ACCESS
FOR EVERY CHILD: REGIONAL, RURAL & REMOTE

JOINT STATEMENT FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION:
IMPROVE REGIONAL, RURAL & REMOTE EARLY LEARNING AND CARE

It can be challenging to access an early learning service anywhere in the country, but it is especially difficult in the regions. This has profound impacts on whole communities.

Children miss out on the educational, health, social and wellbeing benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Parents struggle to engage in paid employment, while the cost of living rises. Local essential industries are faced with workforce shortages; local economies decline and the liveability of the regions is affected.

The Federal Government has made a commitment to a universal early education system. Universal access should mean that every child is entitled to an affordable, high quality, nurturing and culturally-safe place in an early learning centre in their community - or equivalent - regardless of their postcode.

A 'one size fits all approach' will not meet the varying needs across the nation; state, territory and local governments, as well as local communities, must be included in the development and delivery of solutions.

As the **Access for Every Child Coalition**, we urge the Government to implement the following actions to ensure equitable access for every single regional, rural and remote child.

WE ARE CALLING ON THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO:

1 Implement strong public management of the ECEC system in collaboration with state and territory governments

The market cannot and will not solve the problem of equitable access in the regions,[1] which is made evident by the stark absence of ECEC services across many parts of regional, rural and remote Australia. It is the responsibility of governments to ensure service provision where the market will not provide.

The Federal Government should work with State and Territory governments, as well as Local Governments, to manage, monitor, regulate, intervene in and shape the ECEC system to meet the objective of universal access. The ACCC Childcare Inquiry's final report calls for governments to consider such a role, particularly in what it calls 'unserved' and 'underserved' communities.[2] Current funding approaches are not fit for purpose and are failing too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities. Children with disability also need better supports from the ECEC system.

As stewards of the ECEC system, governments should deliver a suite of measures, supports and interventions to establish and/or maintain early learning and outside school hours services and infrastructure in underserved regional, rural and remote areas. Similar to the role governments play in delivering primary and high school education, this would enable all children some form of access to ECEC.

2 Offer a range of supply-side subsidies for ECEC providers in rural and remote areas

The Child Care Subsidy, which is a demand-side subsidy, is ineffective as a funding model for smaller rural and remote areas, where demand is insufficient to support a financially viable service and can shift significantly each year. Through CCS funding, there are simply not enough families and children in many areas to make it feasible for ECEC providers to operate.

Direct, ongoing government funding through supply-side subsidies would protect the sustainability of rural and remote services when demand is low or fluctuates. This approach supports and encourages providers to deliver services in other rural and remote communities, knowing they'll receive funding regardless of enrolment numbers. Both the ACCC and Productivity Commission have recommended the Federal Government expand supply-side funding in "thin markets" (e.g. rural and remote communities),[3,4] where demand is low.

The Government should offer a mix of supply-side options in partnership with the states and territories. This could include demand-oriented subsidies (on a 'per child' basis); block funding such as grants or payments for capital or operating expenses; and supports for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to be co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

3 Invest in quality Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled integrated early years services in rural and remote areas

A high proportion of remote communities are composed of First Nations families, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accounting for 44% of all children in remote areas (ABS, 2016), making tailored, community-led solutions for First Nations families especially important.

The Federal Government should provide a sustainable funding model to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that are delivering early years services in rural and remote Australia. This model should value culture, ensure all ACCOs are well-resourced and include integrated, wraparound services such as allied health.

1 (2024) ACCC Childcare Inquiry – final report
2 (2024) ACCC Childcare Inquiry – final report, page 10.
3 (2024) ACCC Childcare Inquiry – final report.
4 (2023) Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, Draft Report.

The Productivity Commission's draft report on ECEC also recommends that all ECEC services receive publicly funded professional development for staff and better support to improve their cultural capability.[5]

We recommend politicians and decision makers read submissions from SNAICC, the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and hear from First Nations women in Ti Tree.

4 Implement a regional, rural and remote national workforce strategy including culturally safe training for First Nations educators

A workforce strategy tailored to regional, rural and remote areas is imperative to safeguard the early childhood sector - which is under pressure from workforce shortages - and to facilitate its growth. Quality early childhood education and care starts with quality early childhood educators and teachers.

The recruitment and retention of staff in regional, rural and remote areas starts with better pay and conditions. However, workforce initiatives are needed, including wage subsidies, professional development, relocation and locality incentives, and professional support and training. Building up the local workforce is also key. The issue of affordable housing must be addressed to enable workers to live locally to early learning centres.

This workforce strategy should include education and training models and pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in collaboration with First Nations communities. This will support Aboriginal community-controlled early learning services to train local Aboriginal people on country.

5 Improve family day care and in home care provision

In home care (IHC) and family day care (FDC) play a key role in ECEC accessibility in the regions, where there are no other available services.

Currently, the IHC system falls short for rural and remote families, with a decline in services and educators coupled with a rise in expenses. Recommendation 5 of the ACCC final report states "The Australian Government should design policy options to better meet the needs of children and households for whom in home care services are intended to serve".[6] Flexibility within the system would especially benefit agricultural families, who have a need for ongoing care provided by people who understand farm and property life, and would provide more access for families with twins, triplets or more children.

Measures to support the expansion of the FDC sector in regional, rural and remote areas, including a dedicated funding program and innovative approaches that better leverage the capabilities of family day care, would greatly benefit families in these areas, particularly where demand is low or variable.

6 Provide interim solutions

Long-term solutions to deliver universal ECEC access will take consideration and time. Yet families and communities are struggling now. Shorter-term solutions will provide a stopgap for families while effective, longer-term solutions are rolled out.

We urge the Government to consider a suite of interim solutions, such as more flexible in home care, support for rural and remote nannies and governesses, expanded family day care, playgroups, and mobile early learning services. The Government should also consider abolishing the activity test, and implementing a national agreement on universal 3- and 4-year-old preschool.

5 (2023) Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, Draft Report.
6 (2024) ACCC Childcare Inquiry – final report, page 10

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ENDORSING ORGANISATIONS

Australian Education Union
UNITED WORKERS UNION
RRR NETWORK
MINDEROO FOUNDATION
THRIVE BY FIVE
National Farmers Federation
goodstart early learning
RCEA
ICPA Kids to Education
SNAICC National Voice for our Children
National Rural Health Alliance
ppsa
PRIMARY PRODUCERS SA
Grain Growers
RCCI WA
Northern Rivers Preschool Alliance
Dunnybrook - Balingup Chamber of Commerce & Industry
child Australia
Childcare Leadership Alliance
the FrontProject The early years springboard
ruralcouncilsvictoria
BIG STEPS VALUE OUR FUTURE
REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE
Regional Development South Australia
Contact inc.
Single Mother Families Australia smfa
Family Day Care Australia
MANJIMUP CHAMBER of Commerce & Industry
BUSHKIDS Royal Queensland Bush Children's Health Scheme Limited
Victorian Farmers Federation
DUBBO BUSINESS CHAMBER
MOTHERLAND
National Rural Women's Coalition
cyda Children and Young People with Disability Australia
Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation
Brotherhood of St Laurence Working for an Australia free of poverty
ACCI
NW COMMERCE North West
nintirri centre Enriched lives. Thriving Communities
IEU Independent Education Union of Australia
Early Childhood Australia A voice for young children
PILBARA INLAND CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY
EARLY LEARNING ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA
the natural place to be Hinchinbrook Chamber of Commerce, Industry & Tourism Inc
AUSTRALIAN MULTIPLE BIRTH ASSOCIATION
GOONDIWINDI CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
York Business Association Building Stronger Businesses
reed Regional Early Education and Development Inc
CELA COMMUNITY EARLY LEARNING AUSTRALIA
Royal Far West Children's health, country-wide
every child thriving aracy
Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership connect • catalyse • learn
Goondiwindi & District Child Care Local non profit community based long day care centre Ph: 07 4671 3375
NCCI Narrogin Chamber of Commerce

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