

Northern Territory Education Engagement Strategy – Discussion Paper Response

**Goodstart Early Learning submission
July 2021**

Overarching statement

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Northern Territory Education Engagement Strategy (the Strategy). We support the Department of Education's commitment to prioritise actions and resources that will improve engagement in learning for all children across all education settings in the Northern Territory, particularly the focus on improving access and engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

We make a number of recommendations for the development of Strategy, consistent with our shared goal of increasing engagement in early childhood education for all children – but especially for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, who we know will benefit the most from access to high quality early learning.

In 2018, one in five children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of the Australian Early Development Census¹ when they started school. However, this was far higher for Indigenous children, with two in five children assessed as being developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. Unfortunately, children who start school behind too often don't catch up, which is why it is so important for Indigenous children to be able to access culturally secure, supportive and high quality early learning. It is also why we recommend that a key objective of the Strategy be improved pathways to affordable, high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children, including Indigenous children and children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

It has been shown that early intervention through access to high quality early learning reduces the number of children starting school developmentally vulnerable. High quality early learning – particularly in the two years before school – can help children get 'ready' for school and life and prepare them to actively participate in their education and remain engaged throughout their education journey.

Every child deserves access to affordable, high quality early learning in at least the two years before school – regardless of where they live – in a setting that meets their family's needs.

As well as the recommendations below, this submission also outlines some of the key initiatives we have implemented at Goodstart, that could be implemented in the Northern Territory to help achieve the objectives of the Strategy.

Recommendations

We recommend the Strategy specifically include:

1. Extend universal access funding to support all children to access affordable, high quality early childhood education, regardless of setting.
2. Expand preschool funding to the two years before school.
3. Implement targeted funding and initiatives to ensure all children are attending enough early learning to make a difference, especially vulnerable children and Indigenous children.
4. Improve data capture and analysis to better inform ECEC policy in the Territory, particularly in relation to access, attendance and genuine participation.

¹ AEDC 2018 results - <https://www.aedc.gov.au/>

About Goodstart Early Learning

We are for children, not profit

Goodstart is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest ECEC provider, with 671 centres located in all states and territories, caring for more than 70,700 children from 59,200 families with a team of 14,900 employees. Across Australia, 39% of children attending our services have at least one indicator of vulnerability and, in 2020, 5.8% identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (compared to 5% in 2019 and 4.7% in 2018).

Children likely to be vulnerable attending Goodstart

Equity group	Goodstart (% of all children)	Childcare sector (% of all children)	Community (% of all children)
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	5.0%	2.9%	5.7%
With a disability	5.6%	3.4%	4.3%
Regional & remote	32.0%	23.0%	24.9%
Low-income family	24.3%	20.5%	14.5%
At risk of abuse or neglect	3.3%	1.2%*	n.a.
Multiple risk factors	9.2%	n.a.	n.a.

(Source: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2019 – data for children aged 0-5 years. Dept. of Education quarterly data children aged 0-12 years.)

Goodstart in the Northern Territory

We operate 11 centres in the Northern Territory, supporting over 900 children from 765 families and employing over 240 staff. Across the Territory, over 6,500 children access early learning in one of the 120+ long day care centres, which is why it's so important to ensure the Strategy supports every child in every setting.

For more information about Goodstart in the Northern Territory, see **Appendix A**.

Our social purpose

Our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. It is our view that all children should be supported to participate in quality early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. We believe the best way to do this is to ensure all children have access to high quality, inclusive early learning and care no matter their location or life circumstances.

Our commitment to including all children at Goodstart

Inclusive practice is fundamental to our way of working. As an inclusive organisation, all children, families and educators are welcomed at Goodstart. Quality early learning begins with secure, nurturing relationships between educators and children. Each and every day, our centre teams work in partnership with thousands of families across Australia to deliver high quality, inclusive and community connected early learning to achieve learning, development and wellbeing outcomes for all children, especially children who experience vulnerability or disadvantage. We actively

support all children to participate in our services, irrespective of their abilities, developmental capabilities or life circumstances.

We provide a national support structure that assists with enrolling children needing additional support, accessing funding, providing additional staffing and delivering professional development to upskill teams in their work with children with disability or developmental delays. We also endeavour to maximise all available funding and support, so a child can fully participate in early learning however sometimes administrative delays risk the child not receiving the support they require.

Recommendations – in detail

1. Extend universal access funding to support all children to access affordable, high quality early childhood education, regardless of setting.

The Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy and funding approach was designed to deliver preschool in settings that provide choice and flexibility for families and allow the needs of both working parents and children to be met effectively. This, in turn, complements its multiple objectives across economic, social and education policy.

More and more families are enrolling their children in preschool in a long day care format, rather than a sessional preschool, to better suit their family work balance. This trend is also consistent with increased quality of ECEC, particularly since the introduction of the National Quality Framework. One of the many benefits of providing kindergarten in a LDC setting is that children are more likely to participate in the kindergarten program for the recommended number of hours, i.e. at least two sessions per week to a total of 600 hours per year, referred to as 'dosage'. The longer operating weeks per year (up to 52 weeks compared to standalone kindergartens that only operate 40 weeks per year) provide more opportunities for children to attend and benefit from the program.

The 2021 Federal Budget announced a number of preschool reforms, including that, 'Every child enrolled in an approved preschool program will see the full benefit of Commonwealth funding' from 2023. This reinforces the importance of families being able to choose the early learning setting that best meets their family's needs while maintaining access to funding entitlements.

The Strategy is an opportunity to implement these reforms ahead of schedule and increase the quantum of funding for children attending preschool in a long day care setting to the full Commonwealth allocation (approx. \$1340 per child).

2. Expand preschool funding to the two years before school.

International research shows that taking part in a quality preschool program has positive effects on development, wellbeing and learning. Children who attend a preschool program for 2 years start school ahead and are likely to stay ahead. Access to a high-quality preschool program is one of the few proven strategies for lifting outcomes for all children and evidence suggests that two years has more impact than one, especially for the children most likely to be developmentally vulnerable.²

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, these early years are vitally important years for sharing and passing on the richness and strengths of the world's oldest continuing cultures. Grounding children in the pride and strength of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait

² Mitchell Institute (2016), Two Years are Better than One, available [here](#).

Islander identities, languages and cultural law and traditions forms the bedrock for success throughout their lives.³

An early start to ECE supports later participation. Victoria's Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) program is providing free access for Indigenous children. ESK plays a big role in having a higher proportion of Indigenous children in preschool in the year before school than their non-Indigenous counterparts. As well as supporting these children to be school ready through access to two years of ECE, the second year is facilitating increased access and participation.

Many states and territories have committed to or are already implementing a second year of preschool. We do not want Territory children to miss out on this invaluable early childhood education or fall behind their peers in other jurisdictions. We recommend the Northern Territory Government fund a second year of preschool to extend and amplify children's early learning.

3. Implement targeted funding and initiatives to ensure all children are attending enough early learning to make a difference, especially vulnerable children and Indigenous children.

It is essential that all children – especially vulnerable children and First Nations children – are enrolled in early learning and attending enough to make a difference. At Goodstart, we support this through a range of programs and initiatives to support affordability, attendance and genuine participation and engagement.

We welcome our recently established partnership with the Northern Territory Government to establish an Educator Secondment and Cultural Immersion Program in Maningrida, NT. This program supports high quality ECEC delivery for children attending the service and the seconded educators also gain enhanced cultural understanding and practice.

A key initiative to support affordability for very low income families is the Early Learning Fund (ELF). The ELF scholarship fund supports children from low income families (CCS24) to access two days of early learning each week with parents required to make a small co-contribution. This is a mutual obligation program that involves parental participation and planning, so educators and families work together to support each child's learning, development and wellbeing outcomes.

To support our most vulnerable children – children at risk of abuse or neglect – Goodstart has partnered with the Victorian and South Australian Governments to implement the Increasing Access and Participation (IAP) Program. This is a simple referral pathway program to support children known to child protection to access and participate in early childhood education and care. We employed a Family Community Engagement Worker to provide outreach for families, connect with external services, support social inclusion and upskill existing centre teams around the support needs of the child and family. Through this program, over 400 children in child protection are now engaged in early learning and participating regularly.

We would welcome the opportunity to talk more with you about these initiatives to support affordability, access and participation for vulnerable children in the Northern Territory.

4. Improve data capture and analysis to better inform ECEC policy in the Territory, particularly in relation to access, attendance and genuine participation.

All children should have access to affordable, high quality early learning and care but it is also vital to know whether they are attending enough to make a positive difference. Improved data and evidence should not only capture children's attendance but also programs and initiatives that are supporting attendance and participation.

³ https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/NATSI-EarlyChildhoodStrategy_Framework-April2021.pdf

The Child Care Subsidy introduced in 2018, with its focus on parental workforce participation rather than equitable access to early learning, is having a disparate impact on children from low income households or where one or both parents are not working. This has the potential to exacerbate existing inequality, particularly for our most vulnerable children.

In an effort to better understand what supports attendance and participation, not just enrolment, we recommend improved data capture across all early learning but with a focus on preschool, in response to the Australian Government's proposed preschool reforms.

Goodstart's Responses to Consultation Questions

1. What can the education sectors do more of, less of, or differently to engage children and young people?

We acknowledge the importance of access to high quality early childhood education and care, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability, as both a pathway to early childhood intervention and as a prevention and early intervention platform strategy in and of itself.

Active engagement follows as a result of high-quality teaching and providing adequate support and training to educators. At Goodstart, we have championed the progressive increase in Australian requirements for early childhood teachers as necessary and sound policy, recognising the overall professionalism of the sector and the improved quality of educational experiences for young children. Early childhood teachers, centre directors and educational leaders work together in each Goodstart centre to provide pedagogical leadership. We would like to see a similar approach adopted across all early learning centres and schools in the Northern Territory to ensure that the services children access are delivered by professional teachers and educators who can provide culturally safe, evidence-based, easily accessible, effective and responsive care and education programs.

We do not support punitive approaches to attendance, such as penalising or fining parents for non-attendance. Such approaches can have a negative impact on vitally important relationships between families and education services and can also negatively impact families' views of learning entirely. Instead, we support adopting and implementing supportive and invested approaches instead, such as our Staying Connected Initiative (refer below), which have proven to be highly effective in engaging families and maximising participation.

Our Staying Connected Initiative

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a 35% drop in attendances by children in child protection. This resulted in concern about disruptions to early learning and care. Restrictions also reduced the capacity for in home visits by allied health professionals and community service workers. We wanted to make sure all "invisible children" were seen during this period – keeping 'eyes on children' to make sure they are visible, safe, fed, learning and playing.

In response, we implemented the *Staying Connected* initiative to ensure no child slipped through the cracks. It was so successful in engaging families and keeping vulnerable children attending, we have retained it as ongoing practice.

Staying Connected includes:

- An up-to-date dashboard report that centre teams can access, which shows the attendance and absence patterns of children at risk (in priority order).
- Comprehensive resources to help centre teams have 'hard' conversations with families with advice on how we can encourage and welcome their children back into the centres and/or support them with Goodstart@Home.

- Centres with high levels of vulnerable children receive additional wrap around support from our Social Inclusion Coordinators and social impact team.
- Targeted text messages and emails to let vulnerable families know their child was not only welcome but encouraged to keep attending

2. What more can schools and early years programs do to engage and motivate children and young people to learn?

We understand that children learn best through play-based learning and the Engagement Strategy presents an opportunity for renewed discussion around play-based learning as the primary (not optional) teaching practice for children up to 8 years. Play-based learning is an innate learning style for all children, regardless of a child's socioeconomic, cultural, or linguistic background – making play-based learning the most effective educational tool for achieving equitable learning outcomes.

Through play and active exploration, children's brains are shaped and designed and many skills are developed such as creativity, communication, problem solving, emotional regulation, entrepreneurialism and negotiation. These are all critical skills needed for school and life and high quality, play-based early learning is the best way to develop them.

The continuation of a play-based learning for the first few formal years of schooling supports a seamless transition for all children from early learning and, importantly, is more likely to result in young children having a positive relationship with education and learning.

3. What do education systems and schools need to do to create culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments?

At Goodstart, our pedagogy and practice are underpinned by the Early Years Learning Framework, which describes cultural competence as '...much more than awareness of culture differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.' To support children to be confident and capable learners, educators must acknowledge each child's existing sense of identity and help them to build upon it. We think culturally appropriate environments go beyond cultural awareness and safety – and instead provide children, families and educators with cultural security.

A key part of our inclusive practice is creating culturally safe and welcoming environments. We have implemented an Engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educators Community of Practice. The Community of Practice aims to increase workforce participation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and overcome barriers to Indigenous children participating in early learning. The model enables solutions to be created and addressed locally, aiming to create culturally safe and competent early learning centres, strengthening local community connections and relationships. We also support cultural safety in our services by training educators, centre support staff and central office staff in cultural competency, using the Arrilla platform.

Another of our key social inclusion initiatives is our Enhancing Children's Outcomes (EChO) centres. EChO centres offer enhanced services over and above the universal base of education and care, such as additional teachers, child and family practitioners, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and social inclusion coordinators. We invest in proportionately disadvantaged communities using our unique EChO model to enhance learning, development and wellbeing outcomes for very vulnerable children, along with supporting their families and building their communities. Importantly, educators and allied health professionals work together in the centre creating a practice uplift.

4. What can the education system, schools and services do to better support the wellbeing and engagement of children, young people and families?

We support the Northern Territory's *Families as First Teachers* program. Parents, carers, kin and community are the primary influence on their child's wellbeing and strength in culture. Service providers and non-government organisations – both community controlled and mainstream - have a critical role in providing safe and welcoming supports to children and families directly, at the time that they need it.

Mental health underpins children's and young people's social and emotional development and their sense of wellbeing. Investing in the mental health of children and young people delivers significant returns, for them, their family and the community. Governments at all levels have a responsibility to provide systems and policies that are culturally safe, evidence-based, easily accessible, effective and responsive. Funding two years of preschool for all children will help enhance wellbeing outcomes across a range of measures, including physically and emotionally.

We support the Recommendations in the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report into Mental Health⁴, particularly those that relate to early childhood.

5. What more can the education system do with our partners in health, policy, housing and child protection and family support services?

As a universal service, early childhood education and care plays a vital role as both prevention and early intervention strategy and a pathway to other support and interventions, such as social services and children safety services. Many ECEC services and providers are already going above and beyond to support children and families in their services by referring them to health, social and other support services. This referral path needs to be reciprocal so that, just as an educator may refer a child with developmental delays to a doctor, a doctor should refer a child with developmental delays to early learning.

ECEC services play a vital role in safeguarding children, particularly children at risk of abuse or neglect. The Child Care Subsidy Safety Net supports children at risk to access heavily subsidised early learning and care, which usually results in no out of pocket costs for vulnerable families or foster carers. It would be highly beneficial and cost effective if it was standard practice for child safety officers and foster carer agencies to recommend all children in child protection are enrolled in and participating in early learning.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS ANY PART OF THIS SUBMISSION IN FURTHER DETAIL, PLEASE CONTACT:

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⁴ <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>



Goodstart in Northern Territory

Goodstart, as a not-for-profit social enterprise, has for 10 years been creating positive social change by giving Australia's children, especially our most vulnerable, the best possible start in life - access to high quality early learning. Goodstart was created a decade ago by a partnership of four of Australia's leading charities, who recognised a child's early years experiences as having a huge influence on the rest of their lives - The Benevolent Society, The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Mission Australia and Social Ventures Australia. We're the largest early learning and care provider in Australia and the nation's largest non-government provider of preschool and kindergarten programs.



Our Vision

is for Australia's children to have the best possible start in life.

Our Purpose

is to ensure children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life.

Goodstart in NT

Early Learning and Care sector in NT

11 centres

117 long day care centres

958 children

6,448 children

765 families

3,388 families

214 employees

Facts about Goodstart

671 centres

70,700 children

59,200 families

14,900 employees, including 1,300 teachers

Around one quarter of our centres are in low socio-economic communities

Around one third are in rural and regional areas

Our six strategic goals that drive our work are:



High Quality

Ensure all our centres deliver high quality early learning and care in a safe environment



Financial Sustainability

Generate a surplus to reinvest in our network, our people and purpose



Inclusion

Enhance outcomes for children in vulnerable circumstances



Great People

Build a capable, aligned and engaged workforce



Evidence

Embed evidence-informed practice and strengthen the Australian evidence base



Influence

Increase public commitment to quality early learning and care



Reconciliation of Goodstart

Goodstart Early Learning acknowledges all Traditional Custodians across Australia and recognises First Nations peoples' continued cultural and spiritual connection to the land, sky and waterways that surround us. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



Making starts with each of us - but at Goodstart it is more than that. Being safe is who we are and what we do.