Case Study: CSSU Early Learning Centre Pannawonica, WA

CSSU Early Learning Centre Pannawonica works closely with parents working at the nearby mines around their rotating rosters.

The Children’s Services Support Unit (CSSU) was approached by Rio Tinto to establish a long day care service in the remote mining community of Pannawonica in Western Australia, three hours South West of Karratha.

Pannawonica is a closed community of 698 people for Rio Tinto employees and their families, with no private accommodation.

Most parents are employed at the local mines and work a roster with eight days on and six days off. Therefore, families do not need the care provided while they are on their off days and often travel away to Perth or overseas.

Pannawonica ELC previously operated as an occasional care service but was only open until 2.00 pm. It was re-licensed by CSSU to become an approved long day care service and is licensed for 24 children opening from 8.00 am–4.00 pm.

Rio Tinto provides direct support to the service to employ three staff on a permanent basis. Housing support is also provided.

Pannawonica Early Learning Centre works around the rostered shifts of families. In a typical fortnight, a parent may have four booked days one week and the following week have only two booked days. Families can also enroll for half days (8.00 am–12.00 pm) or full day care (8.00 am–4.00 pm) depending on the availability of the spouse.

After school care is available for children from kindergarten to age 12.

Nannies employed by parents pick up some of the children and provide care for the child in a home environment until the end of their shifts. Some of these nannies are educators at the service, employed privately after hours to care for their children.

Director Wendy Cook says that the nature of shift-work can often be difficult for children and that children’s stable relationship with educators at the service are important.

‘There’s a lot of inconsistency in their lives, so that’s why we try and make day care a safe and familiar place,’ Wendy says.

CSSU originally trialed standard billing practices to accommodate families, including booking permanent

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days and families paying for absences. However, following discussions with parents, this was changed to a more flexible user-pays model.

Staffing is the greatest long-term issue faced by the service. Due to the remote location it is difficult to find qualified staff. The service has worked hard to provide stable staffing which has enabled the implementation of flexible practices. Three staff are on site at all times and the service also utilises a casual staff member when needed.

The remote location of the centre often creates difficulties in managing the work life balance of staff. As staff often do not see the children's parents face to face during opening hours, parents frequently approach staff during non-work hours to discuss their child's progress. The centre manages this through greater communication through texts, phone calls and set meetings to discuss issues with the child.

Tips

- Provide a thorough induction meeting for prospective families enrolling in a tailored service.
- Communicate directly with parents at the service. If this is not possible face-to-face, call the parent to discuss any issue with the children or in the service.
- Be aware of external instability in children's lives and provide them with a stable environment.

For more information and resources on flexibility in early childhood services, please visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/early-childhood-flexibility-practices-patterns/.