



MEDIA RELEASE

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Closing the Gap on preschool enrolments is the first step

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes the progress made on *Closing the Gap* on preschool enrolments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and improved child and maternal health. But even greater benefits will flow through to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families if more, and improved, targets are set.

The *Closing the Gap* Report released yesterday shows that the enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early learning in the year before school increased to 91 per cent in 2016, on par with non-Indigenous enrolment, and very close to achieving the target of 95 per cent preschool enrolment for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (by 2025).

We congratulate Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia for achieving universal enrolments (100 per cent) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in a preschool program in the year before school.

‘Such a high level of enrolment in preschool programs is great news as it means more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in early education and participating in the educational experiences that support them to do well at school and in life’, said ECA CEO Samantha Page.

Enrolment to high-quality and culturally appropriate early education needs to be accompanied by support to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are able to attend programs for at least **two days per week in the two years** before they start school—the minimum length of time that research shows is needed to lift outcomes for children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are among the most vulnerable in the country, with two out of five (almost half) at risk of experiencing difficulties, when they start school, in the areas of language and cognition skills, social competence and emotional maturity, physical health and wellbeing, and general knowledge, as measured by the Australian Early Childhood Development Census. These are skills that are critical for thriving and learning at school, and the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children is still too high.

‘Until we see the developmental vulnerability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children reduced, we are not really closing the gap’, said Ms Page.

Quality of early education is also crucial to outcomes, and what we know is that it’s harder for children in disadvantaged and regional remote areas to access quality services.

When measuring against targets such as these, it’s important to ensure that we set high expectations for the educational quality of the programs and the levels of participation.

‘To make sure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children get the benefit of quality early learning, it might now be time to raise the bar on this target, to better measure genuine participation rather than just enrolment’, said Ms Page.

‘ECA also supports the call by [SNAICC](#)—National Voice for our Children: “new targets through the *Closing the Gap* refresh, to eliminate the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and address the gap in access to early childhood supports that help to keep children safe at home”.

‘It is heartening that Education Minister Simon Birmingham announced the extension, for another year, of the [National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education](#)—it’s this federal funding that has ensured that we are closing the gap on preschool enrolment for Indigenous children’, said Ms Page.

‘It is imperative that a permanent funding mechanism is established for all Australian children to attend a preschool program for at least two years before they start school’, concluded Ms Page.

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Download the Closing the Gap Report [here](#). Australian Government. (2018). *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2018*. Chapter 2: Infancy and early childhood, pp. 36–49.