THE STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM IN RURAL, REGIONAL AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES

ISA SUBMISSION

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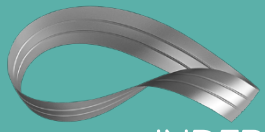

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA

Acknowledgement of Country

Independent Schools Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and commit to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

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1. ABOUT ISA

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body for Independent schooling in Australia. ISA represents the sector on national issues and engages with the Australian Government, national agencies, media, key stakeholders, and the wider Australian community.

Working with the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), ISA represents more than 767,000 students, 1,240 schools and a workforce of over 134,000 people.

Independent schools are long-established partners in Australia's education system, alongside government and Catholic schools. They make a valuable contribution to society and the learning and wellbeing of Australian children.

The Independent school sector is diverse, and schools serve a wide range of communities. The latest available data shows that more than one in six Australian school students attends an Independent school. For secondary students, it is over one in five.

Students at Independent schools reflect the full diversity of Australian society – including those who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage. These students include:

- high-needs students with disability attending special schools
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending remote 100 per cent Indigenous schools
- students living in regional and remote locations
- highly disadvantaged and disengaged young people attending Independent special assistance schools.

Most families with children enrolled in Independent schools are middle-to-low-income earners, increasingly from culturally diverse backgrounds, and residing in outer-suburban and inner-suburban communities. Many of these families are currently facing economic stress and are making substantial sacrifices for their children's education.

According to the most recent data, the majority of Independent schools charge annual fees of less than $6,000, and there were a greater number of schools charging less than $1,300 per year than those charging over $20,000. Some Independent schools charge no fees at all. More than half of the sector's recurrent income comes from parents and families.

Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or alternatively recognised curriculum. Some have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example, Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the sector.

2. INTRODUCTION

Independent Schools Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate inquiry into the state of Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in rural, regional and remote communities. ISA consulted with the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools in preparing this submission.

Independent schools make a significant contribution to ECEC provision across Australia through the delivery of preschool and kindergarten programs, long day care services, outside school hours care (OSHC) and other early learning models. Many Independent schools operate in regional and remote communities and provide essential education and care services to communities who, in some cases, have limited other options.

Universal access to ECEC requires more than universal entitlement to a subsidy. While affordability is important, many regional and remote communities face more fundamental challenges relating to service availability, workforce supply, infrastructure, service viability and geographic isolation. In some communities, families cannot access ECEC because suitable services simply do not exist.

Improving access will require contextualised, place-based approaches that support a diversity of delivery models. Independent schools can form part of the solution where community need exists, but this will require support via government policies that support sustainable service delivery, workforce development and flexible approaches to provision.

ISA's upcoming Regional and Remote Education Strategy is in its final stage of consultation and is expected to be released in late 2026. The strategy contends with similar issues to those addressed by this inquiry, including workforce, access, service sustainability and place-based approaches, and may be of interest to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee once released.

Note that this submission uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Remoteness Areas definitions when discussing "regional and remote" areas. "Regional" includes both inner and outer regional Australia, and similarly "remote" refers to both remote and very remote areas.[1]

[1] ABS Australian Statistical Geography Standard - Remoteness Areas, 2023

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

ISA recommends that the Australian Government, in partnership with the state and territory governments, commit to the following actions:

1. Adopt place-based approaches to ECEC planning and investment in regional and remote communities. Where possible, governments should build on existing local capability, infrastructure and partnerships to create sustainable access to ECEC services.
2. Recognise the distinction between subsidy entitlement and the actual availability of ECEC services and ensure policies target the market conditions that contribute to both affordability and access.
3. Complement demand-side assistance such as the Child Care Subsidy Scheme with targeted supply-side investment to assist in service creation and provision in thin and undersupplied markets.
4. Ensure workforce planning occurs alongside infrastructure and service expansion initiatives. Services require both a skilled workforce and adequate local demand to operate viably.
5. Strengthen regional workforce attraction, retention, training and professional learning opportunities.
6. Consider supporting flexible service delivery approaches when designing government policies or grant programs which target ECEC delivery in regional and remote areas.
7. Improve coordination between Commonwealth and state and territory funding, regulatory and program settings, with a focus on streamlined, proportionate regulation that reduces administrative burden and duplication while maintaining child safety and quality.
8. Establish predictable, long-term recurrent funding models to provide certainty for services operating in thin markets, especially those with limited commercial viability.
9. Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, communities and children through sustainable, flexible and community-led funding arrangements.
10. The Senate Education and Employment References Committee should directly consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations regarding lived experiences.

4. THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SECTOR'S CONTRIBUTION TO ECEC

Independent schools are important contributors to Australia's ECEC landscape.

In 2022 it was estimated by ISA, based on available data, that two-thirds of all Independent schools provided early childhood services, equating at the time to approximately 790 schools.[2]

The majority of Independent school providers operate early learning services for 3- to 5-year-olds. Some Independent schools operate both Long Day Care (LDC) and sessional kindergarten/preschool, or may have Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) available for both preschool and school-aged children. Some regional Independent schools provide early childhood education and care alongside their K–12 provision, offering an integrated model that can help sustain access to early learning in communities where alternative services may be limited.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Preschool Education 2025 dataset states that 8,758 children aged four and five are enrolled in a preschool program run by an Independent school, representing approximately 7.2% of preschool enrolments for this age range.[3]

Many Independent schools deliver ECEC alongside school education, creating opportunities for continuity of learning and development across the early learning continuum. These integrated models support strong relationships between educators, children and families and can facilitate smoother transitions into school.

In regional and remote communities, Independent schools often function as community hubs, offering vital social infrastructure to their communities. In some locations, Independent schools may be the only providers of ECEC services for families.

5. BARRIERS TO ECEC SERVICE DELIVERY

5.1 WORKFORCE

Workforce shortages remain the most significant constraint on improving ECEC access across regional and remote Australia. Independent schools consistently report challenges attracting, retaining and developing qualified early childhood educators and teachers.

While remuneration is an important consideration, workforce challenges extend well beyond wages. Housing shortages, geographic isolation, limited training opportunities, competition from other education sectors and reduced access to professional learning all affect workforce supply and retention. While many of these pressures are also reported by metropolitan schools, they are amplified for those in regional or remote areas.

There is a strong need for investment in local workforce development. This includes expanding access to qualifications in regional areas, supporting traineeships and employment-based pathways, strengthening partnerships between schools, universities and vocational education providers, and creating opportunities for existing school staff to obtain ECEC qualifications. In developing ISA's upcoming Regional and Remote Education Strategy, consulted schools and organisations noted that it is not just about creating attractive remuneration packages that convince people from metropolitan areas to relocate; schools and communities need to create an ongoing environment of support and inclusion where those workers who have relocated from metropolitan areas choose to stay.

Professional learning and mentoring opportunities must also be accessible to educators working outside metropolitan areas. Workforce strategies should support ongoing capability development while minimising the travel and cost burdens often associated with regional and remote professional learning.

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[2] ISA Submission: Productivity Commission's Inquiry into early childhood education and care, 22 May 2023

[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Preschool Education 2025

Even when ECEC service providers in regional or remote areas can afford the travel and registration costs to send an employee to a regional hub or capital city to attend a professional learning opportunity, it can be extremely challenging to secure casual relief staff to ensure service continuity for the time required. This issue is not unique to the ECEC setting, though is a significant barrier to ongoing staff development in regional and remote schools.

Additionally, workforce planning should occur alongside service expansion. New infrastructure and additional places cannot improve access if services are unable to recruit and retain qualified educators. Workforce assessments should therefore form part of all significant service expansion initiatives.

Independent schools report significant challenges attracting and retaining qualified educators and teachers in regional communities. Independent Schools Queensland notes that Independent schools in regional and remote areas such as St George and Charters Towers have responded to workforce shortages by supporting existing educators to obtain teaching qualifications, offering relocation incentives and exploring international recruitment opportunities. While these efforts have assisted service continuity, they illustrate the impact of workforce challenges facing providers in non-metropolitan communities.

Workforce challenges extend beyond recruitment. Independent Schools Victoria noted that early years educators and teachers may need to navigate different qualification, registration, industrial and regulatory frameworks across school and ECEC settings, creating additional complexity for integrated service providers and greatly reducing workforce flexibility to meet changes in demand.

5.2 REGULATORY AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS

The Independent school sector supports strong regulatory frameworks that promote child safety and quality outcomes. Independent school recognises the vital importance of proactive action to create safe environments for young people. However, there is growing concern about the cumulative effect of regulatory and administrative requirements on providers, especially those operating in regional and remote communities.

The ECEC sector has been subject to a significant reform agenda over the past two years, including substantial child safety and regulatory reforms under the National Quality Framework. While these reforms are important, their cumulative implementation burden is significant, particularly for smaller providers and services operating in regional and remote communities where workforce, administrative and viability pressures are already acute.

These burdens may affect the ability of existing services to expand and can discourage new providers from entering underserved communities. They may also create unnecessary barriers for schools seeking to establish ECEC services in response to demonstrated local need.

The objective should not be deregulation or reduced safety requirements. Rather, governments should implement regulation that protects children, maintains quality and supports access, while minimising duplication between systems, streamlining administrative requirements and ensuring regulatory settings remain practical and proportionate for smaller providers operating in regional and remote contexts. The new National Education Register, developed by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), has the potential to strengthen child safety, improve sector oversight and reduce administrative burden and duplication for ECEC services.

6. RESOURCING

6.1 ACCESS GOES BEYOND AFFORDABILITY

Access challenges in regional and remote Australia cannot be addressed by affordability measures alone. While the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) plays a vital role in reducing costs for families, affordability measures cannot create services or places where they do not already exist.

In many regional and remote communities, the primary challenge is service availability rather than service cost. Families may face long waitlists, time-restricted enrolments, caps on places due to

educator-to-child ratio requirements, geographic isolation or a complete absence of local services. These barriers persist regardless of eligibility for financial assistance.

The distinction between subsidy entitlement and actual access is particularly important in thin or undersupplied markets. Increased CCS support may increase demand, but without complementary investment in workforce, infrastructure and service capacity, improved affordability alone is unlikely to result in increased access.

Though there is a broader cost of living crisis which Australian Government policy must address, in the ECEC context policy responses must move beyond a focus on affordability and address the broader supply-side factors that influence whether children can access ECEC services in their local communities. These include workforce supply, infrastructure availability, service viability and local population characteristics.

Information provided by the Associations of Independent Schools demonstrates that access challenges persist even where affordability measures are available. Independent Schools Queensland reports ongoing waitlists in Townsville, Cairns and surrounding communities despite the availability of CCS support, highlighting the importance of workforce capacity and service availability in determining whether families can access ECEC places.

Similarly, Independent Schools Tasmania noted that entitlement to subsidised care does not guarantee access to a local service. In some communities, access is constrained by a lack of services, limited workforce capacity, infrastructure challenges or the difficulty of sustaining conventional service models in smaller population centres.

6.2 SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT

Commonwealth investment is vital in improving ECEC access in communities where market operations alone have not delivered sufficient services to meet demand. However, the effectiveness of such investment should be assessed not only by the number of places created but also by whether those places remain sustainable and responsive to community needs over time.

In remote communities, service viability can be affected by small populations, workforce shortages and higher operating costs. As a result, investment may need to support the ongoing sustainability or expansion of existing services rather than focus exclusively on establishing new ones.

The extension of the ECEC Worker Retention Payment to 30 June 2028 provides welcome short-term certainty for providers, educators and families. However, feedback from ISA members prior to the extension highlighted significant concern about what would occur if the payment ceased without a clear transition or ongoing workforce funding arrangement. In regional and remote communities, where services often operate with narrow margins and face acute workforce shortages, the sudden withdrawal of wage support could undermine workforce retention, increase pressure on fees, affect service viability and reduce families' access to ECEC. Governments should provide early clarity on the future of this funding beyond 2028 so providers can plan workforce, fee and operational settings with confidence.

Governments should continue to support infrastructure development where genuine service gaps exist. Investments that leverage existing community and education infrastructure can provide efficient and locally responsive solutions, particularly where schools are well placed to contribute to service delivery.

Future investment should also consider workforce capacity, service viability, cultural inclusion, infrastructure requirements and coordination across Commonwealth and state and territory programs. A whole-of-system approach will help ensure that investments support lasting improvements in access, participation and quality.

Particular attention should be given to children with additional needs and the availability of specialist support services in regional and remote communities. Access challenges affecting inclusion support and allied health services can limit the effectiveness of ECEC participation and require coordinated policy responses. This work will intersect with the Australian Government's Thriving Kids initiative,

which highlights the need for cross-governmental collaboration when targeting investment to avoid duplication.

Commonwealth funding for new and expanded early learning services has been announced through the Building Early Education Fund. In Tasmania, funding has been allocated to existing government schools to expand their ECEC services, demonstrating how existing school infrastructure can be used to increase service availability in communities with limited provision. Governments could extend this approach by working with the non-government sector to support similar responses in areas with unmet demand for ECEC services.

Independent Schools Queensland highlighted the Queensland Government's Kindy Uplift funding, which provides targeted funding to strengthen quality improvement within preschool services (referred to as kindergarten in Queensland) through educator capability, professional learning and evidence-informed practice. This initiative recognises that quality outcomes require investment in service capability.

7. PLACE-BASED AND FLEXIBLE SERVICE MODELS

The diversity of regional and remote communities means there is no single ECEC delivery model capable of meeting every community's needs. Population size, workforce availability, travel distances, cultural needs, demographic trends and local demand vary significantly across Australia. Policy responses must therefore be flexible and place-based, rather than a prescriptive one-size-fits-all model.

In some communities, conventional centre-based long day care services may be viable and sustainable. In others, integrated school-based provision, partnerships with existing providers, family day care, outreach services or other locally designed solutions may better suit community need.

Independent schools can contribute significantly to these locally responsive approaches. School-based ECEC services can utilise existing infrastructure, established governance arrangements and strong community relationships to support service delivery. Independent schools' governance arrangements can allow schools to review policies and adapt delivery models within responsive timeframes, enabling them to meet changing school community needs and innovate with new approaches more efficiently than larger systems are able to.

Governments should ensure that funding, regulatory and approval settings support rather than impede the development of locally appropriate service models. This includes enabling schools and other providers to respond flexibly to identified community need and recognising that sustainable service delivery may require different approaches in different locations. Importantly, policy settings should build on existing local capability and infrastructure wherever possible.

Tasmania's Early Learning for Three Year Olds initiative provides an example of a place-based approach to access. The government initiative recognises the need for flexible delivery models and seeks to ensure that every three-year-old can access affordable, quality early learning irrespective of where they live. Importantly, the Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People took a cross-sectoral approach when selecting trial sites for this initiative, consulting with both the Catholic and Independent school sectors.

Independent schools can play an important role in initiatives such as this because they often possess existing educational infrastructure and strong community relationships. Independent schools may already have the facilities, governance structures and community connections necessary to support integrated early learning provision, particularly where standalone or new services may struggle to remain viable.

8. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES

ISA recognises the critical role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in delivering culturally safe and community-led ECEC services. These organisations play an essential role in supporting children, families and communities, particularly in regional and remote Australia.

Strong connections between education and other essential services such as health, housing and employment are vital to improving outcomes for First Nations learners in ECEC settings. When these systems work together, young people can engage more fully in learning; when they do not, schooling or care is disrupted. Holistic approaches that recognise the impacts of overcrowded housing, health needs, disability support and family responsibilities help ensure young learners are not blamed for structural barriers beyond their control. Schools and education authorities must collaborate with allied health providers, housing agencies, and employment services to help students and families navigate complex systems, address systemic barriers, and strengthen educational outcomes for First Nations learners.

Integrated support models, including wraparound services and case management, are essential to ensuring First Nations children and families receive coordinated and holistic support. Programs such as Connected Beginnings demonstrate the value of community-led, locally co-designed approaches that bring together family support services, health providers and early childhood education to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. By supporting early development, engagement with services and smoother transitions to school, these approaches can help address early developmental and educational disadvantage before it compounds across schooling and later life.

ISA supports policy settings that strengthen the sustainability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services through long-term funding certainty, infrastructure investment, workforce development and flexible approaches to service delivery.

Policy approaches should be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and should support local leadership, self-determination and community control. Governments should avoid imposing standardised models that do not reflect local circumstances, priorities and aspirations. ISA recommends that the Senate Education and Employment References Committee directly consult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations regarding the specific barriers and opportunities experienced by those organisations. Their voices should remain central to the development of future policy responses and it is important they are given the opportunity to provide their perspectives directly.

9. CONCLUSION

Australia's regional and remote communities require ECEC solutions that reflect local circumstances rather than a single national model. Improving access will require policy settings that acknowledge the interconnected challenges of workforce availability, service viability, infrastructure, geography and community need.

Independent schools are well placed to contribute to locally responsive solutions through their existing infrastructure, community relationships and integrated educational pathways. However, sustainable improvements in access will depend on governments supporting flexible delivery models, investing in workforce capability and designing funding arrangements that recognise the realities of service provision in regional and remote Australia.

Affordability alone will not resolve access where workforce, infrastructure and service viability constraints prevent services from operating. The Independent school sector supports Government

policy and initiatives which ensure that all children, regardless of where they live, can access high-quality and sustainable early childhood education and care.

ISA would be happy to discuss our submission or be involved in further consultation.

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