Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority

29 August 2017

Independent review into regional, rural and remote education
Australian Government Department of Education and Training
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

By email: IRRRRESecretariat@education.gov.au

ACECQA response to the independent review into regional, rural and remote education

Dear Professor Halsey

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the Australian Government's independent review into regional, rural and remote education.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is the independent national authority established under the Education and Care Services National Law to guide the implementation and administration of the National Quality Framework (NQF).

The NQF is the national system for regulating education and care services, setting standards for safety and quality so that all children who attend long day care, preschool/kindergarten, outside school hours care and family day care are supported to have the best start in life. The NQF is jointly governed by the Australian Government and all state and territory governments as a means of driving continuous improvement in the quality of these services, and realising the efficiency benefits and cost effectiveness of a unified national system.

Of particular relevance to this review, ACECQA collaborates with state and territory governments and the education and care sector to:

- monitor and evaluate the performance of the NQF
- improve sector practice by promoting research evidence relevant to high quality education and care delivery
- support policy reviews relevant to the education and care sector.

Please find attached ACECQA's responses to the following topic areas raised in the discussion paper (see **Attachment A**):

- Scope of the review
- Raising achievements.

In response to the invitation in the 'Framing' section of the discussion paper, ACECQA feels that there are issues relating to education in regional, rural and remote areas which were not included in the discussion paper. Specifically, ACECQA would like to highlight the evidence for the positive impact of:

- high quality early childhood education and care on school readiness and school education outcomes
- high quality outside school hours care on student wellbeing and school education outcomes.

ACECQA strongly supports an increased focus on school readiness in regional, rural and remote areas, and improved linkages between the early childhood education and care, school, and outside school hours care sectors.

ACECQA agrees that our attached responses may be made publically available and attributable to ACECQA.

If you would like to discuss our responses to the discussion paper, or would like further information, please contact Michael Petrie, General Manager Strategy, Communications and Consistency, on 02 8240 4230.

Yours sincerely
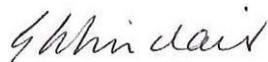
Gabrielle Sinclair
Chief Executive Officer

Attachment A: ACECQA responses to discussion paper

Scope of the review

The review's scope includes identifying gaps and opportunities relating to transitions from school to further study, training and employment, and identifying innovative approaches that support regional, rural and remote students to succeed in these transitions.

ACECQA believes that the review's scope could be broadened to include gaps and opportunities to help students successfully transition *into* school from early childhood education and care.

As the discussion paper notes, home learning environment is an important determinant of students' educational outcomes and 'children who grow up in a family where they are loved unconditionally, are safe, healthy and well fed, and are encouraged to explore ideas and possibilities, are more likely than not to be successful'.[1] There is a large body of evidence which shows that children whose parents are engaged in their learning have higher levels of academic achievement and that parental engagement in children's learning is a more reliable predictor of children's educational attainment than socio-economic status.[2]

Early childhood education and care is an integral part of the Australian education system and lays the foundations for children's later learning and development. It is also an area of significant government investment.[3]

Researchers and policy makers are increasingly turning their attention to the transition to primary school and recognising the important role that it plays. Participation in high quality early childhood education and care can effectively prepare children for a lifetime of learning and development. However, the benefits of early learning can dissipate during the first years of school if the transitions between early childhood education and care and primary school are not well-managed, or if their school education is not of high quality.[4,5]

Children experiencing developmental vulnerability are particularly at risk of falling further behind during the transition process.[6] Strong partnerships between schools, early childhood education and care services and community organisations can assist children during times of transition and counteract the risk of vulnerable children falling behind.[7]

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[1] Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017) Independent review into regional, rural and remote education, Discussion Paper, July 2017.

[2] Monti, J. D., Pomerantz, E. M., & Roisman, G. I. (2014). *Can parents' involvement in children's education offset the effects of early insensitivity on academic functioning?* Journal of Educational Psychology, 106(3), 859-869.

[3] Australian, state and territory governments invested $9.1 billion in early childhood education and care services in 2015-16, of which $7.4 billion was Australian Government expenditure. Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2016) Report on Government Services 2017, Vol. B, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

[4] Schlicher, A. (2017) Primed for primary school, blogpost, OECD Education and Skills Directorate, OECD, Paris. http://oecdeducationtoday.blogspot.com.au/2017/06/priming-up-for-primary-school.html.

[5] Fabian, H & Dunlop, A-W. (2006). Outcomes of good practice in transition process for children entering primary school. Paper commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education. UNESCO.

[6] Victorian Auditor General (2015) Report on Education Transitions, Victorian Auditor General, Melbourne.

[7] Victorian Department of Education and Training (2017) Early Years Transitions – Support for children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability: practice review report.

Raising achievements

Impact of high quality early childhood education and care

There is a large body of research that shows high quality early childhood education and care leads to better health, employment and education outcomes later in life.[8,9] Brain architecture and function develops rapidly during early childhood, making it a vital time for establishing competencies which will support children's medium and long term outcomes.[10]

Attendance at high quality early childhood education and care services is shown to contribute to children's learning and development, including their cognitive, health, social and emotional development.[11] International research shows that attendance at higher quality early childhood education and care services is significantly related to higher standardised test scores, increased independence, and decreased anti-social behaviour in primary school.[12,13,14]

In particular, evidence indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds stand to gain the most from quality education and care,[15] which leads to improved developmental outcomes including learning skills and improved quality of life.[16]

Measuring developmental vulnerability

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a nationwide data collection administered every three years which examines early childhood development and developmental vulnerability at the time children commence their first year of full-time school.

The AEDC collects data relating to the following five domains of early childhood development which have been shown to predict later health, wellbeing and academic success:

- Physical health and well being
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive skills
- Communication skills and general knowledge.

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[8] Elliott, A. Australian Council for Educational Research (2006) Early Childhood Education, Pathways to quality and equity for all children, *Australian Education Review*, Volume 50. (Note A. Elliot is a former member of the ACECQA Board).

[9] Smith, A.B. (2014) School Completion/Academic Achievement-Outcomes of Early Childhood Education. In: Tremblay RE, Boivin M, Peters R de V, eds. Vitaro F, topic ed. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* (online), http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/school-success/according-experts/school-completionacademic-achievement-outcomes-early-childhood.

[10] Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (2010) Engaging families in the early childhood development story, South Australia, pp 15 – 23.

[11] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012) Starting Strong III: Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD.

[12] Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., and Taggart, B. (2004) Technical Paper 12, The Final Report: Effective Pre-school Education. London: Institute of Education.

[13] Reynolds, A., Temple, A., et al. (2011) Schoolbased early childhood education and age-28 well-being: Effects by timing, dosage, and subgroups. Science, 333, 360.

[14] Consortium for Longitudinal Studies 1983. As the twig is bent... lasting effects of preschool programs. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum.

[15] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015) Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development: working paper. Cat. no. CWS 53. Canberra: AIHW.

[16] PricewaterhouseCoopers (2011) A practical vision for early childhood education and care, PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The 2015 results found that:

- 22% of children in Australia were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, meaning that they were commencing school already behind their peers
- 47% of children living in very remote areas were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, compared to 21% of children living in major cities
- 33% of children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in Australia were developmentally vulnerable, compared to 16% in the least socio-economically disadvantaged communities.[17]

The provision of education and care to improve developmental outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and/or those who are at a risk of developmental vulnerability involves the consideration of a range of factors including:

- the proportion of children in these groups accessing education and care
- the number of hours they attend education and care
- the quality of the education and care service, and the type and effectiveness of interventions they receive.

Connecting early childhood education and care quality with educational outcomes

All NQF approved early childhood education and care and outside school hours care services in Australia are assessed and rated against a National Quality Standard (NQS) and given a public rating of their performance against seven quality areas that are important to outcomes for children.[18]

In 2016, Australian and state and territory governments commissioned the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to link NQS ratings data with two other datasets – AEDC 2015 and the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection (NECECC) 2013 and 2014 – to form an enhanced dataset.

Using the enhanced dataset, the ABS analysed the links between developmental vulnerabilities of children when they started full-time school, their experiences of approved education and care programs in the previous two years, and their teachers' perceptions of their home learning experiences.

The project found a moderate relationship between service quality as measured by performance against the NQS and lower developmental vulnerability in the language and cognitive domain. It also found that a greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in regional and remote areas were developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC domains than their non-Indigenous peers in those areas.

Although the analysis recognises several methodological limitations, it provides valuable insights into factors influencing developmental vulnerability. It also lays the groundwork for further investigation of factors influencing developmental vulnerability, including the quality of education and care programs.

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[17] Australian Early Development Census (2015) Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015 – A Snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia, AEDC, Melbourne.
[18] ACECQA (2017) The National Quality Standard, ACECQA, Sydney.

Further data linkage projects are planned to link NQS ratings data with NAPLAN results and other datesets to investigate the link between early education and care quality and later outcomes.

Impact of high quality outside school hours care

Many school-aged children can spend a significant amount of time in outside school hours care services. Outside school hours care supports parents' labour force participation and can allow parents, and mothers in particular, to engage in paid work and/or increase their working hours.[19] There is also evidence that outside school hours care services can improve children's emotional, cognitive and social development when quality care and developmental programs are provided.[20,21]

Outside school hours care services that provide 'developmentally appropriate opportunities' have been found to be associated with more positive outcomes for children and families than other services.[22,23] Quality outside school hours care services have also been shown to enhance children's emotional development. American research found that children who attended outside school hours care services were less likely to report social dissatisfaction or loneliness than children who were in other care arrangements, such as familial or self-care.[24] Participation in outside school hours care services have also been found to be associated with broader health and wellbeing outcomes, including leading children to be more physically active, to make healthier food choices, and aiding the prevention of obesity, heart disease and other disorders through the health promotion role that they serve.[25,26]

The [Framework for School Age Care in Australia](#)[27] and [Educators' Guide to the Framework for School Age Care in Australia](#)[28] have been designed to support the delivery of high quality outside school hours care to foster children's wellbeing, development and learning.

High quality outside school hours programs provide stimulating, nurturing and safe environments that allow time for unstructured play, social interaction, and appropriate learning and development opportunities.[29]

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[19] Organanisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (2007) Babies and Bosses - Reconciling Work and Family Life: A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries, OECD, Paris.

[20] Hurst, B. (2013). Children aged nine to twelve years in outside school hours care in Australia. Masters dissertation, University of Melbourne; Winefield, H., Piteo, A., et al. (2011).

[21] Winefield, H., Piteo, A., et. Al., (2011) Australian parents' needs and expectations regarding out of school hours care: A pilot study. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 9*, 197–206.

[22] Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2014). *Continuity of learning: A resource to support effective transition to school and school age care*. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education.

[23] Simoncini, K., Cartmel, J., & Young, A. (2015). Children's voices in Australian school age care: What do they think about afterschool care? *International Journal for Research on Extended Education, 3*(1), 114–131.

[24] Demircan, H. O., & Demir, A. (2014). Children's sense of loneliness and social dissatisfaction, after school care. *Psychological Reports: Mental & Physical Health, 114*, 169–175.

[25] Sangster, J., Eccleston, P., & Porter, S. (2008). Improving children's physical activity in out-of-school hours care settings. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 19*(1), 16–21.

[26] Thompson, E., Cooper, C., Flanagan, C., Crawford, D., & Worsley, A. (2006). Food and activity in out of school hours care in Victoria. *Nutrition and Dietetics, 63*, 21–27.

[27] Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2011) My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia, DEEWR, Canberra.

[28] Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2012) Educators' Guide to the Framework for School Age Care in Australia, DEEWR, Canberra.

[29] Cartmel, J. and Hayes, A. (2016) Before and After School: Literature Review about Australian School Age Child Care, *Children Australia*, Volume 41, Number 3, pp. 201–207.

The framework focuses extensively on continuity and transitions between early childhood education and care, school and outside school hours care, as well as during arrivals and departures on a given day. [Quality Area 6 of the NQS](...)[30] focuses on collaborative partnerships with families and communities.

Standard 6.3 (Collaborative partnerships enhance children's learning and wellbeing) in particular requires early childhood education and care and outside school hours cares services to foster partnerhips with schools and other organisations and service providers.

Remote and very remote early childhood education and care services

Performance against the NQS

Remote and very remote services are less likely to be rated Meeting NQS or above for most quality standards compared with services nationally.

Contextual challenges facing remote and very remote education and care services include attracting and retaining suitably experienced and qualified staff, and limited access to professional development and networking opportunities.

Service delivery models

The review panel may be interested in some of the specific models of early childhood education offered to children in regional and remote areas. For example, mobile services provide flexible, responsive and innovative services to geographically isolated children and families in many parts of Australia.[31] 'In home' and distance early childhood education and care programs are also available to children in many rural and remote areas. The eKindy program in Queensland, for example, offers a comprehensive 'at home' preschool/kindergarten program for children living in rural and remote areas, as well as those who are travelling or medically unable to attend a local early childhood service.[32] Similar programs are offered by some divisions of School of the Air in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and other jurisdictions.[33]

Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) also operate in multiple parts of Australia, particularly in rural and remote areas. These services are managed by the local Aboriginal community and are funded to meet the educational, social and developmental needs of Aboriginal children.

The New South Wales Department of Education is currently developing a rural and remote strategy for early childhood education and care[34] which may also be relevant to school education in these areas.

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[30] ACECQA (2017) Quality Area 6 - Collaborative partnerships with families and communities, ACECQA, Sydney.
[31] Mobile Children's Services Assocation of NSW (2017) About Mobile Children's Services, MCSA, Newcastle, https://www.mcsa.org.au/about-us/mobile-children-s-services.
[32] Queensland Government (2017) eKindy Queensland, Queensland School of the Future Brisbane SDS, Brisbane, https://brisbanesde.eq.edu.au/Curriculum/ekindy/Pages/ekindy.aspx
[33] See, for example, https://education.nsw.gov.au/rural-and-distance-education/distance-education/distance-education-centres.
[34] NSW Department of Education (2017) Regional and Remote ECE Strategy, NSW DET, Sydney, http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/what-we-offer/regulation-and-accreditation/early-childhood-education-care/regional-and-remote-ece-strategy.