In mid-February APEX members in DHBs voted 95% in favour of the third offer from employers to settle the psychologists’ MECA.

The 95% ratification vote comes after a grinding 12-month campaign for a new psychologist contract that saw members resoundingly vote down two previous pay offers by 90% each time. After a year of bargaining, three months of partial industrial action, two failed attempts at mediated bargaining and a recommendation from the Employment Relations Authority the Government the MECA settles the rumbling discontent that DHBs were not doing enough to address the psychology workforce crisis.

The new MECA provides a strong foundation for the profession, extending APEX coverage to Tairawhiti, Wairarapa and Southern DHBs, and setting up working groups to investigate and make recommendations to the Ministry of Health on workforce development for psychologists.

The big gains in the MECA were made only because the vast majority of psychologists were prepared to sustain a long term campaign to overhaul salary rates and put professional development on the agenda.

As implementation of the new MECA begins, APEX would like to thank all of the 600 members, and 32 delegates whose hard work and determination paved the way for the new deal for psychologists.
An interview with Claire Ewans, an education psychologist and APEX delegate at the Ministry of Education.

Where do you work and what do you do?

I'm an educational psychologist, in the Porirua Learning Support office at the Ministry of Education (MOE). I work largely within early childhood education. Children are referred to me for a range of different areas largely around behaviour, usually with various underlying reasons, which can include having a tough start to life, developmental delays and socio-emotional needs. So I work with kids who need some support building their skills in areas such as emotional regulation and social interaction, in addition to quite a lot of transition support to primary school. This involves putting together transition plans and supporting parents and teachers with strategies to prepare the child for a positive start to their schooling life.

Building emotional regulation is such a key element at this age, being 4-5 years old, emotions are a big thing for them. A lot of evidence suggests that a child's socio-emotional skills are more important than reading and writing when they start school. My work focusses on building the child's ability to manage their emotions and to build their social networks with peers, these are foundations for life.

A lot of the strategies we use are based on adult modelling, so adults model the strategies that they use for their own emotional regulation. Children learn so much by watching adults and we can then encourage them to practice these strategies in their play, with their friends and their families.

Do you think it's ironic, that you went into this job expecting to work with children, and have ended up doing a lot of work with adults?

I have thought about that a few times actually, I specifically trained as an educational psychologist to work with children not with adults. But the focus is the child and we are building capability within adults to be able to support the child to learn life skills which I think is a really sustainable approach. I don't have a relationship with that child, and I believe the best people to teach a child are the people who have a relationship with them.

What does a good day at work look like for you?

A real mix, I like being being out and about, I love going to visit centres and observing, we see some great things. Young children have such great attitudes to life, they say the most amazing things and it's truly enjoyable. I love how young children are able to move on so quickly, two children could be disagreeing over a toy one minute then having an absolute ball with each other the next. It really does give you every opportunity to give each child a fresh start, particularly those we work with. One of the funniest times for me was when a 4 year old wrote and spelt correctly the word “F****” at the centre. You've got to admire the spelling! In early childhood kids don't have many inhibitions and they are truly free with the things they say and do, and it never ceases to amaze me how open and friendly a lot of the kids are.

Did the change in government in 2017 make a difference in the working environment and the resourcing within the Ministry?

I feel like it really did. When I first started in 2014, we had a really stable, experienced team. Unfortunately, across the years people have left and they weren't being replaced, for a while it felt like we were really working on skeleton staff. It was hard to be losing so many fabulous skills that brought so much to our team but no one had come in to replace them. After the government changed, we had a lot more recruitment happen, our teams are certainly fuller than they were during some of those tough years. I feel like our teams are better resourced than they have been for a very long time. We still don't have enough, but it feels like we're on the right track.

You have been on the working group, looking at issues within the Ministry of Education? What’s your experience been?

Frustratingly slow! I'm a doer, I find sitting around the table, and just talking about doing quite difficult, so that part has been really hard. However, I also acknowledge that some of the conversation was entirely needed, and I think that now there is some action happening. I feel like it's been a useful progress because we needed to address the issues, at least we are addressing them, as opposed to just sitting around talking about them.

We will be back in bargaining early next year, what do you think the priorities will be for negotiations for the psychologists at the Ministry of Education?

Psychologists at the Ministry are the worst paid psychologists in the government sector, I don't think that's cool, I don't understand why we are on a different scale than other government departments. Now that teachers have bargained hard to improve conditions, it's our turn. So, I would hope that remuneration is up there. I also think that professional development for psychologists is a key priority.

What do you like to do in you spare time?

As a solo mum I spend time with my child, we're playing lots trivial pursuit at the moment. As we're heading off for an exciting OE soon, much of my time has been planning this. I've got extended leave without pay from the Ministry of Education, so I'll be back in 2021!

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