



## Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee

### Submission – Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

#### Who are we?

The Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee (QIECC) is a Ministerial advisory committee consisting of 11 members, appointed by the Queensland Minister for Education, Training and Employment.

The QIECC consults Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and provides independent advice to both Queensland and Commonwealth Governments on education, training and (pathways to) employment issues relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (refer <http://qiecc.eq.edu.au/>).

#### Introduction

Across Queensland, the early childhood education and care (ECEC) needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families differ. In the urban centres, where there are established labour markets, affordability of ECEC services are of primary concern. In regional and remote areas, workforce issues and addressing children's learning and development needs are of primary concern. In all geographical locations, the cultural capability of the service and access, for example, transportation, are vital for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

The ECEC sector is complex and the various subsidies, rebates, regulations and associated paperwork are a significant barrier for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and local ECEC services.

As noted in the 2011 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report, there is a strong relationship between attending preschool and educational outcomes for Indigenous children in their later schooling<sup>1</sup>. In Queensland, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have lower rates of NAPLAN achievement highlighting that a concerted effort is needed in the early years.

To recognise the importance of extended family in child rearing within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the term 'carers' encompasses those who are the primary carer of the child e.g. biological parents, grandparents, extended family, traditional adoption.

#### Access

The main barriers to access to early years services are affordability of services and a mismatch between services available and services needed. In general, the former applies mainly to urban areas, where services are generally user-pays, the latter to remote areas where service range is more limited.

The system needs to have capacity to capture those children and families that are not currently accessing early education and care services. This is higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children than for the general population.

Funding models that support ECEC services should be looked at. Affordability is an issue for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, particularly in centres where fees are charged. A funding model to offset user-pays funding which builds in factors such as socio-

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission, 2011. *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2011 Report*. Melbourne, Commonwealth of Australia, p. 428.

economic status, Indigeneity, and remoteness should be explored for the early childhood sector.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends a review of the rebate and subsidy system to ensure out-of-pocket costs are affordable and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are not disadvantaged or decide not to use ECEC services due to the upfront costs (i.e. waiting until tax time for the rebate).

*Types of available care*

In all geographical locations there is unmet need because of the limited types of care available. In remote areas, mobile services are ideal. Taking services out to communities rather than families fitting in to a pre-determined model will be one important step to increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parental and family participation and engagement in early childhood services.

All partners in the process need to explore innovative ways of bringing families into the system and a range of care options. For instance, where families are unable to access services due to lack of mobility and / or transport (e.g. grandparent carers), mobile services could be run where the service is brought into the community and can be locally accessed.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends the provision of mobile services to communities to increase participation and engagement.

**Workforce**

Key to the success of any early childhood service is an appropriately qualified and remunerated workforce with access to appropriate professional development and training opportunities.

*Establishing a local workforce*

By ‘appropriately qualified’ the QIECC includes workers who have the cultural capacity to engage a particular community. To enable a culturally responsive service, key service delivery personnel require an understanding of community’s needs and are able to relate to and engage the community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from within the community are best placed to do this, and where required, the employee can be assisted to attain formal qualifications. Community liaison roles are important to assist non-Indigenous employees to promote a responsive, quality service. A quality service also includes it being culturally responsive and meeting local needs.

Particularly in regional and remote communities where the labour market is limited, ECECs provide an opportunity for local employment. Local employment also can increase the sustainability of the service and reduce recruitment costs (e.g. relocation and housing costs).

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends that ECECs develop and implement an Indigenous employment strategy for their centres.

*Family role*

There could be an option for extended family members to be eligible ECEC providers. The requirements and regulations for an extended family member should take into account the

historical circumstances and socio-economic circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Anecdotally, families and services report a reluctance to apply for a Blue card (child safety check) for several reasons including historical past with the role of police (e.g. Stolen Generations and discriminatory policies), past criminal convictions (i.e. disproportionate rates for Indigenous Australians), complexity of paperwork and lack of appropriate identification.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends that the government examine the option of family members becoming eligible ECEC providers.

***Remuneration***

Salary levels must be examined at the systemic level. Many quality early childhood Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, particularly in long day care settings, are 'lost' to the schooling system, simply because the remuneration is higher for what is substantially similar work. There also appears to be a perception in the wider community that early childhood education is sub-standard in comparison to formal school teaching. Therefore, further efforts are needed to elevate the status of the ECE profession through both increased remuneration as well as educating the community about the benefits of play-based learning.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends that the salary level of Early Childhood Educator and Workers be reviewed and brought into line with other similar professions and that a community marketing strategy be implemented to profile the profession.

**Long term sustainability**

Sustaining the ECEC system in the medium to long term through succession planning must also be built into any design. This is as simple as ensuring succession planning takes place. Structuring opportunities whereby those coming into a service, particularly if they are local community members, are upskilled and achieve appropriate qualifications over time so that they can move into roles occupied by those more senior employees once they move from the service or system altogether.

Innovative models that have proven successful elsewhere could be trialled to ascertain their effectiveness and sustainability. Implementing school based traineeship and apprenticeship programs that then articulate into university study for local Indigenous students is one example of effective succession planning occurring in some communities.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends that built into each ECEC employment strategy are strategies for succession planning including qualification and skills audits, performance enhancement management and professional development.

**Integrated holistic service delivery**

Early childhood education and care services should not be provided in isolation. Cohesive support to families within a holistic model will ensure the needs of families and children are met in a more seamless way. While "one stop shop" models are ideal, where colocation of services is not possible, better linkages need to be forged between the early childhood centre and health and family support services. The QIECC supports services which support the whole family in improving the life chances of their children. For example, prenatal, antenatal and nutritional education for parents/ broader community, women's and men's

health groups, alcohol and other drugs education and schooling preparation information. Evidence supports success of such integrated service delivery models, especially the longer term benefits.

While the scope of the inquiry does not encompass health, the QIECC notes its importance when discussing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational services. Broader community education, on pregnancy and healthy choices, prenatal, antenatal and childhood health, are vital to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the best start in life. Particularly in remote areas, follow-up services from clinicians and allied health professionals for children who have additional support needs/ health concerns is inadequate and often those children 'drop off the radar' and it is not until prep/ schooling that they are 're-identified'. At QIECC forums, parents and ECEC providers highlighted success with allied health professionals, such as speech pathology and occupational therapy, working with parents and the child at the centre.

Best Start in Victoria is an example of an initiative that aims to provide improved access to universal early years services for families and improve the health, development, learning and wellbeing of children from ante-natal through to transitioning to school. An evaluation of the Best Start programs demonstrated improvements in a range of areas such as increases in breastfeeding rates, as well as in physical activity and literacy related activities. Likewise, the Toronto First Duty Program in Canada aims to integrate services for young children and their families. An evaluation of these programs showed child outcomes improved in terms of school readiness, social skills and pre-academic skills. Parents in the program also reported feeling more confident in helping their children to learn.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends that best practice models in integrated service delivery and/or inter-sectoral collaboration models are identified, adopted and supported and that ECECs are acknowledged as key stakeholders.

**Tackling systemic complexities**

Services report that government funding is overly complex and it is often unclear what rebates and/or subsidies are available for the particular service and for a particular child. Clearer guidelines and streamlined paper work would alleviate the complexity. In addition, services and Centrelink should provide translated fact sheets/ forms in local language or non-standard English (e.g. Aboriginal English, Kriol or traditional language). Parents and services often report that the complexity of paperwork, including the presentation of a Birth Certificate and immunisation records, results in withdrawal from the system.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends that the government streamline processes and where possible link Centrelink and Medicare with ECEC services. For example, once immunisation is complete, a letter from the local health clinic/ Medicare (MBS Item) is automatically sent to Centrelink and the child's registered ECEC. Similarly, when the Health Care Card (HCC) is renewed, an automatic notification to the ECE service occurs. A more integrated information technology service would support those families with high mobility, English as a second language and/or those families without permanent accommodation.

In some communities, services are constrained by the funding model. Those services with small enrolments and without block funding are unable to sustain operational costs due to the small number of children attending.

**Recommendation:**

The QIECC recommends flexibility in funding models to enable ECEC services, particularly in areas with small populations of children, to continue to operate and remain financially viable.

**Further information**

The Committee can be contacted by emailing [qiecc@dete.qld.gov.au](mailto:qiecc@dete.qld.gov.au) or telephoning 1800 263 836 should further information be required.