Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs residents will have the opportunity to discuss issues affecting the education of children up to the age of eight at public forums next week.

Minister for Employment, Education and Training Syd Stirling said input from the Early Years forums would be assessed as part of an Early Childhood Strategy. The Strategy is currently being developed in conjunction with the Minister’s peak advisory body on education, the Education Advisory Council.

The main issues being discussed are Age of Entry into school; access to consistent quality care and programming for 0-8 year-olds; and parent partnerships.

Mr Stirling said the Department of Employment, Education and Training had already started work on a review of the existing Age of Entry policy.

"The current policy is that children must turn 5 before they can enter school. There are staggered intakes until 30 June, but any child turning 5 after 1 July does not start school until the following year," Mr Stirling said.

"The policy hasn’t been reviewed for 20 years and we would like to see a new policy in place for the start of the 2004 school year."

Mr Stirling said the Early Childhood Strategy would also involve developing greater continuity between the learning processes of child care centres, preschools and primary schools.

"More and more children these days are beginning formal learning processes at child care, at a very early age, and we see it as crucial to their development that there is a sense of continuity in their education as they move on to preschool and then Transition to primary school," he said.

"Also, many parents of young children are not really aware of the curriculum for young students. We are looking to build parent partnerships, with an education program or package being prepared for parents."

All interested parents, childcare providers, educators and community members are invited to attend the forums.