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Samuel Blight
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Dear Mr Blight

Thank you for your email, received on 25 September 2012, regarding the recent welfare reforms and the social obligations for beneficiary parents to ensure that their children participate in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and WellChild checks. These changes form part of the Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Bill.

Perhaps it will help if I provide a little more detail about what the Government is proposing regarding beneficiary parents and their children's participation in education and health services.

There are four social obligations that beneficiary parents will be required to take all reasonable steps to have their dependent child:

- aged three or over, enrolled in and attending an approved Early Childhood Education Programme (ECE) until they start school
- enrolled in and attending school from age of five or six (depending on when the child first starts school)
- enrolled with a primary health care provider, and
- up-to-date with the WellChild checks.

We want to make sure that dependent children of beneficiaries will have access to, and benefit from, vital education and health services. By incorporating these important health and educational goals into welfare reform, it will help ensure children get the best possible start in life. These services are particularly important for vulnerable children, as many currently miss out. I believe that these obligations are reasonable and achievable.

As far as home schooling goes, the existing home school policy remains unchanged under the welfare reform changes. However, it is fair to say that, in general, a beneficiary parent will not be able to home school their child.

There are some very limited exceptions. The Ministry of Social Development has additional criteria to meet over and above Ministry of Education approval for home schooling before it is considered acceptable for a beneficiary parent to home school a child. These criteria are strict as to the circumstances that make the child's attendance at school unreasonable.

The restricted circumstances for home schooling include where it is unreasonable for that child to attend school for example:

- if there is no school bus or
- no suitable transport and
- there is a significant distance between their home and school.

It may also be unreasonable for the child to attend the nearest school because the child has particular needs that prevent them from attending the nearest school, for example:

- special needs such as physical/intellectual disability; chronic or recurring illness
- learning or behavioural difficulties or
- exclusion from the school.

The policy is that provided the parent has met both Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Development criteria to home school their child this would be acceptable.
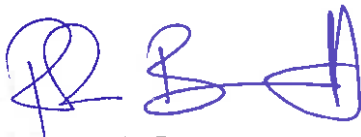
While I appreciate your views on WellChild checks, the welfare of children is a key consideration in the application of this policy. Under the requirements of the new welfare reforms it is expected that beneficiary parents will enrol their children with a primary health care provider and be engaged with WellChild checks.

I hope this information clarifies the situation for you. The intention of the social obligations is about better outcomes for children.

I would also like to point out that The Social Security (Benefit Categories and Work Focus) Amendment Bill has passed through its first reading and has since been referred to the Social Services Select Committee. The Select Committee will be asking for submissions on this Bill and I would encourage you to do this if you remain concerned about this issue.

Thank you for writing and for your invitation to meet with you. Due to my demanding commitments over the next few months you may have to rely on Chris to invite me back to the West Coast. I look forward to meeting you if this is the case.

Yours sincerely

Hon Paula Bennett
Minister for Social Development