



**New South Wales
Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group Inc.**

Response to the draft findings and recommendations in the Productivity Commission's inquiry into Australia's early childhood education and care system

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Final Version

February 2024

Acknowledgement

The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (NSW AECG) acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners of New South Wales (NSW). We also acknowledge past, present, and emerging Elders and the continuation and celebration of cultural, spiritual, and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

Terminology

In accordance with the policy of the NSW AECG and the custom of government agencies in New South Wales, to use the term “Aboriginal” rather than “Indigenous” when referring to programs, data collections and activities related to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people resident within this state. Commonwealth agencies, however, use the term “Indigenous” in preference to “Aboriginal”. In this report, except where the context or a formal name specifically requires the use of the term “Indigenous”, “Aboriginal” is used to mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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Productivity Commission
Australian Government
4 National Circuit
Barton ACT 2600

13 February 2023

Dear Commissioners

Re: Submission to the Productivity Commission's draft report *A path to universal early childhood education and care*

The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG) is the recognised Aboriginal peak advisory body on all matters relating to Aboriginal Education and Training in New South Wales, including early years education. This has been the viewpoint of both New South Wales and Australian Governments since the early 1980's.

The NSW AECG was born from an education movement that advocates the right to access and participate in an education system.

It is our pleasure to contribute to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood education and care (ECEC) by providing a viewpoint that reflects the Aboriginal communities of NSW.

The NSW AECG, through its strong local and regional network, made up of 147 Local AECG's and 20 Regional AECG's, promotes respect, empowerment and self-determination and believes the process of collaborative consultation is integral to equal partnerships which is fundamental in achieving equality.

We strive to ensure every Aboriginal child and young person in NSW achieves their potential through education.

Our submission adopts a solution-focused approach, driven by the voices and perspectives of Aboriginal people within NSW.

In our submission, we have identified affordability, equitable access, enhancing the workforce, promoting inclusion for vulnerable families and children, and empowering self-determination for Aboriginal peoples as high priorities.

We look forward to continuing our work alongside the Australian and New South Wales Governments ensuring Aboriginal children in NSW have access to quality early years education and care, guaranteeing their educational outcomes are as good if not better than those of the general student population.

Yours Sincerely,



Raymond Ingrey
Interim President
New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated

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Executive Summary

The NSW AECG is the peak advisory body to both state and Commonwealth Governments on all matters relating to Aboriginal education, spanning from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to higher education. Our vision is a future where all children achieve their full potential academically, as we embrace and foster their social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs throughout their individual journeys.

The NSW AECG has historically invested in advancing ECEC at both state and national levels through the extensive AECG network, advocacy efforts, culturally empowering programs, and participation in the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations (Coalition of Peaks) and the NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations (NSWCAPO). Additionally, the NSW AECG contributed to the establishment of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy in 1989.¹

While we welcome the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood, it is important to acknowledge that what the reforms are addressing, is not new to Aboriginal children and families. Historically, Aboriginal children have endured countless unwarranted challenges in terms of being, belonging, and becoming, facing oppression and exclusion in educational environments where their journey through early learning has not been equitable and their voices have not been adequately heard.

Aboriginal children, families, and communities need to be the leaders in determining the factors that enable our thriving. Our response to the Commission will apply solution-focused thinking, driven by the voices and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples within NSW which extend to First Nation Peoples across the country.

The NSW AECG's top priority is to address the contemporary challenges and barriers that confront Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, carers and communities. These include:

- *Affordability* - of service delivery for out-of-pocket expenses for families and for ECEC services to prosper, particularly Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), and regional and remote ECEC services.
- *Access* - that caters to the diverse needs of all Aboriginal children and families particularly those in rural and remote areas, including transportation, increased hours, and occasional care.
- *Workforce* – elevating the participation of Aboriginal Peoples to engage and prosper within ECEC employment and training. A workforce that celebrates and embraces culture, including offering Aboriginal Language and cultural programs developed by community and Elders within EC services.
- *Inclusion* - of vulnerable families and children with additional needs as part of the core business of the service provider.
- *Self-determination* – of Aboriginal Peoples through pedagogy development, evaluating cultural responsiveness within ECEC and the right to self-determination for Aboriginal people, empowering them to make decisions that benefit our children and our communities.

The NSW AECG firmly believes that investment in ECEC for Aboriginal children and families delivers better engagement and improved education and employment outcomes and delivers cost savings for government. We look forward to delivering this solutions-focused approach, driven by Aboriginal voices, and working collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders, including children, families, and communities, to ensure all children achieve their full potential academically, as we embrace and foster their social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs throughout their individual journeys.

¹ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy 1989

About NSW AECG

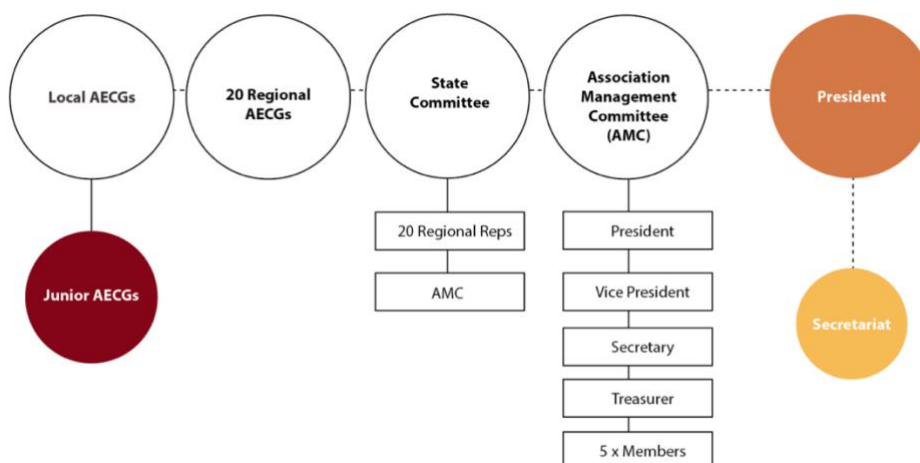
The NSW AECG is a not-for-profit Aboriginal organisation that provides advice on all matters relevant to education and training with the mandate that this advice represents the Aboriginal community's viewpoint.

The NSW AECG promotes respect, empowerment and self-determination and believes the process of collaborative consultation is integral to equal partnership and is fundamental to the achievement of equality.

The NSW AECG advocates cultural affirmation, integrity, and the pursuit of equality to ensure that the unique and diverse identity of Aboriginal students is recognised and valued.²

Not only have Aboriginal people been consistently disadvantaged, but Australian society, in general, has not fully understood and appreciated the significance of Aboriginal culture. The establishment of the NSW AECG has aimed to bridge this gap by fostering a deep personal commitment to Aboriginal Peoples within educational environments, promoting exceptional leadership, and advocating and a systemic cultural change like no other.¹

Structure of the NSW AECG Inc.



The primary role of the NSW AECG Inc. is to promote active participation by Aboriginal people in the consultative and decision-making process of education and training-related matters.

Our strong voluntary members base is key to the organisation being the peak advisory body regarding Aboriginal Education and Training at both State and Commonwealth levels. As a wholly volunteer-based organisation, our key focus is 'community first'; the educational rights of Aboriginal people in NSW being our driving force.

The NSW AECG has 147 Local AECG committees within 20 regions established across the State to support education initiatives and policies and to advocate for improvements in Aboriginal education. This enables effective communication allowing Aboriginal community viewpoints to be echoed throughout the organisation.

The NSW AECG Association Management Committee (AMC) supports and steers the organisation. This is made up of the President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary and 5

¹ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy 1989

² Source <https://www.aecg.nsw.edu.au/about/>

members who are elected by representatives from our Regional AECGs and Local AECGs. These roles are elected annually and represent the Association at a State level. The exception is the Association President, who is elected for a three-year term.

History of the NSW AECG – The First 10 Years...

1977

- The NSW AECG began as a committee of Aboriginal people invited by the Department of Education (DoE) to advise it on Aboriginal Education.
- The Commonwealth Schools Commission provided funds for States and Territories to seek Aboriginal advice on education. Over the next three years, the NSW DoE invited Aboriginal people from across NSW to serve on its Aboriginal advisory committee.

1980

- The Commonwealth stopped funding, so the NSW Government took over funding the committee. At the same time, the members of the committee decided that representatives should be elected from all regions in NSW, to serve for two years.

1981

- The Minister for Education, the Hon. Paul Landa, formally recognized the NSW AECG as the principal advisory body on Aboriginal Education. All Ministers since have continued this recognition.

1982

- The NSW AECG further extended its policy of involving Aboriginal people in education decision-making by fostering the development of local AECGS.
- The NSW AECG was instrumental in the development of the NSW DoE's Aboriginal Education Policy. This was the first Policy of its kind in Australia.

1983

- At the Newcastle triennial meeting, it was decided to increase the length of service of representatives from two (2) to three (3) years.
- Since the policy's development, the NSW AECG, through several conferences, has developed a series of priority areas in an attempt to rapidly implement the policy and to gain other improvements in Aboriginal Education generally.

1984

- The NSW AECG established an Executive committee to assist with the policy implementation within the framework of its aims and objectives.

1986

- The Triennial conference held in Dubbo saw significant developments take place:
- The council structure was formulated, and the rules of operation were determined.
- The 1986 – 1989 new priorities were established.
- The NSW AECG undertook the "1986 Survey of Drug and Alcohol Use by Aboriginal Students in NSW". This project was highly successful, and the results were widely distributed.

1988

- The establishment of an incorporated body to be known as the NSW AECG Association Incorporated.³

³ Source <https://www.aecg.nsw.edu.au/about/history/>

Introduction

The NSW AECG welcomes the opportunity to contribute an Aboriginal perspective to the Productivity Commission's work, however, the Government's response to the Commission's findings must be effective, meaningful, and positively build upon the relationship between education and First Nations Peoples. The lens provided by the NSW AECG should be treated with integrity and followed with action. The recommendations and perspectives put forth must be implemented effectively to make a real difference in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. The NSW AECG will continue to work determinedly, ensuring that the voices and needs of our communities are heard and addressed in the education sector.

“Barriers to Indigenous children’s participation in early childhood education include: out of pocket costs, a limited awareness of services, administrative complexity, lack of transport or locally available services, poor child health, a perception that the child is too young to participate, a lack of confidence in the value of early education services or fear of racism and judgment.”⁴

Whilst Aboriginal Peoples indeed face multiple complex challenges impacting our educational engagement and outcomes, our Aboriginal identity does not inherently make us disadvantaged. Therefore, government efforts should prioritise solutions led by Aboriginal Peoples and take a strengths-based approach alongside high expectations for our children. Additionally, it is necessary to emphasise the responsibility of the broader Australian community to embrace and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages, and histories, while also developing their own cultural understanding.

Cultural responsiveness is a term frequently utilised in this submission. It should be noted that to be culturally responsive is not a permanent state, it is a practice requiring ongoing commitment. It necessitates consistently adapting to cater to the unique cultural needs of each child, family, and community. This includes recognising and embracing the wide range of differences within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures. Cultural responsiveness extends beyond individual educators and encompasses the entire ECEC service, governance, policy, procedures, programs, and environments. Cultural responsiveness cannot be self-proclaimed, but rather a practice that is assessed and endorsed by each individual child and family.

Transforming outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will require more than just ensuring cultural responsiveness within education. Deeper changes need to be made within the education system that address *Affordability, Access, Workforce, Inclusion* and *Self-determination*. This would provide all Australian children the opportunity to learn about the richness, diversity, and depth of the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

By embracing these recommendations, we have the potential to not only improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children but also to foster the growth and development of our nation as a whole.

⁴ Australian Government 2020 Closing the Gap Report. p. 25

Recommendations Priority Matrix

LOWEST	MEDIUM	HIGHEST
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#	Recommendations	Priority
5.1	Support universal access in persistently thin markets via supply-side funding	
3.1	Reduce barriers to educator upskilling	
3.2	Support innovative delivery of teaching qualifications	
3.3	Improve registration arrangements for early childhood teachers	
3.4	Lift support and mentoring for new early childhood teachers	
3.5	Improve pathways and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to obtain ECEC qualifications.	
3.6	Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce	
3.7	Improve the ECEC Workforce Strategy	
6.2	Modify the Child Care Subsidy to improve affordability and access	
6.1	Monitor rises in fees and out-of-pocket expenses	
6.3	Make information about CCS eligibility easy to find and understand	
6.4	Improve the CCS calculator on the Starting Blocks website	
6.5	Prompt families to update their details with Services Australia	
6.6	Provide better information to families about CCS withholding rates	
2.2	Amend the Disability Standards for Education	
2.3	Amend eligibility requirements for inclusion funding	
2.4	Review and amend additional educator subsidies	
2.5	Reduce administrative burden of Inclusion Support Program Applications	
2.6	Improve coordination of inclusion funding between governments	
7.1	Ensure integrated services are available where needed	
7.2	Support connections between ECEC and child and family services	
7.3	Introduce a higher hourly rate cap for non-standard hours	
7.4	Examine planning restrictions related to operating hour	
7.5	Ensure occasional care is available where needed	
7.6	Support out of preschool hours ECEC	
8.1	State and territory regulatory authorities should improve their performance reporting	
8.3	Ensure regulatory authorities are adequately resourced	
8.4	Incentivise quality provision in new ECEC services	
8.2	A new review of the National Quality Framework	
2.1	Ensure appropriate quality regulation for services outside the scope of the National Quality Framework	
9.1	Improve policy coordination and implementation	
9.2	Establish an ECEC Commission	

Recommendations Context & Response

Access

Closing the Gap (CTG) Outcomes:

- Outcome 3 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- Outcome 4 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.
- Outcome 8 - Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities
- Outcome 12 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
- Outcome 14 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional well-being.
- Outcome 15 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical, and economic relationship with their land and waters. ⁵

First Steps Strategy:

- Increase the number of Aboriginal-operated and managed ECE services and ECE services with strong relationships with Aboriginal communities and support their sustainability.
- Ensure our funding models in NSW are best placed to enable quality participation of Aboriginal children.
- Support the attendance and engagement of Aboriginal children in ECE to drive outcomes. This includes ensuring Aboriginal children are fully supported to attend a minimum of 600 hours of ECE in the year before school in all service types.
- Co-design localised solutions with Aboriginal people and communities to increase access and participation in ECE for Aboriginal children across NSW. ⁶

5.1 Support universal access in persistently thin markets via supply-side funding

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

Supporting universal access in persistently thin markets via supply-side funding is of utmost importance when it comes to Aboriginal children and families. Communities often face unique challenges, particularly in remote or sparsely populated regions. ECEC services may be, unavailable, scarce, or inaccessible. By directing resources towards the improvement and availability of services in these areas, along with improved affordability, inclusion, transport and flexibility, which would enhance universal access to ECEC, it becomes possible to overcome limitations and ensure that all families have equitable access. In areas with high populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) should be particularly supported as they are services co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Response:

Building the relationships between federal/state government agencies and the NSW AECG, so the voices of Aboriginal Peoples are heard and inform solutions for delivery and funding.

- The NSW AECG ECCEO to collaborate with early childhood services to ensure that designated positions for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are available, and placements are reflective of the Aboriginal population within the community in which the service is positioned.
- NSW AECG to collaborate with communities and ACCOs to develop contextually tailored services that meet the specific needs and requirements of each community to ensure communities have a voice in the design and delivery of early childhood services.
- ECEC services build partnerships with the NSW AECG ECCEO to utilise pathways to the community they are within to support the services and their families with overcoming barriers to access.
- Government and ECEC services in NSW working with the NSW AECG to develop and implement policies that adhere to Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

⁵ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

- ECEC services have a representative as a member of their local AECG.

7.5 Ensure occasional care is available where needed

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

A significant challenge faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is transiency, which is influenced by cultural factors such as kinship connections, sorry business, shared custody, and the strong desire to connect with Country. These factors can make it difficult for children to access consistent childcare services, particularly in regional and remote areas where a large proportion of Aboriginal Peoples reside. Aboriginal parents may seek educational or employment opportunities where occasional care would be beneficial.

Response:

To address this issue, a more flexible Community Childcare Fund could ensure that occasional care is available where and when it is needed. This would allow families to engage with flexible care options that align with their specific circumstances, providing the necessary support.

- ECEC services work with NSW AECG ECCEOs to help better understand the needs of Aboriginal families.
- ECEC build partnerships with the NSW AECG ECCEO to utilise as pathways to the community they are within to support the services and their families with overcoming barriers to access.
- ECEC services in NSW working with the NSW AECG to develop and implement place-based policies that adhere to Aboriginal children, families, and communities.

7.6 Support out of preschool hours ECEC

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector ⁷

Context:

To empower Aboriginal families to fully participate in the workforce and achieve financial stability, it is essential to support out-of-preschool hours ECEC. The operating hours of preschools do not align with most work schedules, creating a significant barrier to access. This discrepancy often results in families choosing not to return to work to have their children enrolled in more cost friendly option of preschool.

Response:

By supporting and expanding out-of-preschool hours ECEC, families are provided with more flexibility and can pursue both work and quality preschool for their children.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

Affordability

Closing the Gap:

- Outcome 3 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- Outcome 4 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.
- Outcome 8 - Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities
- Outcome 12 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
- Outcome 14 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional well-being.
- Outcome 15 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain a distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical, and economic relationship with their land and waters.⁵

First Steps Strategy:

- Increase the number of Aboriginal-operated and managed ECE services and ECE services with strong relationships with Aboriginal communities and support their sustainability.
- Ensure our funding models in NSW are best placed to enable quality participation of Aboriginal children.
- Support the attendance and engagement of Aboriginal children in ECE to drive outcomes. This includes ensuring Aboriginal children are fully supported to attend a minimum of 600 hours of ECE in the year before school in all service types.
- Co-design localised solutions with Aboriginal people and communities to increase access and participation in ECE for Aboriginal children across NSW.⁶

6.2 Modify the Child Care Subsidy to improve affordability and access

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations⁷

Context:

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2021, Aboriginal Peoples represent a disproportionate 35% average of low-income earners.⁸ It is crucial to increase equity, economic participation, and prosperity by ensuring that lower-income families do not spend a higher proportion of their income on ECEC compared to those who are better off. Early Education should be accessible and desirable for all Aboriginal families, allowing them the freedom to choose where they prefer their children to attend ECEC services.

Response:

Improving affordability for lower-income families is likely to result in more providers establishing services, particularly in disadvantaged areas, particularly those in regional and remote locations.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

6.1 Monitor rises in fees and out-of-pocket expenses

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level⁷

Context:

Out-of-pocket expenses affect Aboriginal families who are already at a disadvantage, including low-income earners, children with disabilities, and ECEC services that are vulnerable or have high operating costs. For instance, services in outer regional and remote areas often face exorbitant prices for necessities such as nappies, food, and milk. This issue is particularly concerning as these areas have a high representation of Aboriginal Peoples who will be most affected by these out-of-pocket expenses.

⁵ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

⁸ Source <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-income-and-finance#>

Response:

While it is essential to consider inflation and ensure vital pay increases for educators, it is also crucial to closely monitor and investigate out-of-pocket expenses that may deviate from what is considered typical.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

6.3 Make information about CCS eligibility easy to find and understand

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level ⁷

Context:

The available information provided on CCS eligibility, specifically on government websites, can be complicated to find and difficult to understand for any family. However, it poses certain challenges for vulnerable groups, including Aboriginal families with low literacy and numeracy skills, limited IT skills, and English as a second language.

Response:

CCS eligibility is a particular issue for Aboriginal families that needs to be addressed.

- Collaborating with the NSW AECG to create culturally appropriate information and resources.
- Provide funding and resources to support the NSW AECG in developing step-by-step guides and video tutorials that explain CCS eligibility criteria and application processes clearly and understandably. These resources can be distributed through community channels such as Aboriginal community centres, schools, and other community networks.
- Supporting the NSW AECG ECCEO to allocate resources for staff or volunteers who can assist families in understanding and navigating the CCS application process. This can include organising workshops, information sessions, or one-on-one support for families who require additional assistance.

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

Workforce

Closing the Gap:

- Outcome 3 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- Outcome 6 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways.
- Outcome 7 - Youth are engaged in employment or education.
- Outcome 8 - Strong economic participation and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- Outcome 16 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing. ⁵

First Steps Strategy:

- Ensure our ECE sector has culturally safe services and a culturally competent workforce.
- Lead the provision of professional learning and networking opportunities for ECE sector staff that is relevant to local Aboriginal communities.
- Ensure all children in ECE have the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal languages and cultures in NSW. ⁶

3.1 Reduce barriers to educator upskilling

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

Accelerated pathways recognise and value prior qualifications which will ensure that existing knowledge and skills, including cultural knowledge and child-rearing recognition, are considered. This is especially important within Aboriginal communities and ACCOs. Implementing and promoting accelerated pathways for Aboriginal staff can contribute to the growth of the pool of Aboriginal early childhood teachers. This not only benefits the staff involved but also helps address the shortage of Aboriginal teachers and educators in ECEC. Moreover, it enables Aboriginal children to have greater access to culturally sensitive and responsive early learning experiences.

Response:

A focus on accelerating the number of qualified Aboriginal staff in ECEC sector is critical to the success of other reform measures.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

3.5 Improve pathways and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to obtain ECEC qualifications.

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

Improved pathways and support for Aboriginal people to obtain ECEC qualifications will increase their economic participation and improve the availability of qualified and culturally competent educators and caregivers within the ECEC sector. As a result, all children, especially those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, will receive high-quality education and care that is responsive to their cultural needs and promotes positive outcomes.

The employment of Aboriginal educators is instrumental in ensuring Aboriginal children and families have a culturally responsive educational environment as it creates a sense of belonging and connection, which is essential for their overall well-being and educational success. It also

⁵ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

strengthens cultural identity and fosters positive relationships between educators, children, and families.

Response:

The employment of qualified and culturally competent educators from the Aboriginal community not only benefits the children and families but also contributes to the broader ECEC sector as it enhances diversity and inclusivity, promotes respect for cultural differences, and facilitates the development of culturally responsive pedagogies and practices.

- Work with the NSW AECG to develop pathways from school to ECEC employment.
- Increase NSW AECG representation on employment panels.
- Employment/training opportunities such as SBAT and traineeships should be advertised at local Aboriginal Employment organisations and within the NSW AECG Network.
- Aboriginal educators can engage with the local NSW AECG ECCEO to be supported in finding available training pathways.
- NSW AECG can explore and support the delivery of ECEC training within Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) and other Aboriginal-controlled organisations. By funding training delivery in these organisations, the NSW AECG can enhance training opportunities and facilitate the development of a culturally responsive and community-driven ECEC workforce.
- Incentivise permanent employment in remote/rural communities to build capacity within the service and the workforce. By offering incentives such as professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and financial support, the NSW AECG can attract and retain qualified educators in these areas, addressing the shortage of skilled professionals and promoting stability and continuity for children.

3.6 Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:


Ensuring that educators have the necessary skills, knowledge, and cultural awareness to provide high-quality and culturally responsive care and education to Aboriginal children ensures that educators can be more aware of the needs of children and families. This enables our children and families are supported to thrive and holistically supported, understood, and respected. It supports the creation of culturally safe and responsive environments that promote a sense of identity, belonging, and well-being.

Response:

Strengthening the skills, knowledge, and cultural competency of educators leads to improved outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

- ECEC engagement with the local AECG within the local and regional network to be aware of available professional development programs and engagement within the community and state.
- NSW AECG ECCEOs can support centres, educators, and teachers by providing guidance on how to engage with the community, access culturally specific cultural programs, collaborate with elders, and involve knowledge holders.
- NSW AECG to deliver culturally inclusive training and development programs. This should include programs such as Connecting to Country Programs, Cultural Awareness training,

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>



trauma-informed training, and other relevant courses that enhance cultural competency and understanding within ECEC services.

- Culturally responsive needs to be contextual to communities and individual families and investigation of this can be facilitated through the NSW AECG. The spectrum of cultural competence should be integrated as a requirement within ECEC accreditation and regulatory frameworks.
- Ongoing funding and investment into AECG Language and Culture Nests will support Aboriginal Languages to thrive and the NSW AECG to support ECEC services to embed language within their community.

Inclusion

Closing the Gap:

- Outcome 3 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- Outcome 4 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.
- Outcome 5 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential and communities.
- Outcome 12 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system.
- Outcome 14 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
- Outcome 16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing. ⁵

First Steps Strategy

- Ensure our funding models in NSW are best placed to enable quality participation of Aboriginal children.
- Ensure Aboriginal children with a disability are able to access culturally appropriate support and have access to the same educational opportunities as all children.
- Develop a culturally appropriate and place-based approach to assessing the development of Aboriginal children alongside the support of NSW Health and Aboriginal medical services.
- Co-design localised solutions with Aboriginal people and communities to increase access and participation in ECE for Aboriginal children across NSW.
- Increase the number of Aboriginal operated and managed ECE services and ECE services with strong relationships with Aboriginal communities and support their sustainability.
- Support holistic wraparound services to Aboriginal children and families.
- Continue to strengthen the relationships and collaborations between the Department, ECE services and Aboriginal families and communities. ⁶

2.3 Amend eligibility requirements for inclusion funding

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

Additional needs for children, beyond a disability, need to be acknowledged. Not doing so is an exclusionary practice that particularly impacts Aboriginal children lagging in developmental milestones, experiencing trauma, struggling with literacy and numeracy, and exhibiting low engagement in other educational settings. Despite their clear need for extra assistance, these children often do not meet the criteria for inclusion funding. As a result, the burden on already limited support capacity within ECEC services becomes even greater. This can lead to the exclusion of children. It can also compromise the learning environment for other children.

Response:

If children cannot access the support they require, it can have far-reaching consequences for their families, including a lack of respite, inadequate support, consequences to restoration and potential disruptions to their overall well-being.

- The NSW AECG ECCEOs can provide essential culturally appropriate support to services and families by facilitating initial conversations about the support needs of Aboriginal children and assisting in navigating their journey and referral pathways.
- Supporting of the NSW AECG critical role within the Coalition of Peaks, collaborating to advocate for the rights and needs of Aboriginal children and families in ECEC.
- Government and ECEC services in NSW working with the NSW AECG to develop and implement policies that adhere to Aboriginal children, families, and communities.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face barriers such as limited access to vital services like the NDIS, family support, and healthcare due to factors like transport, remoteness, and family complexities. Additional support, such as in-house family referral educators, is crucial to address these barriers and assist Aboriginal families in accessing early learning and additional support services.
- ECEC build partnerships with the NSW AECG ECCEO to utilise pathways to the community they are within to support the services and their families by overcoming barriers to access and developing strategies to best support their child and family.

⁵ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

- ECECE services have a representative as a member of their local AECG.

2.4 Review and amend additional educator subsidies

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

To ensure the inclusion of Aboriginal children requiring additional support in Early Learning programs, it is essential to enable the access of additional educator to promote equity in children's participation.

Response:

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.
- Increase the subsidy rate to cover 100% of an additional educator's wage and remove weekly hour limits to align with the child's enrolled hours to promote equity in children's participation.
- Enable the employment of additional qualified professionals, such as allied health or inclusion specialists, as additional educators, particularly in areas with limited workforce availability. In these cases, exploring the possibility of hiring an Aboriginal community member with a valid Working with Children's Check would be advantageous. These measures aim to provide culturally appropriate support and ensure equitable participation for all children.

2.5 Reduce administrative burden of Inclusion Support Program Applications

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level ⁷

Context:

The current administrative burden of the ISP application is overwhelming for early childhood centres. They are already operating at full capacity and struggle to manage the additional workload of completing and reporting on ISP applications to maintain funding.

Response:

The NSW AECG ECCEOs can support in the collaboration of Aboriginal families and inclusion agencies and advocate for their involvement in early childhood services by providing valuable insights, guidance, and cultural awareness training to these agencies, ensuring that they are equipped to support Aboriginal children and families effectively.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

2.6 Improve coordination of inclusion funding between governments

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level ⁷

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

Context:

Inclusion funding can be difficult to navigate particularly for those with a high proportion of children who require funding, which subsequently can be those with a high proportion of Aboriginal children.

Response:

The NSW AECG is in support of streamlining of application requirements, to reduce the need for services to apply for funding multiple times.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

7.1 Ensure integrated services are available where needed

7.2 Support connections between ECEC and child and family services

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

By integrating services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families who may be experiencing barriers, have complex needs or have children with additional needs for ECEC services can be better supported. This means creating initiatives that establish a link between ECEC services with other important services like healthcare and family support.

Response:

There is already a very successful integrated model rolled out in NSW called ACFCs, Early Years Places in Queensland and the Child and Family Learning and the Connected Beginnings. By breaking down the silos between these services, we can provide more effective and holistic support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, ensuring their unique needs are met.

- The NSW AECG to continue to advocate for increased funding and resources, empowering communities to deliver wrap-around service delivery that meets the unique needs of Aboriginal children and families.
- The NSW AECG ECCEOs can support services capacity building through training and programs to enhance their ability to provide holistic support.
- The NSW AECG ECCEOs can support integrated services in their capacity building and partnerships within the community but also deliver solutions to services that want to increase their integrative delivery.
- ECECE services have a representative as a member of their local AECG.

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

Self Determination

Closing the Gap:

- Outcome 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years.
- Outcome 4 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.
- Outcome 5 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential.
- Outcome 6 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways.
- Outcome 14 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy high levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
- Outcome 17 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have access to information and services enabling participation in informed decision-making regarding their own lives. ⁵

First Steps Strategy:

- Co-design localised solutions with Aboriginal people and communities to increase access and participation in ECE for Aboriginal children across NSW.
- Increase the number of Aboriginal operated and managed ECE services and ECE services with strong relationships with Aboriginal communities and support their sustainability.
- Develop resources and provide guidance to support services to become culturally safe and welcoming spaces for Aboriginal families.
- Ensure our ECE sector has culturally safe services and a culturally competent workforce.
- Continue to strengthen the relationships and collaborations between the Department, ECE services and Aboriginal families and communities. ⁶

8.1 State and territory regulatory authorities should improve their performance reporting

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level ⁷

Context:

There is a need for improved time frames and consistency in assessment and rating and "spot checks" in the ECEC regulatory system. Transparency within this system is essential, along with a focus on building relationships and providing support between regulatory bodies, ECEC services, and staff.

Response:

It is crucial to foster strong relationships between ACCOs, Aboriginal staff, and government to be seen as on the same team and work collaboratively towards shared goals.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

8.2 A new review of the National Quality Framework

Priority

High

2.1 Ensure appropriate quality regulation for services outside the scope of the National Quality Framework

Priority

High

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations ⁷

Context:

A review of the NQF would accelerate the implementation of culturally specific standards to ensure AECE services are cultural responsiveness. The current NQF is not reader-friendly to all Aboriginal families particularly those with low literacy and numeracy skills; of vulnerable backgrounds; or who have English as a second language. These families have the right to be

⁵ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

adequately informed on service quality to assist them in the decision-making of where their child is to attend ECEC.

Response:

A revised NQF will bring a contemporary guide to assess ECEC centres and their cultural responsiveness capacity within the services and their program.

- NSW AECG should be actively involved in collaboration with relevant authorities and regulatory bodies to ensure the creation of a culturally responsive and inclusive component within the NQF. This means working together to develop guidelines, standards, and assessment criteria that reflect and prioritise the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal children and families.
- The NSW AECG ECCEO can work with services to hear the voices of Aboriginal families and communities’ perspectives and preferences.
- The NSW should support and guide the assessment of a service’s cultural integrity and delivery. Aboriginal-specific services should be assessed at a level of how they see fit to educate their children within their services.
- The NSW AECG can work with governments to ensure the NQF is reader-friendly to Aboriginal Peoples.

9.1 Improve policy coordination and implementation

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level ⁷

Context:

The coordination and implementation of policy can be complex, especially for services with limited capacity and greater needs. Therefore, it is crucial to articulate and clarify the national vision for ECEC, as well as the roles and responsibilities of all governments, including the Australian Government and state and territory governments.

Response:

Clarity of roles and responsibilities for all levels of government will be greatly appreciated to help navigate the complexities and ensure effective policy implementation.

- In direct favour of the draft recommendation.

9.2 Establish an ECEC Commission

Priority

Medium

Closing The Gap Priority Reform:

- 1 - Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making
- 2 - Building the Community-Controlled Sector
- 3 - Transforming Government Organisations
- 4 - Shared Access to Data and Information at a Regional Level ⁷

Context:

The involvement of consultative groups like the NSW AECG is crucial in ensuring that the voices and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are heard and elevated within ECEC decision-making processes.

The ECEC Commission, together with Australian, state, and territory governments, should engage in joint decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, communities, and leading peaks such as the NSW AECG. This collaboration will determine how to regulate the

⁷ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

quality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services outside the National Quality Framework (NQF). The expertise and input of these stakeholders will help develop effective regulations that reflect the priorities and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, promoting high-quality, culturally appropriate ECEC services.

Response:

The NSW AECG's deep understanding of community needs and aspirations is essential for planning and implementing culturally appropriate and responsive services.

- The government will demonstrate that the NSW AECG is its peak advisory body for the education of Aboriginal Peoples in NSW by:
 - Always consulting with the NSW AECG first on all matters related to the education of Aboriginal school children.
 - Always working with the NSW AECG in developing and implementing policies and programs for the education of Aboriginal students.⁸
- The NSW AECG is positioned as an integral piece in ensuring effective consultation occurs with Communities at the local level, in acknowledgement of the NSW AECG's grassroots structure.
- The government will develop a partnership agreement with all leading Aboriginal Education peak advisory bodies regarding EC.
- Government to support the NSW AECG in leading the development of pedagogy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of being, belonging and becoming.
- Government to support the NSW AECG in leading Indigenous data sovereignty.

⁸ Department of Education AECG Partnership Agreement 2020

¹⁰ ACECQA National Quality Framework 2010

Information Request

Cultural safety in ECEC services

The Commission seeks information on cultural safety in ECEC services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse families and children.

1. What factors most effectively promote the provision of culturally safe ECEC?

Cultural safety is a term that describes the desired feeling achieved through cultural responsiveness, where the cultural identity of a person is embraced, supported, and celebrated. It is important to note that what one child or family may see as culturally safe may not be the same for another child or family. Therefore, nothing can be in a permanent state of cultural safety, but the practice of being culturally responsive is important. The best provision for promoting 'cultural safety' or 'cultural responsiveness' within ECEC is to put the people whose culture is the objective to be included, Aboriginal children, families, and communities, at the forefront of assessing what is seen as culturally safe.

Cultural responsiveness, a term frequently utilised in this submission, should be noted as a practice that is not permanent but requires ongoing commitment. It necessitates consistently adapting practices, programs, and environments to cater to the unique cultural needs of each child, family, and community. This includes recognising and embracing the wide range of differences within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures. Cultural responsiveness extends beyond individual educators and encompasses the entire service, governance, policy, procedures, programs, and environments. It is not self-proclaimed, but rather a practice that must be assessed and endorsed by each child and family.

- **Collaborating with local Aboriginal communities** is crucial to ensure that ECEC services have contextual cultural responsiveness and meet the specific needs of the families and community they engage with. Consulting with Elders, community leaders, and families builds trust and fosters genuine and meaningful partnerships to facilitate this collaboration.
- Educators, teachers, and service providers need to have a deep understanding and respect for the cultural heritage, traditions, and values of Aboriginal Peoples. This includes **ongoing professional development** and training locally and regionally, to increase cultural responsiveness, awareness, and sensitivity.
- ECEC services need to ensure that they are strengthening Aboriginal leadership within the workforce by ensuring representation within **employment and training opportunities** which can eventuate to leadership positions, governance, and decision-making processes within ECEC services ultimately promoting culturally safe practices.
- **Culturally evident resources, activities, and programs** that reflect and value Aboriginal cultures. Such as language, storytelling, art, music, and dance need to be embedded and intertwined within the physical environment and curriculum consistently throughout service delivery.
- What ultimately promotes the provision of cultural safety in ECEC is the strength of relationships with families and the wider community.
- **Walking together with the families** to understand the needs desires, complexities, and barriers. Building trust within these partnerships through regular yarns, involvement in decision-making processes, championing cultural celebration and community involvement and embracing the strengths and knowledge of families and the community can ultimately deliver a culturally responsive environment for our children and families to thrive and flourish.

2. Should there be changes to the National Quality Framework to promote cultural safety and capability, beyond the updated learning frameworks? Would a national cultural competency framework help improve the cultural safety of ECEC services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children?

In 2023, the delivery of the revised Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)⁹ saw the elevation of cultural value and the incorporation of a cultural lens within early learning services. It would only make complete sense to follow with a revised NQF¹⁰ which is equally reflective of incorporating Aboriginal perspectives within service, ultimately promoting cultural safety and capability of Aboriginal children in ECEC services.

Implementing a national cultural competency framework would be an effective way to improve the cultural safety of ECEC services. This framework would set out the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that educators and service providers need to develop to effectively engage with and support Aboriginal children and families. It would guide culturally appropriate practices, understanding of historical and contemporary issues, and the importance of cultural respect and inclusion.

A national cultural competency framework would serve as a valuable tool, ensuring that all ECEC services are equipped to deliver cultural responsiveness. It would support educators in their professional development, promoting ongoing training and reflection on cultural awareness and competence. Having the NQF revised holds services accountable for potential cultural harm. Incorporating cultural safety and capability into the NQF would require changes to existing regulations, assessment and rating processes, and quality standards. This would communicate the importance of culturally safe practices as an integral aspect of quality ECEC provision and promote accountability among services in meeting these requirements.

It should be emphasised that the inclusion of cultural safety and capability needs to include the importance of contextualisation of practice and environments to different families and communities to avoid cultural generalisation. Published Aboriginal pedagogy is limited and needs support to develop through the peak Aboriginal Education organisations across the nation. Supporting the development of published pedagogical documents will enhance the diverse perspectives and views of what services can be done within their services to improve their cultural safety.

3. Does the structure of the Inclusion Support Program adequately prioritise and allow the provision of culturally safe ECEC in mainstream services? If not, what are the issues and how could these be addressed?


The current structure of ISP is limited in allowing the provision of culturally safe ECEC in mainstream services resulting in exclusionary practices that particularly impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with additional needs. The prevalent and foremost challenges have been effectively addressed in the Productivity Commission report. As a result, the recommendations we propose are to broaden the criteria and eligibility for inclusion funding, enhance resources and funding for professional development in areas such as inclusion, trauma, and additional needs, raise the subsidy provided for additional educators, allow more flexibility in their employment arrangements, and strengthen partnerships with Aboriginal Education organisations such as the NSW AECG.

4. Would professional development in cultural capability (draft recommendation 3.6) be adequate to promote inclusion in ECEC services, or are there other components required? [Information request 2.2]

To promote inclusion in ECEC services, professional development in cultural capability, as recommended in draft recommendation 3.6, is indeed crucial. However, it is important to note that other components need to be considered as well (see information request Q1). Alongside cultural responsiveness, there is a need for professional development in culturally strengthening practices,

⁹ ACECQA Early Years Learning Framework V.2.0 2022

¹⁰ ACECQA National Quality Framework 2010



language programs, cultural knowledge programs, trauma-informed care, and support for Aboriginal families. These provisions should be contextualised to specific communities, endorsed, or approved by the Aboriginal community, and delivered regularly.

Professional development in cultural capability alone is not sufficient to address the complex needs and diverse cultural backgrounds of children and families. To ensure a comprehensive and effective response, it is important to involve the NSW AECG and other peak AECGs across the nation as key partners in this process. The AECG can provide valuable insights, guidance, and support for ECEC services in developing culturally safe and responsive practices. We can assist in the development of culturally appropriate curriculum materials, policies, and procedures, as well as provide ongoing advice and resources for educators. By partnering with the AECG and specifically the NSW AECG ECCEOs, ECEC services can benefit from the expertise and perspectives of the Aboriginal community, leading to more inclusive and culturally respectful environments for children and families.

Appendices

Appendices 1: AECG Early Childhood Initiatives

Over the past years, the NSW AECG has significantly increased its commitment to ECEC. This includes the employment of Early Childhood staff, the provocation of professional development for Early Childhood services, curriculum development support to educational institutions, and the continuation of Language and Culture nests.

To further our reach and impact, in 2024 the NSW AECG will drive the recruitment and on-boarding of Early Childhood Community Engagement Officers (ECCEO). This will see the position of ECCEOs throughout the state bridging the gap between Early Childhood services and Aboriginal communities. The ECCEOs play a vital role, in building relationships and supporting families, communities, and early childhood services. They provide resources, professional development, guidance on cultural responsiveness, and ensure that children receive the necessary support from birth to transition into primary school.

We recognise that in the ECEC sector, our children need increased cultural nourishment and support. By our ECCEOs actively engaging with children, families, and ECEC services, the ECCEOs will increase overall engagement and promote a sense of belonging for our children. The ECCEOs will be rolled out to locations across the state as soon as possible and where is prioritised. It will be delivered in a three-phase approach seeing the first four positions in 2024 and a projected increase in position numbers up until 2027.

Building the NSW AECG's capacity to support ECEC encompasses a range of additional initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacity and quality of early learning experiences for ECEC. This will be done by offering professional development, extending programs such as Connecting to Country to the Early Childhood sector, promoting data sovereignty, and fostering Aboriginal-led pedagogical and curriculum development.

By doing so, the NSW AECG is creating a transformative and inclusive educational landscape that sets the foundation for lifelong learning and cultural empowerment for Aboriginal children.

Appendices 2: NSW Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations

The NSWCAPO is a partnership of peak Aboriginal organisations addressing various issues affecting Aboriginal communities, including early childhood development and education. As a member of NSWCAPO, the NSW AECG actively contributes to developing and implementing policies and initiatives that improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the EC sector. This collaboration enables the NSW AECG to advocate for the needs of Aboriginal children and families, promoting culturally appropriate ECEC curriculum, the recognition of Aboriginal languages, and the incorporation of cultural practices into childcare environments.

Officially in 2019, all Australian Governments, the NSW CAPO, and Aboriginal Local Government Associations (ALGA) committed to collective action into the Closing the Gap National Agreement. The aim is to accelerate improvements in the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. This partnership has facilitated shared decision-making with Aboriginal organisations and has provided a broader platform for the voice of the NSW AECG Network.¹¹

¹¹ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>

Working in consultation with Aboriginal communities, the NSW Government and NSWCAPO have developed the NSW Implementation Plan for Closing the Gap¹². This plan identifies focus areas and acknowledges the ongoing work while acknowledging that there is still much more to be done to address the gaps in health, education, and employment outcome.¹¹

By working alongside other peak organisations, the NSW AECG amplifies a holistic EC perspective, influencing systemic changes in childcare policies and funding models to ensure equitable support for the specific needs of Aboriginal children. The NSW AECG's involvement with NSWCAPO helps to create culturally responsive and inclusive childcare practices, ultimately aiming to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children in the early childhood sector.

Appendices 3: Walking Together, Working Together

The NSW AECG and the NSW DoE have a partnership agreement Walking Together, Working Together. The first official Partnership Agreement was signed in 1999 to ensure that Aboriginal people had a voice in setting the directions and goals for education and training in NSW. The current Partnership Agreement (2020-2030) Partnership Agreement holds the principles of respect, commitment, collaboration, and accountability to improve educational and training outcomes for Aboriginal learners. It builds on the joint work undertaken by the Department (which comprises Regions, schools, TAFE NSW Regions, Adult and Community Education Colleges, and state offices) and the NSW AECG (at a local, regional, and state level) to ensure Aboriginal parents and communities are actively engaged in public education and training in NSW.⁸

The Partnership Agreement is based on a genuine and practical approach to ensuring Aboriginal learners have access to an education and training system that values our cultural heritage and identity and supports our learning and career development through quality teaching practices, relevant policies and strategies and inclusive curriculum and training programs.

Walking Together, Working Together is a notable example of collaboration that holds essential elements that every child, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, should be entitled to when entering an educational setting. This agreement serves as an inspiring model for impactful partnerships, as it prioritises proactive responsiveness to measurable targets guided by the voices of Aboriginal Peoples.

By employing similar methods, we can achieve integral deliverables that should be expanded, enhanced, and contextualised within ECEC settings. Working together in this way, we can create inclusive and equitable educational environments that benefit all children, specifically from birth to school age.

¹¹ Source <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement>

⁸ Department of Education AECG Partnership Agreement 2020

¹² Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2023

Early Childhood

- All Aboriginal children in NSW Public School preschools complete a culturally safe pre-school education.
- All Aboriginal children are well-prepared for school.

Schools

- Parents and carers of Aboriginal children will find schools welcoming and respectful places.
- Aboriginal languages are part of every school and pre-school curriculum.
- Technology allows children and young people to learn the Language or Languages of their Peoples, wherever they live.
- Aboriginal children and young people are equally represented in achieving a HSC with an ATAR at the same level or better than the whole population of their peers.
- Aboriginal children and young people are equally represented in gaining places in further education at the same level or better than the whole population of their peers.

Aboriginal Students

- Aboriginal students find schools to be engaging, culturally safe places to learn.
- Aboriginal students believe that they can succeed at school and they do succeed.
- Aboriginal students are confident in their heritage, cultures and languages.

Non-Aboriginal Students

- Every student in NSW understands the heritage and culture of the Aboriginal Peoples on whose land/s they live.
- Every student in NSW leaves school with an understanding of Aboriginal heritage and culture and the history of the interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples.

Teachers

- All teachers have completed Aboriginal cultural awareness training, with refresher courses every three years.
- All teachers demonstrate that they understand Aboriginal parents/families have high expectations for their children and all teachers work in collaboration with parents/caregivers and communities to ensure Aboriginal students achieve these expectations.

Other Staff

- Senior positions have been identified and created for Aboriginal educational leaders across a wide range of levels of the department.
- Panels established for the recruitment and selection processes in education have a representative of Aboriginal Peoples through the inclusion of a representative of the NSW AECG.
- All non-teaching staff complete Aboriginal cultural awareness training, with refresher courses every three years.

⁸ Department of Education AECG Partnership Agreement 2020

Appendices 4: First Steps Strategy

Alongside the DoE and AECG partnership agreement, there is also the First Steps Strategy ⁶. The Strategy provides a five year roadmap (2020-2025) to achieving the best educational outcomes for Aboriginal children aged 0-5 and supports renewed reform under Closing the Gap and the partnership between the department and the NSW AECG.

⁸ Department of Education AECG Partnership Agreement 2020

The Strategy was developed in consultation with members of the NSW DoE's Early Childhood Education (ECE) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group, now renamed the ECEC Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee. Their voice and guidance enabled the department to connect the national ambitions of Closing the Gap to the reality of what happens in ECEC services and communities across NSW every day.

The department works in collaboration with the NSW AECG to achieve better educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. This formalises and compliments our 10-year partnership. We know that Aboriginal children have better educational outcomes when their learning enhances their identity as Aboriginal people. The Strategy commits to enhancing Aboriginal children's education by fostering their cultural identity and ensuring a safe and nurturing ECEC environment.⁶

The Strategy outlines 3 key goals for Aboriginal children and families in NSW:

OUR GOALS

- 1 CHILD**
All Aboriginal children and their families are supported to enrol in quality culturally inclusive ECE.
- 2 FAMILY + KINSHIP**
All Aboriginal families and children feel respected in ECE as their culture is celebrated and nourished.
- 3 LEARNING**
Aboriginal children can have stronger outcomes in ECE and all children will feel pride in Aboriginal people, cultures and histories in NSW.

The Strategy has 5 performance measures or targets: ⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

OUR PERFORMANCE MEASURES

- 1 95%** of Aboriginal children will be enrolled in the year before school by 2025*
- 2 55%** of Aboriginal children will be assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census by 2031*
- 3 50%** of Aboriginal children in ECE will have access to an Aboriginal language program by 2025*
- 4 3%** of Early Childhood and Education Directorate staff will be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander**
- 5 100%** of staff employed in the NSW Department of Education Early Childhood and Education Directorates will have completed or commenced cultural awareness/safety training by 2025

* Closing the Gap target
** NSW Public Sector Aboriginal Employment Strategy

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

Achieving these goals will look like the following:

- Work with local communities to enrol more Aboriginal children in ECE.
- Increase and support the number of Aboriginal ECE services and ECE services with strong connections with Aboriginal communities.
- Increase Aboriginal educators to create culturally safe learning places.
- Ensure there is funding for quality participation of Aboriginal children.
- All children in ECE can learn about Aboriginal languages and cultures in NSW.
- Support culturally appropriate transitions into ECE and primary school programs.
- Aboriginal children with disabilities will have culturally appropriate support and the same educational opportunities as all children.
- Provide guidance and resources to services to become culturally safe and welcoming spaces for Aboriginal families.
- Ensure our ECE sector has culturally safe services and a culturally aware workforce.
- Work with other service providers to give comprehensive support to Aboriginal children and families.

⁸ Department of Education AECG Partnership Agreement 2020

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

- Continue to strengthen the relationships between the NSW DoE, ECE services and Aboriginal families and communities.
- With the support of NSW Health and Aboriginal medical services, develop a culturally appropriate and locally relevant approach to assessing the development of Aboriginal children.
- Show leadership in professional learning and provide networking opportunities for ECE sector staff within local Aboriginal communities.
- Ensure that Aboriginal children are supported to attend at least 600 hours of ECE in the year before school for better outcomes.
- Ensure that NSW DoE staff work with services in a culturally safe manner.⁶

While we acknowledge that these initiatives are contextually different, we believe they contribute significantly to the Productivity Commission's inquiry. They reflect extensive investment and effort in their development, making them highly relevant and important. We have included them in our response to showcase a solutions-oriented approach and to recognise the hard work and voices that have already been involved to emphasise the continued importance of this work in ECEC as a crucial element for success.

Appendices 5: Championing Advocacy and Cultural Celebration

The NSW AECG runs several successful programs across NSW that help ensure gains and opportunities in education and training are afforded to Aboriginal people and our communities. These programs cater towards Aboriginal students and include Aboriginal Culture and Literacy programs, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Camps, Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) Camps and Sports, Health, Opportunities and Wellbeing (SHOW) Camps, Language and Culture Camps. Some of our leading programs include:

- **Language and Culture Nests (LCN)**
The NSW AECG LNCs Nests are networks of communities bound together by their connection through an Aboriginal language. The broad idea behind the NSW AECG LCNs is to support, continue and increase Aboriginal language teaching and learning within Nest communities and schools.¹³
- **Connecting to Country**
Connecting to Country is an Aboriginal community cultural awareness teaching programme. This programme provides a much-needed cultural conduit between the States teaching fraternity and Aboriginal peoples and communities. Teachers are offered a unique opportunity to engage directly with Aboriginal Australians at the local community level.¹⁴
- **Ngaarr Dhuwi (Strong Spirit) Girls Academy**
Ngaarr Dhuwi Girls Academy Program is a holistic program that supports our young Aboriginal women through their 7-12 educational journey. Our mentor's role is to support female Aboriginal students through culture, wellbeing and education to increase self-determination and engagement to complete school.¹⁵
- **Pirru Thangkuray**
The NSW AECG have developed and is implementing a Cultural Engagement and Goal Setting Program '*Pirru Thangkuray*'. The program is designed to align with the Premiers Priority in increasing the number of Aboriginal students completing their HSC, whilst maintaining their cultural identity. To support schools in achieving this,

⁸ Department of Education AECG Partnership Agreement 2020

⁶ Department of Education First Steps Strategy 2020

¹³ Source https://www.aecg.nsw.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/NSW-AECG-Language-and-Culture-Nests-QA-doc_website.pdf

¹⁴ Source <https://aecgservices.com.au/professional-learning/connecting-to-country/>

¹⁵ Source <https://aecgservices.com.au/ngaarr-dhuwi-strong-spirit-girls-academy/>

Aboriginal students studying in Years 8-12 are eligible and invited to participate in the program.¹⁶

- **Ngurang-gu Yalbilinya**

The Ngurang-gu Yalbilinya program is an initiative designed for young Aboriginal males who have become disengaged with or discontinued education. The program combines mainstream educational needs with Aboriginal Culture/Connection programs. Evidence illustrates the program is having significant success in delivering a local community engaged cultural engagement program as well as achieving significant gains in literacy, numeracy, attendance and wellbeing outcomes.¹⁷

The NSW AECG is actively engaged in advocacy work to promote and champion Aboriginal education. Our efforts include lobbying for policy changes that address the needs of Aboriginal students to ensure inclusivity in the education system. We advocate for the implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices, emphasising the importance of including Aboriginal perspectives, histories, languages, and cultures in the curriculum. The NSW AECG also addresses educational disparities by advocating for increased resources, funding, and support for Aboriginal students. We provide support in curriculum development, resources, programs, and initiatives to support students, parents, and communities, and collaborate with various organisations and stakeholders driving positive change in the education system. Through our advocacy work, the NSW AECG aims to ensure equitable and quality education for Aboriginal students, foster cultural respect and recognition, and address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal communities in education.

¹⁶ Source <https://aecgservices.com.au/programs/pirru-thankuray/>

¹⁷ <https://aecgservices.com.au/place-of-learning-program/ngurang-qu-yalbilinya/>

Table of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
ACCOs	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
ACFC	Aboriginal Child and Family Centre
AECG	NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
ALGA	Australian Local Government Association
Coalition of Peaks	Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations
CTG	Close The Gap
DET	Department of Education and Training
DoE	Department of Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECCEO	Early Childhood Community Engagement Officer
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
ISP	Inclusion Support Program
LCN	Language and Culture Nest
NATSIEP	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
NQF	National Quality Framework
NSW	New South Wales
NSWALC	NSW Aboriginal Land Council
NSWCAPO	New South Wales Coalition of Aboriginal Peak Organisations