

4th October 2012

PRESS STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO BUDGET 2013

INCLUDE NOT SECLUDE!

The NECIC welcomes the government's recognition of the pivotal role of preschool education, highlighted in Budget 2013. We also welcome the attention given to Children with Special Needs (CSN) in the proposal to set up special preschools for the six categories of CSN. However, the idea of separate preschools for different disabilities clearly goes against the shifts towards inclusive education proposed in the recent National Education Blueprint. Educating CSN in separate preschools also contradicts the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 which stipulates that CSN shall not be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disabilities. Inclusive education must begin early from the preschool level as this will provide the foundation for implementing inclusion in primary schools. Logistically, it is also not practical to have CSN travelling long distances to attend special preschools set up for particular target groups.

A clear distinction must be made between Early Childhood Intervention Centres and Day Care Centres or Preschools. Early Intervention should, as the term implies, begin as soon as a child is found to have a special need. Daily attendance at such centres is not necessary. The objective of early intervention is to involve parents/caregivers in appropriate care, therapy, rehabilitation and stimulation in all areas of the child's development so that the child may attain his or her full developmental potential. With good Early Intervention programs, the majority of CSN can be prepared to attend neighbourhood preschools while continuing early intervention as required by his or her condition on a regular basis.

We suggest several alternative ways in which the money to be allocated for special preschools for CSN can be used to improve intervention and education services for them. First, there is a need to improve and increase Early Intervention Programs and make them more accessible. We need multi-disciplinary teams not only in paediatric departments in general hospitals but also multi-disciplinary teams that visit district hospitals, mother and child clinics and community-based centres on a rotation basis.

Second, the government can provide subsidies to NGOs that provide good accredited early intervention programs. This is a common practice in many developed countries where the government is not able to undertake the organization and administration of sufficient Early Intervention Centres to meet the needs of the target group. NGOs can also be subsidized to support preschools that enroll CSN such as providing in-service training and itinerant consultation to teachers. Third, the government can subsidize preschools which accept CSN to encourage all preschools to move towards the Inclusive Education ideal and prepare these children for mainstream primary education. Finally, there should be a training program for all preschool teachers that will prepare them to manage a range of children with different special needs and/or disabilities.

In the long run, it is more cost-effective to educate CSN in existing mainstream preschools with special educational support than setting up separate special preschools. It is also more practical to have CSN attending preschools in their neighbourhood. We must progress towards the inclusion of all children, with different abilities and needs, into our education system so that they will be accepted fully as part of our society.

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(Note: This statement was prepared collectively by NGOs represented in the NECIC)