

THE FRONT PROJECT

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee

Inquiry into the state of Australia's early childhood education and care system in rural, regional and remote communities

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About the Front Project

The Front Project is a national, philanthropically-funded organisation that puts children and families at the centre. We work with the early childhood sector, government and business leaders to ensure the early childhood system lives up to what children and families want from it. We believe in matching the quality of our nation's early childhood system with the high expectations we hold for all children. We want all families to have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of the challenges they face. The Front Project works systematically to develop evidence-based, meaningful, and pragmatic policy solutions that create deep, sustained, and long-term change for greater impact.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Executive Summary

A child in a regional, rural, or remote community is more likely to start school developmentally vulnerable, less likely to have an early childhood education and care (ECEC) service within reach, and more likely to attend an ECEC service that has not yet met the National Quality Standard.

This matters if we care about all children being able to access quality ECEC, regardless of their postcode. But too often these issues of distance, access, quality and developmental outcomes are treated as separate problems but access without it being a quality offering is not genuine access. This inquiry is an opportunity to understand and address this intersection of factors that impact children and families in regional, rural and remote communities.

Figure 1: Children developmentally on track on all five AEDC domains, by geographic category, 2021 and 2024

Source: Australian Early Development Census (2025), AEDC National Report 2024, Commonwealth of Australia, figure OT5.



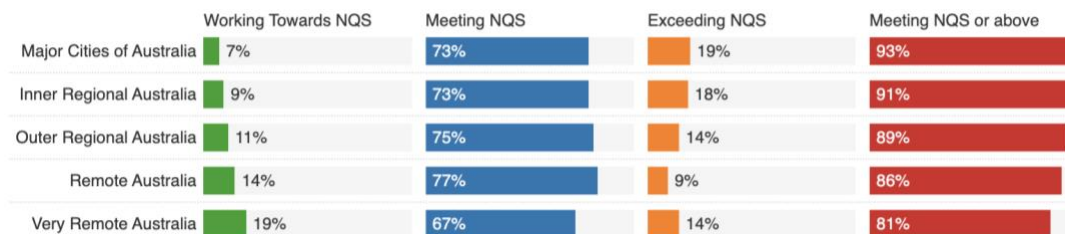
Helpfully, we have Australian evidence on where the quality threshold sits: AERO's linkage study found children in services rated Exceeding had lower rates of developmental vulnerability at school entry than children in services rated Working Towards or Significant Improvement Required, and lower rates than children in Meeting services on three of the five AEDC domains. AERO identifies Exceeding, not Meeting, as the threshold at which quality most effectively reduces developmental vulnerability and found that association held across remoteness, income and income support.¹

The good news is that quality does the same work for a child in a very remote town as it does for a child in a capital city. One of the questions this inquiry must look at is why children in regional, rural or remote areas are less likely to have access to a quality early learning and care service.

¹ Australian Education Research Organisation (2024), *Linking quality and child development in early childhood education and care: Research summary*, AERO, Melbourne. Available at <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/summaries-explainers/research-summaries/linking-quality-and-child-development-early-childhood-education-and-care>

Figure 2: Overall quality ratings by remoteness classification

Source: ACECQA, NQF Online Snapshot Q2 2026, figure OR8, data as at 1 July 2026. Some services are excluded from ARIA+ classification because of poor quality address matching.



* The *Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+)* is a product of the Hugo Centre for Population and Housing and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). It measures relative access to services based on road distances to service centres. ACECQA uses the address details of a service at the Statistical Area 1 (SA1) level to identify its ARIA+ classification. Some services are excluded from ARIA+ classifications because of poor quality address matching. 'Meeting NQS or above' combines services that have received an overall rating of 'Meeting NQS', 'Exceeding NQS' or 'Excellent'.

[Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The funding model and policy settings play a key role in supporting quality. Almost all funding in the long day care system is linked to parent fees, which means a service is resourced according to what its families can afford to pay rather than what its children need, and quality follows that. Services in advantaged areas are more likely to Exceed the National Quality Standard, and services in disadvantaged areas are more likely to be Working Towards it. It is Exceeding that does the most to improve children's developmental outcomes. Rather than counteracting disadvantage, a system funded this way makes it worse. Services in disadvantaged areas, such as regional, rural and remote areas end up with less income because there is less capacity to charge higher fees and generate funds to invest back into quality. Needs-based funding is the mechanism that would resource a service according to the children it has enrolled. A location loading could apply on the same principle as the Schooling Resource Standard, where schools receive a percentage uplift based on remoteness and a separate loading recognising they cannot achieve efficiencies of scale. Both are recurrent entitlements under legislation, not competitive grants.

Current Commonwealth settings are also often calibrated to a metropolitan default. A demand-driven subsidy assumes a market deep enough for families to choose. An averaged hourly rate cap assumes costs that do not vary much by location. Minimum-weeks and booking rules assume families need regular, predictable care. Competitive grant rounds assume providers have back-of-office capacity to apply. Each of these assumptions works reasonably well in a metropolitan catchment but not as well in a thin market.

The Government has recognised this with its Service Delivery Prices Project, which is exploring the idea that different services delivered in different places and communities have varying delivery costs. The outputs of this project will provide an opportunity to treat location as a genuine cost driver, either through adjustments to the hourly rate cap, or, preferably through a loading, similar to that used in the schooling system.

Finally, we also ask the Committee to consider the pressures being felt right now within the ECEC sector and the cumulative load of many reforms all landing at once. No one is assessing how this is all landing on a single-service town or a community with limited resources. In May 2026 the Government announced it would consider establishing a national Early Education and Care

Commission, with advice due to Education Ministers in October 2026.² We have publicly welcomed this commitment to greater stewardship of the ECEC system. The Commission's design is perhaps most consequential for these communities. A Commission that maps supply but applies uniform settings will not close these gaps. One with authority to flex settings by community context, fund services directly where the market will not operate, and sequence reform, could.

Recommendations

1. **National stewardship with real authority.** That any national Early Education and Care Commission be given an explicit function to design and vary funding, workforce and regulatory settings by community context, including remoteness and market thinness, and to assess the cumulative implementation load of reform on small, standalone and remote services.
2. **Block funding for thin markets.** That the Commonwealth establish the Early Childhood Education and Care Development Fund recommended by the Productivity Commission, providing block-based recurrent funding for capital and operating costs in communities the market will not serve, open to centre-based care, family day care, in-home care, mobile services and preschools, and supported by the advisory service the Commission recommended for community representatives seeking to establish a service.
3. **Needs-based funding to address disadvantage** That the Commonwealth introduce a needs-based funding component within early childhood education and care, recognising the additional cost of supporting children experiencing disadvantage and that the component be weighted for remoteness so that services in regional, rural and remote communities are funded for the cost of the children they actually enrol.
4. **Let preschools do more.** That Family Assistance Law be amended to enable subsidised wrap-around care in dedicated preschools, and that minimum operating period and 48-week requirements be removed so preschools and kindergartens operating on a school-term calendar are not excluded in practice.
5. **Funded quality improvement support.** That the Commonwealth fund quality improvement support for services in regional, rural and remote communities, delivered through place-based mentoring and coaching, and covering the backfill, travel, accommodation and paid release time that make professional learning possible outside metropolitan centres.
6. **A regional workforce strategy.** That the Committee recommend a National Rural, Regional and Remote ECEC Workforce Strategy, with hard-to-staff location incentives, funded qualification pathways, and paid placement and mentoring support delivered locally and that progress be

² Education Ministers Meeting (15 July 2026), *Communiqué*, Australian Government Department of Education. Available at <https://www.education.gov.au/education-ministers-meeting/resources/communiquis-education-ministers-meetings-2026>

measured and published annually by remoteness classification, using staffing waiver rates, qualification completion rates and service vacancy data.

7. **Fund ACCO-led services properly.** That the Commonwealth commit to the funding model recommended by SNAICC: block and needs-based, scaled by population, remoteness and need, and including backbone functions, designed so that decision-making on First Nations early childhood remains with the community-controlled sector.

The extent and nature of service gaps

A benchmark for measuring the gap

The Productivity Commission recommended that all families with children aged 0 to 5 who choose to use ECEC be able to access at least 30 hours or three days a week of high-quality ECEC, for 48 weeks a year. We recommend the Committee adopt this as the standard against which service gaps are assessed. It measures usable access rather than the presence of a service somewhere in the region.

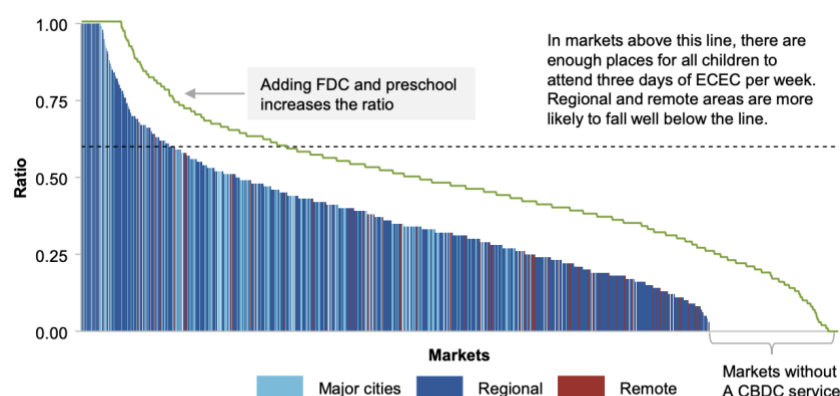
Since 5 January 2026, the 3 Day Guarantee has provided all CCS-eligible families with at least 72 hours of subsidised care per fortnight regardless of activity. Entitlement and access are not the same measure. A family in a town with no service, or with a room closed for want of an educator, holds an entitlement it cannot use.

The size and location of the gap

Across the ECEC sector the Productivity Commission estimated a national shortfall of up to 130,000 places, or 15 per cent of existing places. In regional, remote and very remote areas, counting preschool places, it estimated a gap of about 40,000 places. Its mapping of approved places to children across local markets found regional and remote areas are more likely to fall well below the ratio required for all children to attend three days a week.

Figure 3: The ratio of approved places to children varies widely across markets

Source: Productivity Commission (2024), *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 1, figure 11, p. 28.



a. Ratio is calculated as the number of approved places per child in a local area. The number of approved places is as at Q4 2022 and population is as at the 2021 Census. The ratio has been restricted to 1. The 54 local areas with a ratio greater than 1 have been accorded a ratio of 1. b. When adding family day care and dedicated preschools to the ratio the order of the markets changes. The green line only depicts the new distribution.

Both national inquiries found the market will not close the gap

The Commission found supply will respond in many areas once additional subsidies are implemented, but recommended the Australian Government provide additional funding in persistent thin markets and communities with complex needs to establish services and, where necessary, ensure their ongoing viability. The ACCC likewise identified that the market would not address shortage of supply on its own and categorised markets as adequately served, under-served

and unserved, and recommended different mixes of intervention including supply-side funding, identifying under-served markets as most often outer metropolitan areas and larger regional towns.

Access without quality is not equivalent access

The Productivity Commission recommended that increased access should not come at the expense of quality, and recommended quality uplift through support for the regulatory system, workforce investment and better information for services and parents.

AERO's linkage study, the first Australian research connecting quality ratings to child development, found children in services rated Exceeding the National Quality Standard had lower rates of developmental vulnerability at school entry than children in services rated Working Towards or Significant Improvement Required. It identified Exceeding, rather than Meeting, as the threshold at which quality most reduces developmental vulnerability, and found the association held across remoteness, income and income support.³

Gaps in service type, not only in places

Where a community has no long day care centre it may have a preschool, school, mobile service or family day care educator. Whether these count as supply depends on what the rules permit them to do. The PC recommended removing impediments to wrap-around care in dedicated preschools and that state governments facilitate outside school hours care in public schools where demand is sustainable. A gap analysis counting only long day care places will understate supply in communities where the preschool or school is the only early childhood infrastructure.

³ Rankin, P., Staton, S., Jones, A., Potia, A. H., Houen, S., Healey, B., & Thorpe, K. (2024). *Linking quality and child development in early childhood education and care: Technical report*. Australian Education Research Organisation.

Workforce attraction, training and retention

Shortages are worse the further a service sits from a capital city

HumanAbility, the Jobs and Skills Council responsible for children's education and care, found in its 2025 Workforce Plan that shortages are more pronounced in outer regional areas and especially in remote and very remote areas, and that this directly affects service quality and availability for children.⁴ It identified how services are absorbing the shortage: increasing reliance on trainees and staff still working towards their qualifications, a rise in unpaid overtime, and sustained use of staffing waivers.

ACECQA's most recent snapshot shows 4.3 per cent of services nationally hold a staffing waiver. By remoteness, services in major cities sit at 3.5 per cent. Every other classification sits well above it: 6.1 per cent inner regional, 6.7 per cent very remote, 6.9 per cent outer regional and 7.9 per cent remote.⁵ A service outside a major city is roughly twice as likely to be operating without the qualified staff the National Quality Standard requires. That holds for inner regional communities as much as for the most isolated ones.

Figure 4: Proportion of services with a staffing waiver by remoteness classification

Source: ACECQA, NQF Online Snapshot Q2 2026, figure W4, data as at 1 July 2026.



Jobs and Skills Australia, with HumanAbility, identified in its 2024 capacity study a national shortfall of around 21,000 qualified ECEC professionals to meet existing demand, with a further 36,000 needed to meet unmet demand and deliver committed subsidy and preschool policies.⁶ It found shortages across major cities, regional and remote Australia, forecast to persist over the next ten years. Its recommendations specific to these communities included paid placements with outcome measures tied to time worked in regional or remote settings, transport incentives for hard-to-reach

⁴ HumanAbility (2025), *Workforce Plan 2025: Sector Profile, Children's Education and Care*, Jobs and Skills Council. Available at https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/69267e08baa8c811103ab421/6a44b0a9edfe9366ceeb4e28_WFP25%20Childrens%20Education%20and%20Care.pdf

⁵ ACECQA, *NQF Online Snapshot Q2 2026*, figure W4: Proportion of services with a waiver by remoteness classification and waiver category, data as at 1 July 2026. Available at <https://snapshots.acecqa.gov.au/Snapshot/waivers.html>

⁶ Jobs and Skills Australia in partnership with HumanAbility (September 2024), *The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession: Extended Report*, Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study. Available at https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-09/the_future_of_the_early_childhood_education_profession_-_extended_report.pdf

services, and funded supervision support for senior staff in regional and remote locations. Those recommendations were made two years ago.

The gap is in how existing investment reaches these communities

The Commonwealth is investing substantially in the workforce. The Worker Retention Payment has delivered a 15 per cent wage increase. Fee-Free TAFE covers early childhood qualifications. The Commonwealth Prac Payment supports students on mandatory placements. The Paid Practicum Subsidy funds up to eight weeks of paid leave for educators completing practicum requirements, with applications expressly prioritised from First Nations educators, educators in regional and remote locations, and small providers.

The national waiver rate is falling. The regional gap is not closing at the same rate. Closing it does not require new programs. It requires existing programs to carry a quarantined regional and remote allocation rather than asking the communities with the least administrative capacity to compete for it.

The Productivity Commission recommended governments introduce new measures to support the workforce, including tailored training options for new entrants and better mentoring, professional development and career pathways for the existing workforce.

Child Care Subsidy effectiveness and whether its structure reflects regional costs

ACCC findings on the Child Care Subsidy

The ACCC made three relevant findings. The characteristics of childcare markets mean the Child Care Subsidy and the hourly rate cap have limited effectiveness as a price signal and as a constraint on prices. The subsidy's complexity makes it difficult for parents to understand their entitlements and choices. The system does not differentiate the costs of caring for younger children or reflect the higher costs of delivering services in disadvantaged or First Nations communities.

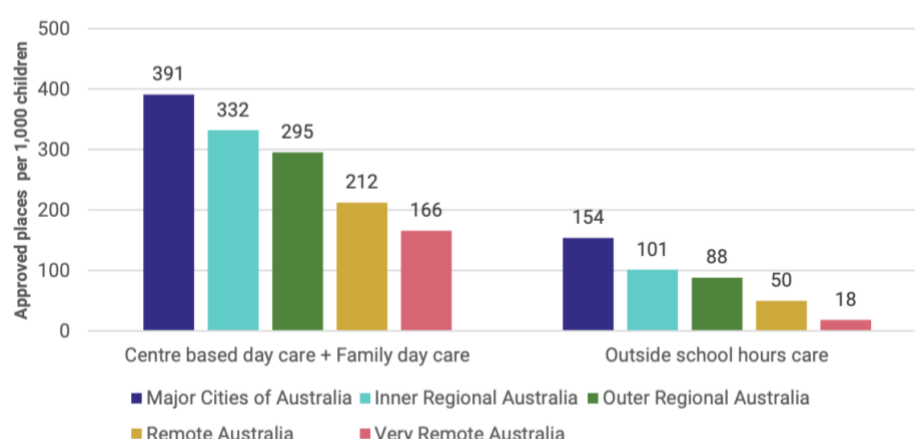
The ACCC classified communities as adequately served, under-served and unserved, identified under-served markets as most often outer metropolitan areas and larger regional towns, and concluded that different market types require a different mix of government interventions, including supply-side funding. The same funding settings currently apply to all three.

Those settings are regressive. Almost all funding is linked to parent fees, so a service is resourced according to what its families can pay rather than what its children need. Services in low-income communities operate on the smallest budgets. In regional, rural and remote communities, higher fees do not translate into higher quality. They meet a higher cost base.

In 2022 there were 391 approved childcare places per 1,000 children in major cities, 212 in remote Australia and 166 in very remote Australia. A child in a very remote community had access to roughly 40 per cent of the places available to a child in a capital city.

Figure 5: Approved childcare places per 1,000 children by remoteness, 2022

Source: ACCC (June 2023), *Childcare Inquiry Interim Report*, Figure 1. ACCC analysis of ACECQA and Department of Education administrative data.



Source: ACCC analysis of ACECQA and Department of Education administrative data.

Subsidy rules penalise models suited to smaller communities

Occasional, community-based provision is often what small towns need, for example a neighbourhood house running a few sessions a week for families who do not need, and often cannot use, a regular booked pattern. Minimum-weeks and structured-booking requirements work against

this model. The families most likely to need it are those with irregular or seasonal work, those travelling to a regional centre for appointments, and those for whom a full booked week is neither affordable nor wanted. Our family research found 83 per cent of families wanted more casual care options. Of families not accessing any paid early learning and care, 17 per cent reported the days or hours did not suit their needs.⁷

The Productivity Commission recommended the Australian Government build on the Community Child Care Fund to develop a new Early Childhood Education and Care Development Fund, addressing the limitations it identified in the current approach: a relatively small budget, eligibility constraints and administrative complexity. It recommended the Development Fund be able to contribute to services addressing specific community needs, naming occasional care and integrated services offering health or other community supports.⁸ We support that recommendation, on the condition that occasional care is treated as early childhood education bound by the National Quality Standard. Flexibility of model is not an argument for a lower standard.

Funding will not resolve this while the subsidy rules remain unchanged. A service can be funded and still find families cannot claim subsidy for the sessions it offers, because those sessions do not meet minimum-weeks or booking requirements. The Development Fund and the subsidy settings need to move together.

⁷ The Front Project (2023), *Work and Play: Understanding families' experiences and perceptions of Early Childhood Education and Care*. Available at <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/our-work/research/273-work-and-play-report-2023>

⁸ Productivity Commission (2024), *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, Inquiry Report no. 106, Volume 1, Canberra, pp. 29-30. Available at <https://assets.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report/childhood-volume1-report.pdf>

The effectiveness of existing Commonwealth programs

The Community Child Care Fund

The Productivity Commission put the Community Child Care Fund's annual budget at about \$150 million, supporting around 57,000 places, and found its eligibility conditions can be overly restrictive. The most recent round makes \$106.9 million available across three years and has supported 386 services, around two-thirds of them in regional, rural and remote Australia.⁹

The targeting is right, but the mechanism for securing funding can be challenging. Competitive, time-limited rounds ask the smallest and most isolated providers to compete on application-writing capacity, which is the capacity they are least likely to have. A grant round also assumes a viability problem that will pass.

The Productivity Commission's recommended replacement

The PC recommended the Australian Government build on the Community Child Care Fund to develop a new Early Childhood Education and Care Development Fund, identifying the limitations of the current approach as a relatively small budget, eligibility constraints and administrative complexity. It recommended support be available as a priority in regions with small populations and low ratios of approved places per child, where services would not be viable without funding beyond the Child Care Subsidy and inclusion support. It recommended the Fund be able to provide grant funding, block-based recurrent funding for capital and operating costs, and low-interest loans, and be able to fund family day care, in-home care and occasional care where those models suit local need. It also recommended an advisory service within the Department of Education to support parent groups, local governments and schools in identifying funding required and meeting legal and administrative requirements.¹⁰

The recommendation has not been implemented

The Commission's implementation pathway placed establishment of the Development Fund in the tranche beginning in 2026, with the Fund in operation from 2028. Grant funding has expanded since. The Development Fund has not been established.

The Building Early Education Fund

Within the \$500 million committed to building and expanding services, a small-scale grant package of up to \$80 million comprises three opportunities. At least \$20 million supports small not-for-profit CCS-approved providers to build or expand a centre-based day care service for children aged 0 to 5, or to modify a building to deliver in-venue family day care in communities with no existing service. At least \$20 million provides capital funding for services led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, by invitation, in consultation with First Nations partners and peak bodies. Up to \$40 million provides time-limited operational support to help Building Fund supported services open and

⁹ Productivity Commission (2024), *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 1, Canberra, pp. 15 and 30. Available at <https://assets.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report/childhood-volume1-report.pdf>

¹⁰ Productivity Commission (2024), *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, Inquiry Report no. 106, Volume 1, Canberra, pp. 29-30. Available at <https://assets.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report/childhood-volume1-report.pdf>

operate sustainably, and cannot be used for capital works. The small-scale round is competitive and targets outer suburbs, regional and remote communities.¹¹

We support these streams and would want them maintained and expanded but two cautions.

The scale is small relative to the fund. The two capital streams commit at least \$40 million between them, 8 per cent of the Building Fund's capital half and 4 per cent of the fund overall. And the large-scale round was open to large not-for-profit providers building or expanding multiple services. In the communities this inquiry is examining, provision rests overwhelmingly on small and standalone services rather than providers of that scale.

¹¹ Department of Education, *Building Early Education Fund small-scale grant opportunities*, Australian Government. Available at <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/about/building-early-education-fund/small-scale-grant-opportunities>

Challenges facing Aboriginal community-controlled organisations

We defer to SNAICC on this term of reference.

SNAICC is the national voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and should carry primary weight here. What follows is offered in support of its positions.

Any policy response to remote access is, in substantial part, a First Nations response.

In 2024, 33.9 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains, down from 35.2 per cent at the 2018 baseline, with Closing the Gap target 4 assessed as worsening. The proportion of children on track falls with remoteness, from 36.9 per cent in major cities to 16.5 per cent in very remote areas. In remote areas, 44 per cent of children are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.¹² That last figure is the one we would ask the Committee to hold. It means the recommendations this inquiry makes about remote access will apply, in practice, disproportionately to First Nations children and families. They should therefore be designed with the community-controlled sector from the outset, rather than adapted afterwards.

Supporting the workforce

HumanAbility reports that First Nations workers make up 2.4 per cent of the early childhood workforce in major cities, 6.8 per cent in regional Australia and 25 per cent in remote Australia. So the regional and remote workforce measures discussed in “Workforce attraction, training and retention” are, in the most remote communities, measures affecting a workforce that is one quarter First Nations.

The training pipeline is also worth noting. In 2023, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners were 5.3 per cent of enrolments in children's education and care qualifications and 2.4 per cent of completions.¹³ Jobs and Skills Australia found First Nations leadership of education and training providers makes a significant difference to access and success for First Nations students, but that there are relatively few Aboriginal Community Controlled providers delivering these qualifications. It recommended governments examine the viability of current funding arrangements for ACCO-led registered training organisations and higher education providers.¹⁴

Where place-based, culturally grounded delivery has been resourced, it works. RATEP, delivered by TAFE Queensland and James Cook University across six remote communities with face-to-face

¹² Productivity Commission, *Closing the Gap Information Repository*, Dashboard, Socio-economic outcome area 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years, figure CtG4.1, based on 2024 AEDC data (accessed September 2026). Available at <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/children-thriving/>

¹³ HumanAbility (2025), *Workforce Plan 2025: Sector Profile, Children's Education and Care*, Jobs and Skills Council, p. 18. Available at https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/69267e08baa8c811103ab421/6a44b0a9edfe9366ceeb4e28_WFP25%20Childrens%20Education%20and%20Care.pdf

¹⁴ Jobs and Skills Australia in partnership with HumanAbility (September 2024), *The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession: Extended Report*, Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Capacity Study, findings F16 and recommendation R17. Available at <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/future-early-childhood-education-profession>

teaching in the Torres Strait, records a 95 per cent completion rate.¹⁵ Against a national picture in which remote and very remote areas together account for around 1 per cent of completions, that is not a marginal difference.¹⁶

Cultural safety should be elevated in the National Quality Framework.

We have argued that the National Quality Framework sets the bar for cultural safety too low. Meaningful engagement with families and community, drawing on diversity in practice, and embedding First Nations perspectives in curriculum currently sit within an Exceeding theme rather than being requirements for Meeting the Quality Standards.¹⁷ In communities where a quarter of the workforce and a substantial share of the children are First Nations, that is a significant problem. We have also supported SNAICC's recommendation that consideration be given to a unique framework and standards for First Nations early childhood services, developed through joint decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, communities and peaks.¹⁸

National stewardship must not displace sector leadership.

SNAICC supports the establishment of a National ECEC Commission to act as system steward, on the condition that its development and design are done in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies so that it meets the needs of ACCO services, and that the process does not displace existing models of shared decision-making between First Nations leaders and government.¹⁹

We hold the same position. Stewardship is needed to fix settings built for a metropolitan default but it is not a licence to centralise decisions that belong with communities, and the Commission's enabling design should settle that at establishment.

¹⁵ HumanAbility (2025), *Workforce Plan 2025: Sector Profile, Children's Education and Care*, Jobs and Skills Council, RATEP ECEC case study. Available at https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/69267e08baa8c811103ab421/6a44b0a9edfe9366ceeb4e28_WFP25%20Childrens%20Education%20and%20Care.pdf

¹⁶ HumanAbility (2025), *Workforce Plan 2025: Sector Profile, Children's Education and Care*, Jobs and Skills Council, p. 18. Available at https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/69267e08baa8c811103ab421/6a44b0a9edfe9366ceeb4e28_WFP25%20Childrens%20Education%20and%20Care.pdf

¹⁷ The Front Project, *Submission to the Productivity Commission Draft Report on Early Childhood Education and Care*, March 2024, pp. 37-38. Available at <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2024/03/13/6mar-pc-submission-v3.pdf>

¹⁸ The Front Project, *Submission to the Productivity Commission Draft Report*, March 2024, p. 10. Available at <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/media/attachments/2024/03/13/6mar-pc-submission-v3.pdf>

¹⁹ SNAICC - National Voice for our Children (October 2025), *Senate Inquiry into the Quality and Safety of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System*, submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee, Recommendation 10, p. 25. Available at <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Senate-Inquiry-into-the-Quality-and-Safety-of-Australias-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-System-SNAICC-Submission.pdf>

Conclusion

We encourage the Committee to consider these important issues for regional, rural and remote communities from the perspective of the child and whether they are afforded the same opportunities as a child in a capital city.

Evidence tells us that the communities with the fewest services also have the highest proportion of services yet to meet the National Quality Standard, the lowest proportion reaching the Exceeding rating that the evidence identifies as most protective for children, and the highest reliance on staffing waivers.

We want to be clear that this is not a sector that has been neglected. The past three years have brought the most substantial investment in early childhood education and care in a generation: a 15 per cent wage increase for educators, the 3 Day Guarantee, a billion dollar building fund, fee-free training, and a serious body of work now underway on service delivery prices and national stewardship.

However, these communities are consistently the last to feel the benefit, because the policy settings and initiatives were designed for a “market” that doesn’t function like other markets. The advice on how to fix that already exists. The Productivity Commission recommended the Development Fund. The ACCC recommended supply-side funding differentiated by market type. The South Australian Royal Commission recommended needs-based funding. Education Ministers named the regional and remote workforce as a national priority in 2021, and SNAICC has already designed the funding model for ACCO-led services. What this inquiry can most usefully do is ask what it would take to act on it.

The Front Project would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee and to provide further detail on any of the analysis in this submission.