



MEDIA RELEASE

Wednesday 15 February 2017

Closing the Gap: Preschool gains at risk if Universal Access Agreement ends

Whilst it is of concern that progress in most of the areas measured in the *Closing the Gap* report is too slow, there is some progress being made in the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early education (preschool/kindergarten programs). These gains could be lost if the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education ends in December this year.

The *Closing the Gap* Report released yesterday shows that the enrolment of Indigenous children in early learning in the year before school increased to 87 per cent in 2016, an improvement from 81 per cent in 2015 (ABS) and a step closer to achieving the target of 95 per cent preschool enrolment for all Indigenous four-year-olds by 2025.

The report cites the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education as a key driver of increasing attendance, through funding state governments, to provide free or subsidised access to early learning for 15 hours per week for all Australian children in the year before school.

'It is heartening to see targeted government investment and cooperation between Federal and State/Territory Governments achieving positive results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children', said ECA CEO Samantha Page. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are among the most vulnerable with two out five (almost half) at risk of experiencing difficulties with their health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and communication as measured by the Australian Early Childhood Development Census. These are skills that are critical for thriving and learning at school.

'As a nation we can change this story by providing quality early learning programs in the two years before children start school; this will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to realise their potential and equalise their opportunity to excel at school and go on to tertiary education and lifelong learning.'

As Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said yesterday: 'The higher the level of education, the smaller the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment ... For tertiary-educated Indigenous people, there is no gap'.

'This is why all State Premiers and Education Ministers must make it a priority to ensure the Federal Government extends the Universal Access agreement on Early Childhood Education', said Ms Page.

'It is also important that the next National Partnership Agreement draws on the success of jurisdictions that are achieving very high rates of participation (ACT, WA, SA, Vic. and Tas.) to make faster improvements in jurisdictions where participation rates are significantly below target (NSW, NT and Qld). Success factors include:

- giving children a right to participate—guaranteed access, priority enrolment
- keeping costs to a minimum so that families can afford early education
- ensuring that services are easily accessible—within walking distance as much as possible.

The impact on Indigenous engagement with early learning must also be a key consideration in the design of the Childcare Subsidy reforms in the Jobs for Families Childcare Package.

'ECA are calling on the Government to amend the Jobs for Families Childcare Package to increase the entitlement for Indigenous children from 12 hours to 22.5 hours', said Ms Page. 'Reducing support for Indigenous families, as would currently occur under the package, puts at risk the progress on early education participation. The Government must also consider a funding model that ensures the viability of Indigenous early childhood services so that access for vulnerable children is not reduced', concluded Ms Page.

ECA supports the call by SNAICC (National voice for our children) to broaden the early years targets to include reporting on access to early learning for all children under five, not just in the year before school, and on the rates of children being removed by child protection authorities.

For more information contact: Carolin Wenzel 0475 554 999

Early Childhood Australia is the peak advocacy body for children under eight, their families and early childhood professionals.