



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

Education in remote and complex environments

Inquiry by the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

Early Childhood Australia

February 2020

About us:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. We have a federated structure with branches in every state and territory in Australia and our membership includes individual professionals, early childhood services and schools, as well as public, private and not-for-profit organisations that share a commitment to young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA specifically acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

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1. Executive Summary

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes this opportunity to provide input to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, to assist its inquiry into education in remote and complex environments.

Almost half a million people live in remote and very remote areas of Australia. These Australians have, on average, shorter lives and poorer health, experience higher levels of poverty and have lower rates of educational attainment at both secondary and tertiary levels.¹

The youngest Australians in remote areas – those aged five and under – also have poorer participation rates in early learning, and arrive at school less prepared to learn and thrive. This degree of educational disadvantage, based on geography, should not be acceptable in Australia.

Each child's educational journey begins in the home, but many families need support to help their children learn. Children in remote Australia, like their peers across the country, should have access to trained educators and quality-assured, play-based learning.

ECA encourages the committee to give particular attention to the circumstances and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with additional needs. Careful design and delivery of quality early learning services for these children is likely to generate lifelong benefits, for both individuals and communities.

The viability of early learning services in remote regions presents an ongoing challenge. Providing educational services in remote regions is more difficult and more costly than in other parts of Australia. Further investment is warranted in recruiting and retaining qualified educators, and ensuring the financial health of early learning services with small and/or seasonal enrolment.

The economic and environmental wellbeing of remote communities and individual families is also important to early learning outcomes. When families are negatively affected by extreme weather events – drought, bushfire, flood, storms – their work status and financial circumstances may change, making it difficult for them to afford early learning, or preventing them from meeting the

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2019). 'Rural and remote Australians'. Accessed at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/population-groups/rural-remote-australians/overview>. National Rural Health Alliance. (2017). *Poverty in rural and remote Australia*. Accessed at <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/nrha-factsheet-povertynov2017.pdf> Department of Education. (2019). *National regional, rural and remote tertiary education strategy – final report*. Accessed at https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/national_regional_rural_and_remote_tertiary_education_strategy.pdf



work test rules for the Child Care Subsidy. Recent government responses to drought and bushfire are a first step towards a comprehensive plan for safeguarding early learning in environmental emergencies.

Recommendations

In summary, ECA recommends that the Australian Government:

1. Develop a National Early Learning Strategy for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia.
2. Implement the recommendations of ECA and SNAICC in *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*, to reduce barriers to early learning for Indigenous children in remote areas.
3. Improve the access of families and educators in remote areas to clinicians, service providers and other measures that support the inclusion of children with disability and additional needs in early learning programs.
4. Ensure that the national early childhood workforce strategy responds to the needs of remote Australia.
5. Assess the potential for secondments to strengthen the workforce in remote early learning services.

Terms of reference

This submission responds to several of the Terms of Reference for the inquiry, notably:

- A child's journey through early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary education in remote communities, like the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory
- Key barriers to the education journey, including the effects of environmental factors such as drought on families and communities
- The role of culture and country in a child's learning
- Effective government initiatives, past and present, that support remote communities to enable greater educational outcomes, including those that have improved attainment in literacy and numeracy
- Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities that could be more generally applied.



2. Early learning in remote Australia: the challenges

Enrolments

Remote and very remote regions of Australia contain almost 2 per cent of the Australian population, and 2 per cent of Australia's approved child care services.² In 2019, there were 14,410 children in remote and very remote areas enrolled in early learning and care services (centre-based and family day care). This included 3,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, constituting 21 per cent of all children enrolled in remote and very remote areas.³

Preschool participation

The benefits for children of participating in a high-quality preschool program, led by a qualified teacher, are well-known.⁴ In their first year of full-time schooling, Australian children who have attended preschool are significantly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable than children who have not attended preschool – regardless of socioeconomic factors.⁵

However, preschool enrolment rates are much lower for children in remote and very remote parts of Australia than in other areas. Of the children who are enrolled in preschool programs, those living in remote and very remote areas attend for fewer hours each week than children in cities or regional areas.⁶ This is despite policy measures that provide free and/or early enrolment in preschool for some children.

² Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2019). *NQF Annual Performance Review 2019*, p. 4. Accessed at <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-12/NQF-Annual-Performance-Report-2019.pdf>. Approved child care services are licensed to operate under the National Quality Framework for . These include: centre-based services (long day care, preschool/kindergarten and outside school hours care) and family day care services.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Regional Population Growth, Australia, 2017-18*, Cat. No. 3218.0. Data cube accessed at <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3218.02017-18?OpenDocument>.

³ Department of Education (Australia). (2019). *Child care data for financial year 2018-19*. Accessed at <https://docs-edu.govcms.gov.au/node/53077>).

⁴ Pascoe, S. and Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting our Game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*. Accessed at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/whats-happening-in-the-early-childhood-education-sector/lifting-our-game-report>.

⁵ Early Learning: Everyone Benefits. (2019). *State of early learning in Australia 2019*. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia. p.15. Accessed at <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/submissions-statements/state-early-learning-australia-report-2019/>

⁶ *ibid.* pp. 15, 17-18.



Cost of provision

For governments, the cost of provision of early learning in remote areas is high. For example, across the Northern Territory, combined government expenditure on early learning and care services amounts to \$9,572 for each child enrolled – 43 per cent above the national average (\$6,681 per child).⁷

For families in remote and very remote areas, the average hourly fees charged by centre-based early learning and care services are lower than the national average, but fees for family day care and outside school hours care are higher (see Figure 1). However, it should be noted that, in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia, preschool is delivered free for 15 hours per week within the school system, for children in the year before full-time schooling (and for some younger children). Preschool programs in centre-based services do charge fees, but families may be eligible for subsidies under the Australian Government’s Child Care Subsidy (CCS) scheme.

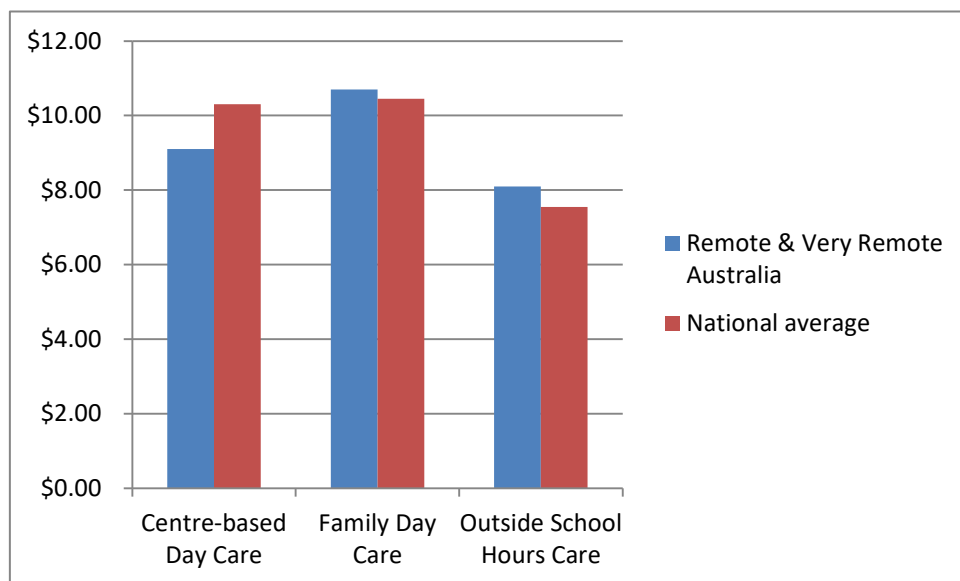


Figure 1: Average hourly child care fees, September quarter 2019

Source: Department of Education administrative data, 2019.

⁷ Productivity Commission. (2020). *Report on Government Services 2020*. Canberra: Productivity Commission. Part 3.A, Table 3A.36.



Quality

The quality of early learning and care services is lower in remote areas of Australia, and much lower in very remote areas, than in metropolitan Australia. Services in very remote areas are almost twice as likely as city-based services to fail to meet the National Quality Standard (NQS) that governs the sector (see Figure 2).⁸ While services rated *Working Towards the NQS* are not a danger to children, neither are they providing the level of quality that is considered optimal for children’s learning, development and wellbeing.

At the top end of the quality spectrum, early learning and care services in very remote areas are only half as likely as city-based services to reach the highest quality level, *Exceeding the NQS*.⁹

The situation is better for services in remote (rather than very remote) areas. In remote Australia, 78 per cent of early learning and care services are *Meeting or Exceeding the NQS*, almost on par with services in major cities and inner regional areas (both 81 per cent).¹⁰

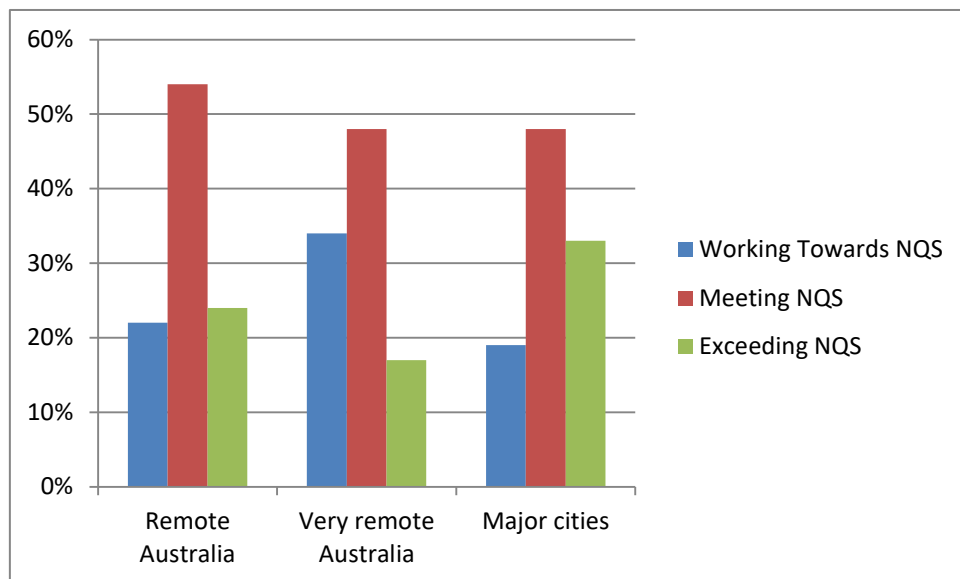


Figure 2: Quality ratings of centre-based early learning services, June 2019

Source: ACECQA, 2019.

⁸ ACECQA. Op. cit. p. 37.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*



Educational disadvantage

In their first year of fulltime schooling, children in remote Australia are much more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than their city-based peers. This means that children in remote areas (and especially those in very remote areas) are less likely to thrive at school. NAPLAN results show that the educational disadvantage established in the early years (aged five and below) is maintained over time among the primary school and high school population in remote Australia.¹¹

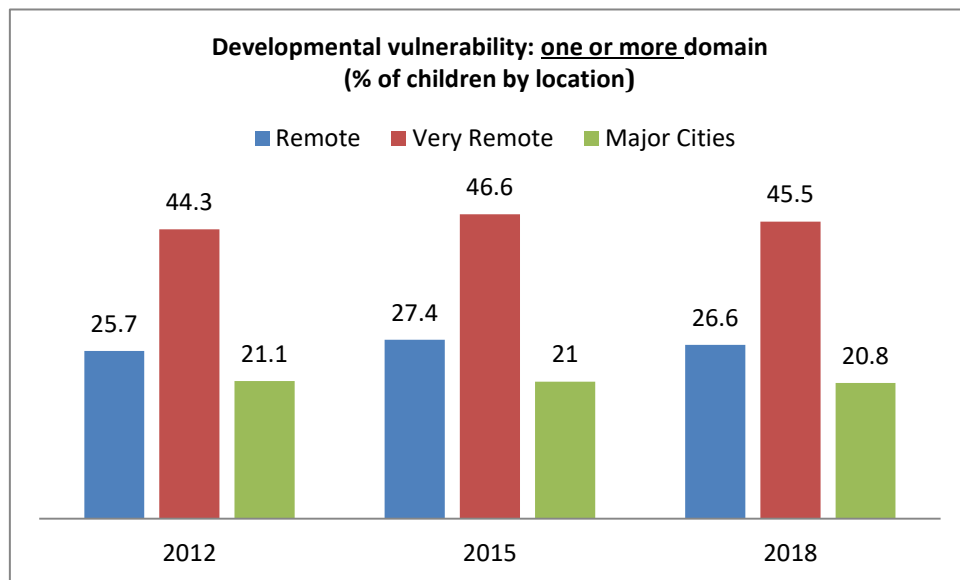


Figure 3: Developmental vulnerability of Australian children, first year of full-time schooling, by location, 2012-2018

Source: AEDC, 2019.

3. Complex environments: environmental factors

ECA commends the committee for including ‘environmental factors’ in the terms of reference for this inquiry. Children’s learning happens within the context of their families, communities and physical environments, and is shaped by these contexts.

Environmental factors and climate-related weather events – such as drought, bushfire, storms and floods – affect children’s learning, and their access to early learning services, in several ways:

¹¹ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. 2018. *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy. National Report for 2018*. Accessed at <https://nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/resources/2018-naplan-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2>.



Trauma: children who experience traumatic events, such as bushfire, may be affected in their social and emotional development and their academic performance. These children need to rely on trusted adults – including their educators – for information, support and protection.¹²

Service viability: early learning services may find it difficult to operate due to weather events and environmental factors (including smoke pollution) that (a) affect the safety of staff and children; (b) limit the availability of staff; and (c) cause disruption or delay to the payment of fees by families.

Family income and employment: drought or physical damage to businesses and can disrupt family work patterns and income for substantial periods of time, placing families at risk of breaching the activity test of the Child Care Subsidy system or placing pressure on family budgets.

ECA has welcomed the Australian Government’s financial support for early learning services and the families of young children affected by drought, flood and bushfire in 2019 and early 2020. These responses should form the basis of a streamlined package of policies and advice for use in future emergency-level events. ECA supports, and will contribute to, the current consultation process led by the Department of Education, which is seeking to improve bushfire-related resources and advice for early learning services.

4. Improving early learning in remote Australia

In order to ensure that children in remote Australia have every opportunity to learn and thrive, governments need to counter the geographical and structural disadvantage that affects families and communities in remote areas. Through developing, implementing and assessing targeted programs, governments are able to even the playing field for remote Australia.

Australian, state and territory governments currently operate programs to support early learning in remote areas. These include:

- Community Child Care Fund (Commonwealth): Grants and assistance to early learning services in targeted regions or servicing high-priority families, including in remote areas.¹³

¹² Gillard, J. (2020) ‘We’ve learnt this lesson – now let’s help them thrive’. The Australian. 31 January. Accessed at <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/weve-learnt-this-lesson-now-lets-help-them-thrive/news-story/60b3c068dbc3989b7d6c913755465907>.

¹³ Department of Education (Australia). (2020). ‘Community Child Care Fund’. Accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/community-child-care-fund-0>



- Families as First Teachers (NT): A dual generational early learning program that works with families and children in remote Indigenous communities prior to school entry.¹⁴
- eKindy Pods (QLD): Kindergarten (preschool) experiences for groups of 2-4 children, delivered in community venues or state schools in rural and remote communities.¹⁵

While many of the early learning support programs for remote areas are state-and territory-based, improving early learning in remote Australia demands national attention and leadership. Early learning is governed by a National Law, National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard, precisely to ensure that all young children in Australia, regardless of their location, can expect the same level of educational opportunity.

It is important to note that improving early learning may look different in different parts of remote Australia, and in different communities. However, addressing educational disadvantage must be a national priority, to ensure that all young children are given adequate support.

ECA recommends the development of a National Early Learning Strategy for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia. Such a strategy would align with the findings and recommendations of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the Halsey Review) of 2018, which focused primarily on school and post-school education. ECA recognises that a national program of work will require coordination across jurisdictions, ideally via the Education Council of the Council of Australian Governments.

Recommendation 1: Develop a National Early Learning Strategy for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia.

5. Priority issues

In working to improve early learning in remote areas of Australia, the immediate goals should be:

- Lifting the participation of young children in remote areas in early learning programs, particularly in the two years before fulltime schooling
- Improving the quality of early learning and care services in remote areas.

In order to achieve these goals, governments will need to address the following priority issues:

¹⁴ Department of Education (NT). (2020). 'Families as First Teachers'. Accessed at <https://education.nt.gov.au/support-for-teachers/faft>

¹⁵ Department of Education (Queensland). (2020). 'eKindy Pods'. Accessed at <https://earlychildhood.qld.gov.au/funding-and-support/rural-remote-and-indigenous-programs/ekindy>



The needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

It is not possible to improve early learning in remote Australia without addressing the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

While the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia is highly urbanised, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are heavily represented in remote regions. In very remote areas of Australia, there is one Indigenous resident for every 1.2 non-Indigenous residents. Of the total Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, 18 per cent live in remote and very remote areas.¹⁶

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have double the risk of starting school developmentally vulnerable as their non-Indigenous peers.¹⁷ For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in remote areas, the risk is even higher.¹⁸ For these reasons, strengthening the wellbeing, health and learning of young Indigenous children has already become a national priority, through the Closing the Gap targets.

In 2018, 86 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their year before fulltime school were enrolled in an early learning program. This means that progress towards the Closing the Gap target (95 per cent enrolment) is on track. However, the national figure masks big disparities in performance between states and territories. For example, in 2018, South Australia and Western Australia achieved full or near-full preschool enrolment of Indigenous children, while the Northern Territory and NSW managed only 76 per cent.¹⁹ Furthermore, while enrolment figures are encouraging, data suggests that actual *attendance* at preschool is lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and that this disparity 'is particularly pronounced for those in remote areas'.²⁰

Barriers to participation

In 2019, ECA produced a position paper with SNAICC—National Voice for our Children, entitled *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early*

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2016*, Cat. No. 2076.0. Accessed at <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/2076.0Main%20Features1312016?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=2076.0&issue=2016&num=&view=>

¹⁷ AEDC. Op. cit.

¹⁸ Early Learning: Everyone Benefits. Op. cit. p. 16.

¹⁹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2020). *Closing the Gap Report 2020*. pp. 24, 27. Accessed at <https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/>.

²⁰ Early Learning: Everyone Benefits. Op. cit. p. 16.



years.²¹ The position paper drew on extensive research into the barriers to young Indigenous children participating in early learning. The barriers include:

- Family employment and income
- Health conditions
- Housing instability
- Low cultural competency and quality at early learning services.²²

The paper identifies two strategies to overcome the barriers, to ensure that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is learning and thriving:

1. Integrated, family-focused support programs
2. High-quality early education.

Drawing on these two strategies, the ECA/SNAICC paper sets out clear, practical steps that the Australian Government can take to address barriers to early learning participation and improve the wellbeing and educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The recommendations from the paper are at Attachment A.

Recommendation 2: Implement the recommendations of ECA and SNAICC in *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*, to reduce barriers to early learning for Indigenous children in remote areas.

Children with disability or additional needs

Children with disability or additional needs may require support to participate fully in early learning programs.²³ However, the types of support required (eg, staffing, physical supports) may be difficult to access in remote areas of Australia.

There is evidence that the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has exacerbated the challenge of supporting Australians with disability in remote areas. The Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme concluded in 2019 that, while difficulties in accessing disability services in rural and remote areas were not new, 'the transition to a

²¹ ECA and SNAICC. (2019). *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*. Accessed at <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/submissions-statements/working-together-ensure-equality-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-children-early-years/>.

²² Sydenham, E. (2018). *Ensuring equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*. Discussion paper. Accessed at <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SNAICC-ECA-Discussion-Paper-.pdf>.

²³ Early Childhood Australia. (2016). *Statement on the inclusion of every child in early childhood education and care*. Accessed at <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Statement-of-Inclusion-2016.pdf>.



market based system has brought new challenges for delivering services in areas of thin markets'.²⁴ The issue of 'thin markets', and the potential for market failure, were being addressed by the committee, in conjunction with the National Disability Insurance Agency.

The difficulties facing young children in remote areas can be particularly acute when they involve delays in accessing diagnosis and support. The Halsey Review highlighted the urgency of providing support for young children with disability, to ensure their participation in learning and schooling:

'[T]he early years are especially critical in terms of a child's cognitive and emotional development. It is unacceptable that a 6 year old, for example, has to wait a year or more for an initial diagnosis so that targeted learning and support can commence.'²⁵

ECA welcomes the recommendation of the Halsey Review that the Australian Government, '[e]nsure RRR [regional, rural and remote] children start school with a strong foundation for learning' (p. 56).²⁶

Recommendation 3: Improve the access of families and educators in remote areas to clinicians, service providers and other measures that support the inclusion of children with disability and additional needs in early learning programs.

Service viability

Early learning in remote Australia depends on the availability – and the viability – of early learning services staffed by qualified educators. Remoteness can increase costs and limit the supply of staff, presenting ongoing challenges to early learning service operators.

Geography has a significant impact on the business of early learning provision. For example, one ECA member runs a network of not-for-profit early learning services in a variety of settings – metropolitan, regional and rural. The provider's early learning services in rural areas (towns relying on tourism and agricultural production) operate at a financial loss, due to highly variable enrolments. Keeping the doors open in these rural early learning services depends entirely on cross-subsidisation from metropolitan and regional services in the provider's network.

The Australian Government's Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) was established as part of the new Child Care Package, to support early learning services to 'reduce barriers to accessing child care,

²⁴ Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme. (2019). *Progress Report - March 2019*. p. 43. Accessed at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Disability_Insurance_Scheme/General_NDIS/Report

²⁵ Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*. p. 51. Accessed at <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/50281>.

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 56.



particularly in disadvantaged, regional and remote communities'.²⁷ This includes support for former Budget Based Funded (BBF) services, many of which operate in (and are operated by) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote areas.

However, SNAICC has documented the difficulties experienced by early learning services in Indigenous communities since the introduction of the Child Care Package in July 2018. Now operating under the mainstream CCS system, these former BBF services are facing 'enormous administrative burden' and financial instability, due to taking on debts generated by families unable to pay for care, and to families dropping out of care.²⁸

Some early learning services designed specifically for regional and remote areas are not eligible for operational grants and fee subsidies, because they sit outside the National Quality Framework (NQF). Mobile children's services often work within the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (on a voluntary basis), but may not meet the requirements of the NQF in other domains.

However, some states and territories (such as NSW) are now working with the early learning sector to bring mobile services into line with the National Quality Standard, while recognising the 'unique' nature of their business model.²⁹ This aims to strengthen the quality and accessibility of early learning in remote communities.

In order to support early learning in remote areas, the Australian Government must be prepared to look beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to business support. Early learning services in remote Australia may require different types of support, in order to provide both stability and quality for children and families. The National Quality Standard and the EYLF should stand as the benchmark for all early learning services, but the Government can consider innovative ways of applying them in remote settings.

Recommendation 3: Improve support for early learning services in remote areas, as part of the National Early Learning Strategy for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia.

²⁷ Department of Education (Australia). (2019). Op. cit.

²⁸ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2019). *Submission to the Australian National Audit Office examination of the design and implementation of the Child Care Package*. Accessed at https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SNAICC-ChildCarePackageAuditSubmission_May2019.pdf.

²⁹ Department of Education (NSW). (2019). 'Amendment of the Children (Education and Care Services) Supplementary Provisions Act'. Accessed at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/operating-an-early-childhood-education-service/regulation-assessment-and-rating/regulatory-framework/amendment-of-the-children-education-and-care-services-supplementary-provisions-act-2011#Mobiles2>.



Workforce

The educator workforce is a critical factor in the viability of early learning services in remote Australia. Early learning services operating under the NQF are required to maintain educator-to-child ratios, for reasons of safety and quality of learning. These services also need to ensure that their educators engage in ongoing professional learning, again for reasons of quality. However, remote early learning services face enormous difficulties in sourcing both staff and professional development.

The national regulator, the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), acknowledges the problem:

‘Children’s education and care services located in remote and very remote areas continue to have the highest proportion of staffing waivers, reflecting the greater difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff in those locations’ (ACECQA 2019 p. 54).

Early learning services in remote Australia have more than three times the rate of staffing waivers (which excuse them from meeting staff-to-child ratios) as services in metropolitan Australia (see Figure 4).

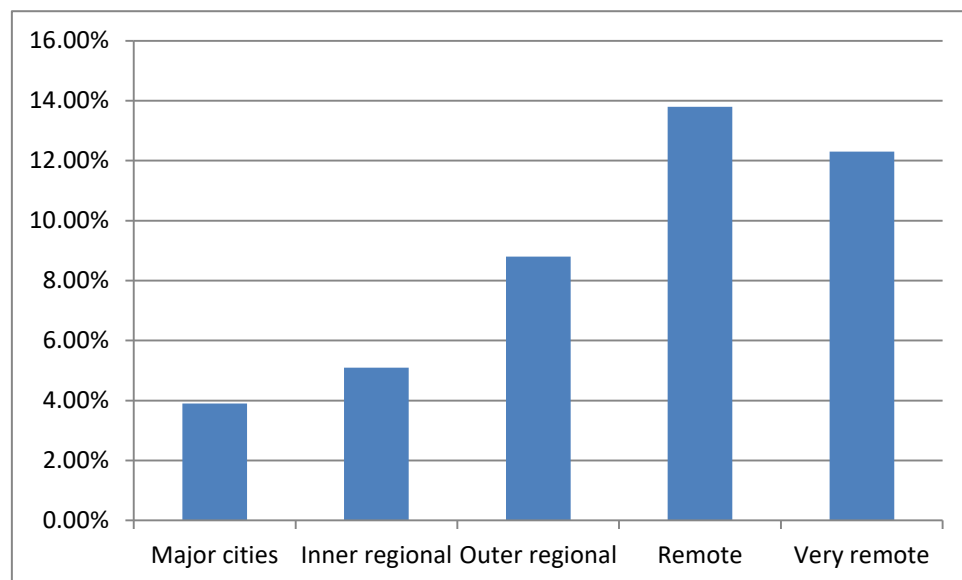


Figure 4: Early childhood services (operating under the NQF) with a staffing waiver, by region – at 30 June 2019.

Source: ACECQA, 2019.



While the findings of the Halsey Review are specific to the school sector, they reinforce the scale of the teacher shortage in early learning. The review concluded that addressing the teacher turnover rate in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, and improving the teaching experience, constitute a ‘critically important matter’.³⁰

ECA strongly supports the development of a national early childhood workforce strategy, announced by the Education Council in December 2019. While the workforce strategy will be national in scope, it must address the place-based challenges facing the early learning sector, including those in remote areas.

Recommendation 4: Ensure that the national early childhood workforce strategy responds to the needs of remote Australia.

ECA is supportive of the Government’s current policy of waiving HELP debts for graduate teachers who spend four years working in very remote areas, while noting that this measure may be attractive to only a limited pool of new teachers. It will be important to assess the effectiveness of the HECS waiver over time.

The Government should also consider investing in other, innovative ways of meeting the early learning staffing challenge in remote communities. The program developed by Goodstart Early Learning and the Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit in Fitzroy Crossing (WA) is a proven model (see Box 1).

With investment from the Australian Government, the model developed by Goodstart Early Learning and Baya Gawiy could be applied to other remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to strengthen the viability of remote early learning services, improve children’s outcomes and build reconciliation. It is vital to note that such programs will only succeed with the input, advice and direction of the community in which they are located.

³⁰ Halsey, J. Op. cit. p. 44.



Box 1: Goodstart Early Learning and Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit

In 2016, at the invitation of the Marninwarntikura Women’s Resource Centre and the Baya Gawiy Early Learning Unit in Fitzroy Crossing (WA), Goodstart Early Learning entered into a partnership to establish an Educator Secondment and Cultural Immersion Program.

This program is a two-way cultural learning program which involves Goodstart providing two qualified educators each school term (eight educators per annum) to work at the Baya Gawiy Early Childhood Learning Unit alongside local educators. This enables the Centre to operate with consistent staffing and deliver a high quality early learning program, to support access for highly vulnerable children and families within a remote, disadvantaged community.

The program also highlights the critical importance of two-way learning and reconciliation. For each 12-week period, the participating teachers and educators have a unique opportunity to live and work in an Aboriginal community, with the aim of enhancing cultural understandings and practice that can be applied when they return to their own communities.

Over the four years of the partnership program:

- Baya Gawiy has maintained consistent child numbers through continuous, qualified staffing.
- The two-way cultural exchange has enabled Goodstart educators to authentically embed practice in their home Centre, strengthen community connections and relationships in their local community and progress their own, and their Centre’s reconciliation journey.
- Baya Gawiy educators have gained professional development opportunities through shared collaboration on educational practice and engaged in external professional learning programs, otherwise unachievable due to staff shortages.

Recommendation 5: Assess the potential for secondments to strengthen the workforce in remote early learning services.



ATTACHMENT A

Recommendations from *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years* (ECA and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, 2019)

Progressing the agenda to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will require Commonwealth Government leadership to drive strategic policy reform. The following recommendations require action from the Commonwealth Government, working alongside state and territory governments where appropriate.

STRATEGY

1. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) should establish new early childhood development targets to close the gap in the AEDC domains by 2030, and develop an accompanying strategy through the Closing the Gap refresh – in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – that includes independent evaluation. Many of the following recommendations would form part of this strategy.
2. Establish and resource an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Steering Group to report on the development, planning, implementation and review of each Closing the Gap target in the specific context of child development, wellbeing and protection—as recommended by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2012).
3. Ensure that all governments embed coordinated policy approaches across departments that address the needs of children from conception and adopt a nurturing care framework.
4. Explore and model a needs-based funding approach for early education, to ensure equity of access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to a high-quality education.
5. Ensure that COAG formalises a partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies to oversee all aspects of the Closing the Gap refresh process.

ACCESS TO SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

6. Ensure that each state and territory government establishes affordable access to preschool programs for all children, as a legislative entitlement.
7. Commonwealth and state/territory governments permanently commit to funding universal access to high-quality early education for three- and four-year-olds, including additional funding to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children get access to a minimum of three days per week—determined by children’s needs— of high-quality preschool, with bachelor-qualified teachers.
8. Invest in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services, through a specific early education program, with clear targets to increase coverage in areas



of high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, and high levels of disadvantage. This could be a quarantined proportion of the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF), specifically for culturally safe and community-controlled delivery in areas of high disadvantage, to contribute to Closing the Gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

9. COAG to fund a targeted program for supporting evidence-informed, culturally safe, integrated early childhood and family-focused programs across the nurturing care spectrum in early education and care services that work with high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

10. Closely monitor and publicly report on the impact of the transition to the Child Care Package on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to ensure that the goal of increasing their access to early education and care is achieved, making adjustments as required.

11. Amend the Activity Test within the Child Care Subsidy to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements.

QUALITY SERVICE PROVISION

12. Include the former Budget Based Funded Program services within the National Quality Framework (NQF), at the first opportunity, with adequate support and flexible timeframes to ensure effective transition and compliance.

13. Deliver an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education and care workforce development strategy to expand and build capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and strengthen the cultural competence of the mainstream workforce.

14. Prioritise effective professional development on trauma-informed practice for all staff supporting at-risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

15. Include an additional objective within the Inclusion Support Program to support services targeting areas experiencing disadvantage, and, in particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to meet the National Quality Standard through targeted professional development.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY

16. Develop a cultural competence framework and accompanying resources to support implementation of the guiding principle in the NQF on valuing Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. 17. Work with the sector to promote and support effective two-way learning processes of genuine partnership development and cultural competency between mainstream services and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, services and communities.



DATA AND EVALUATION

18. COAG to embed a strong data enhancement, and monitoring and evaluation approach within the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood strategy to support deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in early education and care, as well as the quality and impact of early education.

19. Ensure that all early education and care program funding includes adequate resourcing of evaluation, and requires quality program evaluations within funding contracts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led evaluations, in particular.

20. Adapt the AEDC to better reflect all children's strengths and better incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge.