

# Putting Queensland Kids First

## Goodstart Submission

February 2024

We're for children, not profit.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Goodstart fully supports the Queensland Government's commitment to giving all children the best start to life by enhancing access to essential services. We commend Minister Farmer for developing a strategy for all children and young people, recognising the pivotal role of prevention and early intervention in shaping their life trajectories.

We also wholeheartedly endorse and share a commitment to partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations, recognising the unique contributions of First Nations communities in shaping the future of our youngest generations. Putting Queensland Kids First provides an opportunity to create a child and family-centred system that delivers high quality services to all children, irrespective of their background or location. Aligned with national initiatives, such as the push towards a universal early learning entitlement – the future is bright for Queensland's children.

The Strategy is also an opportunity to fine-tune significant investments in early childhood education and care (ECEC) the Queensland Government has made in recent years, including Free Kindergarten, the Queensland Pathways Program for the ECEC workforce, and the Kindy Uplift program, which will improve quality and inclusion across the state as it rolls out. Building on this, Goodstart urges Queensland Government to expand kindergarten to cover the two years before school, learning from what has worked in other states and territories, and to consider increasing the kindy entitlement for vulnerable children to close the attainment gaps that emerge once they reach school.

While our submission emphasises the critical role of early childhood education and care, we recognise that a positive strategy for Queensland's children would focus on all elements of their development, including health and education, as well as the broader supports for families and communities and how all government services can link together to best support them. The consultation draft places a very strong – and welcome – focus on child health. But the final draft also needs to include specific actions to support all elements of child development, as well as a clearer strategy to connect and integrate services to provide full wrap around support for children and families who need it. Drawing inspiration from the findings and recommendations of the South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC, our submission highlights the power and potential for ECEC to form the universal 'backbone' and entry point for families into broader support systems, and the opportunity Putting Queensland Kids First presents for Queensland to pave the way towards similar goals.

## ABOUT GOODSTART

Goodstart Early Learning is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and is Queensland's and Australia's largest provider of kindergarten and early childhood education and care, with 654 centres located across every state and territory, supporting more than 61,400 children from 51,500 families. Our national headquarters is in Brisbane, and we have 213 centres in Queensland caring for 18,550 children from 15,600 families and employing 5,100 Queenslanders. Around 1 in 10 children in long day care in Queensland attend Goodstart centres.

Our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. All children should be supported to participate in quality early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. We work in partnership with the sector, governments and the community to improve outcomes for all Australian children – not just the children who attend a Goodstart service.

Last year, our targeted social purpose investments of \$47 million delivered a “social dividend” valued at \$336 million.<sup>1</sup> In a typical commercial operation, the \$47 million would likely have been paid as profits to shareholders or business owners but we invest in activities like inclusion for children with additional needs, operating in rural and regional and low SEIFA areas, Reconciliation and evidence-based professional development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Queensland Government joins the Productivity Commission and ECEC sector in calling for all children have a minimum entitlement of 3 days a week from 6 weeks of age until school, with up to two additional days available for children who are likely to experience vulnerability or disadvantage and for families to support workforce participation.
2. That the Queensland Government work with the ECEC sector to incentivise the growth of high quality, affordable and inclusive ECEC providers through targeted capital grants, supply of state-owned land at peppercorn rents and commissioning new services in areas of unmet need.
3. That the Queensland Government commit to implementing universal, two-year preschool programs by 2030. In doing so, Queensland should stage implementation – prioritising uptake by children experiencing vulnerability, building the early childhood teacher workforce, and continuing investments into quality and inclusion via the Kindy Uplift program.
4. That the Queensland Government moves quickly to increase the kindergarten dose for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage from 2 days or 15 hrs a week to 30hrs a week across all settings.
5. That in light of recent evidence provided by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the Productivity Commission inquiries into early childhood education and care, the Queensland Government considers opportunities to adjust Free Kindy settings to further reduce cost barriers for low-income and vulnerable families.
6. Building on the insights gained from the South Australian Royal Commission and other contemporary inquiries into ECEC, Putting Queensland Kids First should explicitly acknowledge the potential for ECEC services to provide a ‘backbone’ for the early childhood development system and allocate funding for the rigorous trialling and evaluation of various models of allied health support within ECEC services.

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<sup>1</sup> Goodstart Annual Reports, see <https://www.goodstart.org.au/media-centre/annual-reports>

7. That the Queensland Government invest in initiatives to engage with families with children who are most vulnerable and support them to overcome barriers to accessing ECEC. This can include scaling up successful programs like the Increasing Access and Participation program to cover all communities and ECEC services throughout Queensland.
8. Drawing on experience in other states, that the Queensland Government consider approaches to identify and address developmental concerns within ECEC settings. This may include the roll-out of developmental screening programs and associated protocols for referrals, ensuring that children and families receive timely access to support services and interventions based on their individual needs.
9. That the Queensland Government undertake awareness-raising campaigns regarding the National Quality System quality ratings. Additionally, services should be required to formally advise families about the outcomes of assessments and ratings at the service(s) in which they are enrolled.
10. That the Queensland Government build on its experience to date to partner with the non-government sector to invest in and develop approaches to achieve service connection and integration, both when services are co-located and when they are not, depending on the needs of the community.
11. That the Queensland Government continue developing a proactive and well-funded ECEC workforce strategy that:
  - Reduces barriers to educator upskilling to become teachers and supports innovative delivery of teaching qualifications;
  - Improve registration arrangements for early childhood teachers to recognise any ECT level qualification approved by ACECQA;
  - Lifts mentoring for new early childhood teachers;
  - Extends the service location subsidy to all teachers in regional and remote areas;
  - Increases operational funding for long day care kindergarten programs to support centres to match school rates;
  - Supports access to VET courses in ECEC with free TAFE, ensuring courses are high quality and expanding access to school based traineeships;
  - Funds more professional development opportunities for educators, such as whole of team staff training days similar to the pupil free days available to educators and teachers in schools and kindergartens; and
  - Advocates to the Federal Government for a funded wage rise for educators and including educators on skilled migration priority lists.

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**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS ANY PART OF THIS SUBMISSION PLEASE CONTACT:**

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# PUTTING QUEENSLAND KIDS FIRST

## 1. Wellbeing from conception and the earliest years of life

### ***Why access to high-quality ECEC matters for birth to 3s and how we can support this***

While most OECD countries, including Australia, provide universal access and/or legal entitlements to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children aged three to five years, legal entitlements for younger children are less common. However, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of increasing access to quality ECEC for babies up to three years old.<sup>2</sup> Children experience rapid growth and development during their first three years of life, with sensitive windows of time during which specific learning takes place and the brain hones particular skills or functions (see **Graph 1** below).<sup>3</sup>

Communication and language development are also recognised as crucial during the first three years, with environmental factors and parenting styles playing significant roles in language acquisition.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, emotional regulation undergoes significant development during the first three years, laying the foundation for social and emotional development in later years.<sup>5</sup>

Access to high-quality ECEC is a crucial, universal intervention, involving a highly developmental, child-centred approach and collaboration with parents to support children's holistic development, including cognitive, language, and preacademic skills. Studies, such as the well-known Abecedarian study, have demonstrated the significant long-term returns on investment in providing quality ECEC programs for children from birth to five years.<sup>6</sup> For example – children with language delays may experience challenges in early reading skills, classroom performance, and social interactions. Quality ECEC programs can support language development, although challenges remain, particularly in addressing disparities related to socio-economic status.<sup>7</sup>

In response to this evidence, Goodstart has developed the *All Children Communicate!* Program, which encourages all centres to build language-rich learning environments and monitor children's language acquisition, particularly in birth to three rooms. We have also developed a birth to three learning framework to focus on this crucial age group – recognising the evidence that high quality programs for children under three can make a positive difference in children's outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> ABC News, "Government releases early childhood education learning report," ABC News, December 9, 2022, accessed January 26, 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-09/government-releases-early-childhood-education-learning-report/101751416>.

<sup>3</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2004). *Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships*. Harvard University.

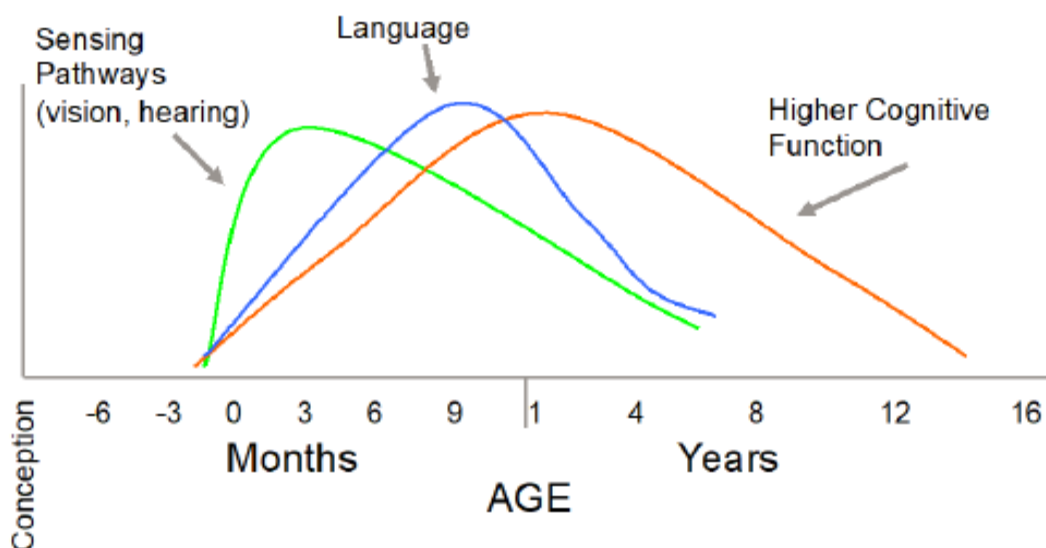
<sup>4</sup> Rowe, M. L. (2012). A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech in Vocabulary Development. *Child Development*, 83(5), 1762-1774.

<sup>5</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2011). *Building the Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function*: Working Paper No. 11. Harvard University.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, F. A., et al. (2012). Early Childhood Education: Young Adult Outcomes From the Abecedarian Project. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(1), 42-57.

<sup>7</sup> Law, J., et al. (2017). Identifying Children with Special Educational Needs: Views and Experiences of Practitioners and Policy-Makers. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 33(1), 25-42.

**Graph 1. All children aged birth to five require high quality pedagogy to support their learning and development**

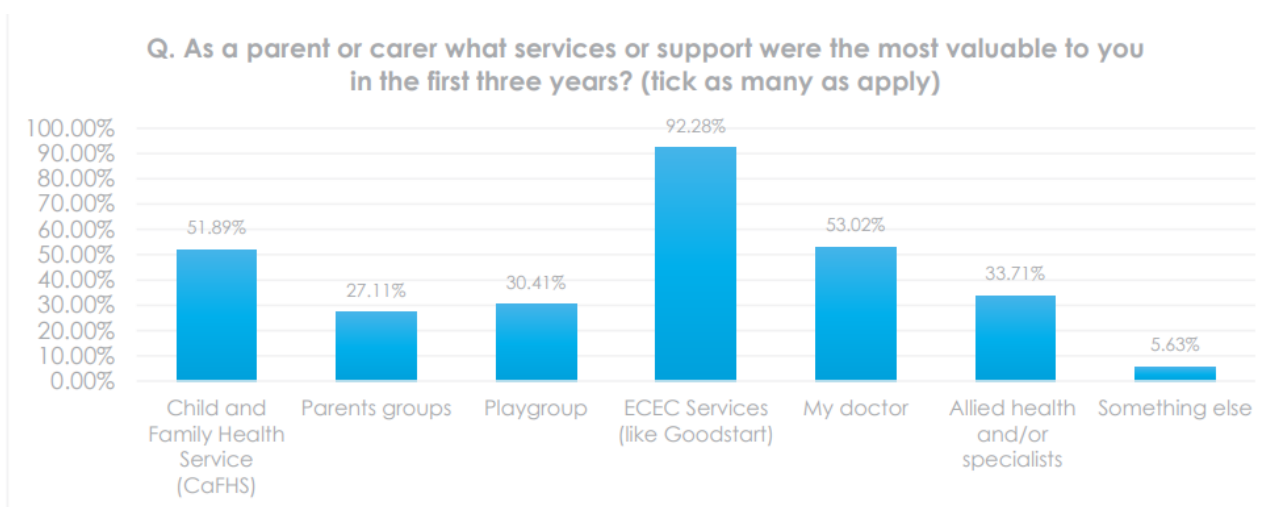


*Human synapse formation from conception to age 16 years (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000)*

ECEC services can also play a central supporting role in the first years through to the preschool years by connecting families into the community and acting as part of the 'village' it takes to raise a child. This is particularly important where families may be dislocated from other supports (e.g., grandparents, friends and family). ECEC services can also act as a soft or universal entry point to a wider network of supports when children and families need these (see Section 3).

As part of our work supporting the South Australian Royal Commission, Goodstart conducted a survey of 1100 families to gauge which services or support were the most valuable in the first three years. Overwhelmingly, they chose ECEC as one of the most valuable services, followed by their personal doctor and then a child and family health service:

**Graph 2. Parents agree ECEC is one of the most valuable services in the first three years**





Although we know the positive difference attending high quality ECEC can make, right now, most children attending ECEC from birth to three are from working families, while the children who would benefit the most from early learning do not have access to enough subsidised hours to make a difference to their outcomes. This is because the Federal Government's current Child Care Subsidy (CCS) only provides one day a week for children whose parents do not meet the Activity Test. Our practice evidence at Goodstart is that attending ECEC one day a week is challenging for all children as it is hard to establish a routine and form relationships, which is especially the case for young children.

This will change if the Productivity Commission's recommendations for a minimum child-level entitlement to at least 3 days of ECEC is taken up by the Federal Government. But operational costs for providing high-quality care and learning for children under three will remain higher compared to older age groups due to higher staff-child ratios. These costs, together with the current one-size-fits-all CCS hourly rate cap have contributed to fewer places for children aged two and under and longer waitlists in some markets. Despite vacancies for most age groups across our network in Queensland, waitlists for babies remain high, underscoring the demand for quality ECEC for the youngest children.

Under a more robust market stewardship model, state governments could play a direct role in supporting provision in areas of unmet need via partnering with high-quality, not-for-profit providers to address barriers to entry and commission new services, including in underserved or unserved markets. One of the most significant barriers to entry relates to continued high rental costs in the private market as landlords and investors look at ECEC in terms of "high yields and long-term tenancies backed by the 'deep pockets' of the Australian Government."<sup>8</sup> While commercial and retail rents have generally decreased since 2018, the recent ACCC Inquiry into ECEC found costs for our sector – including rent and property costs – have been rising faster than CPI.

While national reform processes are underway, Queensland could look to similar investments and programs underway in New South Wales, Victoria and potentially Tasmania to utilise state-owned land and facilities to reduce rental expenses and partner with high-quality ECEC providers to establish or expand services in areas of unmet need and allocate more resources to delivering quality services without compromising financial sustainability.

**Recommendation 1.** That the Queensland Government joins the Productivity Commission and ECEC sector in calling for all children have a minimum entitlement of 3 days a week from 6 weeks of age until school, with up to two additional days available for children who are likely to experience vulnerability or disadvantage and for families to support workforce participation.

**Recommendation 2.** That the Queensland Government work with the ECEC sector to incentivise the growth of high quality, affordable and inclusive ECEC providers through targeted capital grants, supply of state-owned land at peppercorn rents and commissioning new services in areas of unmet need.

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<sup>8</sup> See for example, <https://www.childcare4sale.com.au/what-you-need-to-know-now-about-buying-a-childcare-centre/>

## 2. Supporting confident transitions and participation in early learning, education and training

*This section responds to investment priority area four of the Consultation Draft.*

### **Queensland is making smart investments in ECEC that can be built on to provide all children the best start in life**

Goodstart recommends this investment priority be reframed to recognise that ongoing participation is at least as important as transition to a child's successful learning journey. We also suggest that early learning be called out explicitly as separate from compulsory schooling and post-secondary education to make it absolutely clear that this is a priority for Queensland. Across Australia, the ECEC sector is too often the 'poor cousin' to the larger, more expensive school sector, despite overwhelming evidence that investment in early learning delivers the greatest returns and have a huge impact on how children perform in later education in schools.

To support transition and participation in early learning, Queensland can reflect on what is working well in the ECEC sector in Queensland and also what is working well or being planned in other states and territories. Some of the best performing states are investing heavily to push results further, with massive investments in early learning in recent years to give their children an even better start in life.

The good news is Queensland is making smart investments that will help make a difference, such as Free Kindy and Kindy Uplift. But, to give all Queensland children the best possible start to life, a targeted plan will be needed. Goodstart proposes this includes:

- Supporting the growth of high quality, affordable and inclusive ECEC providers through targeted capital grants, the supply of state-owned land and commissioning new services in areas of unmet need (discussed in the previous section).
- Supporting all children to have access to at least three days of ECEC per week, particularly children experiencing vulnerability (discussed in the previous section);
- Supporting programs to remove barriers to access and engage hard to reach populations (discussed in the next section).
- A guaranteed entitlement for all children to two (rather than one) years of high-quality kindergarten delivered by a qualified teacher.
- Increasing the kindergarten dosage from 15 to 30 hours for children experiencing vulnerability.
- Ensuring kindergarten/early learning is truly free for children who would benefit most, regardless of setting.
- Continuing to address ECEC workforce shortages, so there are enough qualified staff to provide sufficient places to meet demand (see next section).



***A guaranteed entitlement to a two-year, high-quality kindergarten program would reduce attainment gaps for children in vulnerable circumstances and benefit all children.***

The evidence is clear that children who have attended high-quality preschool programs in the two years before school are less likely to start school behind and effects are greatest for children facing vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> Yet, children from low-income families are less likely to access formal early learning and care in Australia. In Queensland, around 46% of children from low-income families access CCS eligible ECEC services, compared to 58% of children from middle and upper income families.<sup>10</sup> Even with a means-tested CCS, low-income families still spend a higher proportion of their household income on ECEC out-of-pocket costs than middle- and high-income families.<sup>11</sup>

Queensland has made remarkable gains in providing access to universal kindergarten programs in the year before school since the first National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access in 2009, with participation rates rising from 27% to over 95%. In an Australian first, the roll out of Free Kindy from 2024 now also ensures that 600 hours of ECEC is provided free to all families across both sessional and LDC preschool services. Queensland's considerable investment into the IT architecture required to deliver such an approach also means it is now well placed to extend this offer to younger children and families.

However, for kindergarten to make a difference, programs must be high quality. Evidence shows services in disadvantaged communities are less likely to meet the National Quality Standards (NQS) than those in the most advantaged areas, particularly in outer regional and remote areas.<sup>12</sup> Goodstart has a strong focus on supporting these communities and is proud to buck this sector trend, with 96% of our services in SEIFA 1-3 areas rated as 'Meeting' or 'Exceeding' the NQS. Queensland's Kindy Uplift program will also make an enormous difference in these areas as it rolls out statewide in 2024.

Workforce is also central to quality provision and we are excited to continue work with the Queensland Government Department of Education (the Department) in the roll-out of the Pathways program, which will help alleviate the acute shortage of early childhood teachers over time. Similar investments made by the Victorian Government have led to a temporary staffing waiver rate under the National Law of only 0.9% compared to the national rate of 9.4% and we welcome the flexible and collaborative approach the Department is taking to maximise the returns on this investment.<sup>13</sup>

The building blocks are now in place for Queensland and the time has never been better to introduce a second year of kindergarten. With high proportions of three-year-olds already participating in quality ECEC settings cross Australia, Queensland can leverage this participation in a staged roll-out, similar to the approach taken by Victoria and South Australia in recent years. Victoria, for example, has been rolling out universal preschool for 3 year olds progressively since 2019 and has seen the participation rate of 3 year old

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<sup>9</sup> Howells, S., Lam, B., Marrone R., Brinkman S.A. (2022). Rapid review of the literature and results of an academic pulse survey to determine the evidence behind pre-school for 3-year-old children. Commissioned report for the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, South Australia.

<sup>10</sup> Calculated from Report on Government Services 2024 tables 3A.8 and 3A.18

<sup>11</sup> Productivity Commission (2023) Inquiry into ECEC Draft Report p. 25, ACCC Childcare Inquiry June Interim Report, pg. 15.

<sup>12</sup> ACECQA NQS Snapshot Q4, 2023, accessed at <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/snapshots>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

children rise from 54.7% in 2019 to 77.4% in 2022 and has been able to more rapidly increase from a 10 to 15hrs entitlement.<sup>14</sup> With six out of eight jurisdictions now also implementing three year old kindy programs, *Putting Queensland Kids First* is an opportunity for the state to benefit from the experience of other jurisdictions to design and implement a world-class early education system. Taking a staged and national approach, **Attachment 1** situates Queensland in a suggested pathway for national preschool reform.<sup>15</sup>

**Recommendation 3.** That the Queensland Government commit to implementing universal, two-year preschool programs by 2030. In doing so, Queensland should stage implementation – prioritising uptake by children experiencing vulnerability, building the early childhood teacher workforce, and continuing investments into quality and inclusion via the Kindy Uplift program.

### ***Evidence suggests some children benefit from more than 2 days of kindergarten to close the attainment gap***

While the evidence is clear about the benefits of accessing two years of quality kindergarten programs, it is less clear about an optimal, minimum 'dose' per week for all children. However, the evidence is most compelling when it comes to children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability benefitting from more days (i.e. full time attendance). Children who need more to support their developmental progress or their parent's workforce participation should be able to access up to 5 days per week. The Royal Commission on ECEC in South Australia recognised and responded to this evidence, suggesting there should be a higher entitlement of 30 hours of preschool for children who are highly vulnerable, to be phased in over time.

The relatively stubborn rates of developmental vulnerability across Australia and overrepresentation of some cohorts (e.g., children from low SES backgrounds, First Nations children) among the developmentally vulnerable suggest the current 15-hour dose, delivered primarily as either two days per week or a five-day fortnight in the year before school, is not enough. Multiple studies show that children who are disadvantaged benefit from more hours (higher dosage).<sup>16</sup> Yet, in the year before school, 18% of children from the most disadvantaged income quintile are not attending preschool in Queensland for even the universal minimum of 15 hours a week. For these children, higher intensity programs (i.e., more than 15hrs) are likely to be beneficial. Research from the UK, France and the USA suggests 3-year-old children benefit from programs involving twenty or more hours per

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<sup>14</sup> ROGS 2024 table 3A.10

<sup>15</sup> Western Australia does not currently have 3yo preschool but is actively exploring this in 2024.

<sup>16</sup> van Huizen, T and J Plantenga (2018). "Do children benefit from universal early childhood education and care? A meta-analysis of evidence from natural experiments." *Economics of Education Review*, vol 66, pp206- 222; Li, W., G. Farkas, G. J. Duncan, M. R. Burchinal and D. L. Vandell (2013). "Timing of High-Quality Child Care and Cognitive, Language, and Preacademic Development." *Dev Psychol* 49(8): 1440-1451. Barnett, W. S. (2011). "Effectiveness of Early Educational Intervention." *Science* 333(6045): 975-978.; Yazejian, N., D. Bryant, K. Freel and M. Burchinal (2015). "High-quality early education: Age of entry and time in care differences in student outcomes for English-only and dual language learners." *Early childhood research quarterly* 32(Jan): 23- 39; Cornelissen, T., C. Dustmann, A. Raute and U. Schönberg (2018). "Who benefits from universal childcare? Estimating marginal returns to early child care attendance." *The Journal of political economy* 126(6): 2356- 2409.

week, whereas programs of a lower dosage may not promote significant gains, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>17,18</sup>

It is worth noting that Australia's 15 hours per week /600 hours per year benchmark was informed by the United Kingdom's Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) studies, which found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from higher dosages, with impacts lasting well into high school, although the format of those hours in EPPSE were different to the two day week or five day fortnight delivery in Australia.<sup>19</sup> Other studies show similar benefits from a longer duration of exposure from ages 2 to 3 years.<sup>20</sup>

When considering optimal dose for children, it is important to acknowledge existing patterns of attendance, which are largely driven by the current rates of workforce participation by parents of young children. While models of provision should always be child centric, it is important to consider the unintended consequences in setting a minimum dose that is less than the average days children attend – in particular, the inefficiency this drives in the system and the potential for vulnerable children to then access less than their more advantaged peers.

Average weekly hours in long day care centres have steadily increased from 28.9 hours in 2017 to 33.5 hours in 2023 (36 hours in Queensland), reflecting increases in maternal workforce participation.<sup>21</sup> The ACCC noted the proportion of families in Australia attending ECEC for 4 or 5 days per week has risen from 46% in 2019 to 53% in 2022, with 82% attending for at least 3 days.<sup>22</sup> The PC noted this attendance pattern 'most likely reflects their parents working hours'; the corollary being that it is often it is the more disadvantaged cohorts who are attending for fewer days or not at all, many paying for unsubsidised hours to do so.<sup>23</sup> Too many families are managing multiple settings and transitions over 4 and 5 days as they try to reduce their out of pocket costs by accessing two shorter days of free sessional preschool and 2-3 days of LDC, even though this may not be optimal for children's attachments, learning outcomes, or the parents' workforce participation.<sup>24</sup> In light of this, findings and recommendations of the South Australian Royal Commission will see a higher entitlement of 30hrs a week provided to children experiencing vulnerability in the two years before school from 2026.

While the post-Preschool Reform Agreement, post-Productivity Commission future of national preschool policy is still taking shape, the Queensland Government can act on the available evidence to increase the 'dose' of preschool for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Such an action could be undertaken on a 'no regrets' basis as national ECEC policy and other states and territories move towards higher doses and two-year programs on a universal basis (See **Attachment 1**).

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<sup>17</sup> ABS Preschool Australia 2022 table 17

<sup>18</sup> Lee, R., F. Zhai, J. Brooks-Gunn, W.-J. Han and J. Waldfogel (2014). "Head Start Participation and School Readiness: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort." *Dev Psychol* 50(1): 202-215; Warren, D., M. O'Connor, D. Smart and B. Edwards (2016). *A Critical Review of the Early Childhood Literature*. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

<sup>19</sup> Sammons, P., K. Sylva, E. Melhuish, I. Siraj-Blatchford, B. Taggart, D. Draghici, R. Smees and K. Toth (2012). *Influences on students' development in Key Stage 3: Social behavioural outcomes in Year 9*, Faculty of Social Sciences.

<sup>20</sup> Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2004, Sammons, Sylva et al. 2012, Li, Lv et al. 2015

<sup>21</sup> Department of Education Child Care Quarterly statistics Sep 2017 and Sep 2023A

<sup>22</sup> ACCC (2023) *Inquiry into ECEC Interim Report* September p. 175

<sup>23</sup> PC (2023) *Draft Report* p. 315

<sup>24</sup> The Queensland Government approach to providing parity in out-of-pocket costs across kindergarten setting types may positively impact families' options and choices in this regard over time.

**Recommendation 4.** That the Queensland Government moves quickly to increase the kindergarten dose for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage from 2 days or 15 hrs a week to 30hrs a week across all settings.

***There are opportunities for small adjustments to 'Free Kindy' settings to make two days of early learning truly free for low income families***

While the introduction of Free Kindy is an incredible milestone in Queensland's early childhood policy, seeking for the first time to provide parity in out-of-pocket costs for children attending 600hrs across 40 weeks a year, it is important that the Queensland Government continues to work collaboratively with the sector to refine the program to make it fairer and more efficient for 2025.<sup>25</sup>

While the new 'Free Kindy' model has been great news for middle and high-income families, who can receive as much as \$9,800 from the Queensland Government (in addition to the Australian Government's Child Care Subsidy), Goodstart remains committed to working with the Queensland Government to remove the remaining cost barriers for low-income families and supporting strategies to engage the ~8,000 children who are currently not participating in kindergarten at all.<sup>26</sup>

A key concern in the design of the program relates to funding out-of-pocket costs for only a 7.5-hour window in a long day care day, and for only 40 weeks per year in what is usually a 52-week enrolment. Working families need the flexibility provided by long day care, however, the current methodology means some low-income families will still face cost barriers when accessing a two-day preschool program. The flat rate kindy subsidies offered by the New South Wales and Victorian Governments offer a higher level of assistance to low-income families, providing two days of LDC kindergarten completely free over a full year, which will not happen under current arrangements in Queensland.

Since the policy design work on Free Kindy was concluded last year, the ACCC has completed its review of ECEC fees across Australia. It found that: *"The design of the Child Care Subsidy system, particularly the activity test and use of an hourly fee cap, incentivises optimisation of the daily session length for centre-based care to maximise the subsidy contribution and minimise household's out of pocket expenses."*<sup>27</sup> To address this, it recommended reforming the activity test and consideration of a move from an hourly fee cap to a daily one.<sup>28</sup>

The Productivity Commission's Draft Report on ECEC, which came out in December after the Free Kindy funding rules for 2024 were announced, contains an extensive discussion on the difference between hours charged (i.e., sessions) and hours attended. It found that, while the majority of charged ECEC sessions were 10 hours or more, the majority of attendance is for less than nine hours a day.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Parity in out-of-pocket costs between sessional and LDC preschool settings removes significant cost-incentives for high-income families to drift to free sessional offerings, as we are beginning to observe in some locations where kindy is free in other settings and not free in LDCs.

<sup>26</sup> <https://statements.qld.gov.au/statements/97916>

<sup>27</sup> ACCC Inquiry into ECEC Final Report p.44

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p. 9

<sup>29</sup> Productivity Commission 2023 ECEC Inquiry Draft report p. 441



These PC and ACCC findings may open a window for further examination and fine-tuning of the Free Kindy methodology to better leverage the existing CCS system in the short term. A minimum block subsidy that can be applied flexibly for vulnerable families, for example, may provide a cost effective and short-term solution to remove cost barriers while the Australian Government considers reforms to the CCS that may deliver a minimum 3-day entitlement to ECEC that is free for families in 30% lowest income households.<sup>30</sup>

**Recommendation 5.** That, in light of recent evidence provided by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the Productivity Commission inquiries into early childhood education and care, the Queensland Government considers opportunities to adjust Free Kindy settings to further reduce cost barriers for low-income and vulnerable families.

### 3. Strengthening Families and identifying and responding to needs for healthy development and positive life courses

*This section combines our response investment priorities two and three.*

#### ***ECEC services can play a significant role in redressing disadvantage by acting as a 'backbone' for the early childhood development system***

Increasingly, ECEC services are being recognised as a potential universal entry point for the early childhood development system, with 69% of two-year-olds and 74% of three-year-olds in Queensland attending ECEC services.<sup>31</sup> ECEC is used more by children and families than any other early childhood development service and utilisation is expected to increase when the Albanese Government's commitment to a universal, affordable system is realised.

The 2023 South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC found that the sector is already playing a significant and under-recognised role in the early years which may provide a 'backbone' for universal infrastructure for early childhood development, including parenting programs and health and development services.<sup>32</sup> This is a considerable focus in its final report too, with Recommendations 8, 11 and 13 outlining explicit strategies for designing the 'glue' between actors in the system.<sup>33</sup> This approach is also consistent with ECEC's critical role in the 'foundational support system' envisaged in the NDIS Review.

The final Putting Queensland Kids First strategy would be improved if it more explicitly calls out this potential and includes measures to better connect health and community support services to ECEC where children and families already attend. While the exact mix of

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<sup>30</sup> As recommended by the Draft Productivity Commission Report.

<sup>31</sup> ROGS, 2024.

<sup>32</sup> The sector survey completed for the Royal Commission found that in South Australia, 4 in 5 long day care centres provide access to speech pathology and occupational therapy, 1 in 3 provide access to supports for families, and 1 in 3 provide access to Foodbank.

<sup>33</sup> Royal Commission into the South Australian Government's Early Childhood Development Inquiry. (n.d.). Final Report. Retrieved from <https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/publications/final-report> - p93.

services should be tailored to the local context, all children attending ECEC services would benefit from onsite access to:

- developmental screening,
- hearing screening,
- dental screening,
- allied health services,
- nutrition and food programs.

At Goodstart, we directly deliver these services at many of our centres. We employ teams of allied health professionals, facilitate and host visiting professionals and refer families to other local child development services. Many other for-profit and not-for profit providers do the same but, in our experience, we often do not have the resourcing to deliver these services to the scale we know is needed. Here, there is an opportunity for the Queensland Government to partner with ECEC services to trial and evaluate various models of allied health within ECEC services with a view to increasing provision statewide.

**Recommendation 6.** Building on the insights gained from the South Australian Royal Commission and other contemporary inquiries into ECEC, Putting Queensland Kids First should explicitly acknowledge the potential for ECEC services to provide a 'backbone' for the early childhood development system and allocate funding for the rigorous trialling and evaluation of various models of allied health support within ECEC services.

### ***Removing barriers for children and families facing disadvantage should be a clear objective for all levels of Government***

For ECEC to be an effective 'backbone' service for all children, children and families need to be able to access it. Evidence shows that universal systems tend to be under-utilised by those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage – even when they are free.<sup>34</sup> Low service usage in the early years (across the range of health and educational services) also correlates with higher levels of developmental vulnerability on the AEDC.<sup>35</sup>

We know that addressing cost barriers is necessary but is not the whole story in ensuring children and families experiencing vulnerability can access and continue to participate in non-compulsory services like early learning. Moving towards a universal ECEC system requires a holistic response to address barriers to access, including:

- **Cost:** universal eligibility to adequate payments and/or subsidies to ensure ECEC is affordable, noting cost is cited in research as the single most significant barrier to access. Financial assistance to support access to a minimum entitlement of ECEC should be offered to all children, regardless of their parents' workforce participation activity. Some families need more assistance to overcome cost barriers.

<sup>34</sup> Royal Children's Hospital. (2022). Restacking the Odds: Early childhood education: A study of the barriers, facilitators, & strategies to improve participation; accessed [https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/images/RSTO-CommBrief-ECEC-Barriers-Facilitators-Strategies-Jan2022\(2\).pdf](https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/images/RSTO-CommBrief-ECEC-Barriers-Facilitators-Strategies-Jan2022(2).pdf); Wong. S., From fees to free and back again; What we learned. Goodstart Early Learning Evidence and Insights Series, [https://www.goodstart.org.au/getmedia/52c1e7c0-0843-4689-a3f9-cecf5c62fdb1/Evidence-Insights-Series-From-Fees-to-Free-and-Back-Again\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.goodstart.org.au/getmedia/52c1e7c0-0843-4689-a3f9-cecf5c62fdb1/Evidence-Insights-Series-From-Fees-to-Free-and-Back-Again_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Australian Journal of Social Issues. (2021). Early childhood education and care in Australia: Equity in access and service use. Australian Journal of Social Issues, 56(3), 369-387. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.186>



- **Location:** ensuring the supply and viability of high-quality services in all communities through funding and planning approaches, including consideration of provision to children in very remote locations.
- **Transport:** children and families need to be able to get to a service to access it. Consideration should be given to the best ways of overcoming transport barriers, including improving local public or shared transport options, not just ECEC provided transport.
- **Parental concerns and perceptions (cultural, trust and/or lack of awareness of benefits of ECEC):** a better trained and supported workforce should be able to better relate to families facing vulnerability with trust issues or cultural issues with placing children in care.
- **Capacity:** accessing ECEC and the current Child Care subsidy or Additional Childcare Subsidy (which covers up to 100% of costs for vulnerable children) requires time and skills to navigate a range of bureaucratic hurdles which currently lock many eligible children out.

The Productivity Commission's recommendations for a minimum 3-day entitlement to ECEC with a 100% fee subsidy to families in the lowest 30% of households would be gamechangers in Australia by effectively removing the cost barriers for some of the most vulnerable children in the community. State government strategies and investments could then focus on removing other barriers to access for vulnerable and highly vulnerable children. For example, targeted communications and outreach could be extended to cover children in particular locations and cohorts likely to be eligible for free ECEC, but who are underrepresented in ECEC participation (e.g. culturally and linguistically diverse communities, or children in out-of-home care). Goodstart's successful partnership with the Queensland Government in delivering our Increasing Access and Participation program could also be taken to scale.

**Recommendation 7.** That the Queensland Government invest in initiatives to engage with families with children who are most vulnerable and support them to overcome barriers to accessing ECEC. This can include scaling up successful programs like the Increasing Access and Participation program to cover all communities and ECEC services throughout Queensland.

**Box 1. Goodstart's Increasing Access and Participation Program provides effective pathways into early learning and vulnerable families**

Goodstart's Increasing Access and Participation (IAP) Program aims to improve outcomes for some of our most vulnerable children by facilitating their entry into early learning. Under this model, a Family and Community Engagement Worker works within a local service system to address barriers to access and create a warm entry point for families who may otherwise never connect with early learning. The Family and Community Engagement Worker supports children and families with:

**Enrolment into our centres:** Takes referrals from agencies and supports case workers who refer, including; outreach to assist families, advocating the benefits of ECEC, supports guardians with registering for childcare subsidies and understanding child and family any cultural and additional needs. The worker will seek the best centre for the child and family based on centre capacity and family needs.

**Partnership Building:** with referring agencies, families, and centres to plan tailored goals and ensure ongoing provision of evidence to support access to Child Care Subsidies.

**Commencement Support:** Provides six weeks of transition support for children and families to ensure a smooth transition into early learning, review support strategies, ensuring any professional development is provided and relationships between the family and centre are supported.

**Ongoing Inclusive Approach:** Ensures continued connection to early learning, including access to additional Goodstart and Government support programs.

The program currently operates in Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales with costs mainly attributed to employing Engagement Workers. Each worker is able to support up to 300 families a year and may be providing support to up to 35 families with complex needs at any time. In 2023, Goodstart employed two Engagement Workers in Queensland, partially offset by one-off grants from the Queensland Government.

There is very high demand for the program in some locations and Engagement Workers are often at capacity. Additional, ongoing funding for these roles is a priority for Goodstart. Further details and case studies are available on request.

**Expanding developmental screening and warm referral pathways in ECEC services**

While Goodstart and many providers already offer developmental screening on a universal or targeted basis within ECEC services, the opportunity exists for the Queensland Government to invest in this with the goal of increasing the number of children who receive all the recommended checks.

Similar investments made in New South Wales and South Australia are demonstrating significant benefits for children and families. By implementing developmental health checks in Queensland's ECEC services, the government can ensure every child receives timely and comprehensive assessments of their developmental progress, enabling early identification of any developmental delays or concerns.

In NSW, the introduction of the "Early Childhood Education and Care Health Checks" program has included developmental health checks as part of its comprehensive approach to promoting children's health and well-being in early childhood settings.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> NSW Government. (n.d.). Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Health Checks. <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/ececchecks>

These health checks, conducted by trained professionals, provide valuable insights into children's developmental milestones and enable early intervention when necessary. Additionally, the program facilitates the connection of parents and carers to early parenting groups, fostering community support and engagement.

Similarly, in SA, initiatives such as Goodstart's partnership with Flinders University to deliver the "Health2Go" program have prioritised developmental health checks as a key component of early childhood development support services.<sup>37</sup> The partnership offering children from predominantly low socio-economic backgrounds screening for conditions such as autism also provides opportunities for allied health students at Flinders University to gain valuable practical experience. The South Australian Government has also recently committed to expanding universal child development checks, including considering the total number of checks offered in response to its Royal Commission into ECEC.<sup>38</sup>

For screening to be effective, a robust pathway to care must exist so that children have an accessible pathway to treatment and the necessary support when concerns are detected. But as the consultation paper acknowledges, across Queensland and Australia families are waiting too long when a concern is identified for further diagnosis and support. The problem is particularly acute for families relying on public health services.<sup>39</sup> Addressing this requires sustained investment and effort in developing local health and community networks and the availability of public health specialists.

**Recommendation 8.** Drawing on experience in other states, that the Queensland Government consider approaches to identify and address developmental concerns within ECEC settings. This may include the roll-out of developmental screening programs and associated protocols for referrals, ensuring that children and families receive timely access to support services and interventions based on their individual needs.

### ***Supporting all families to make informed choices about ECEC for their children***

Contemporary state and national inquiries into ECEC have reaffirmed the need for families and communities to have timely and accurate information and support to make informed choices about quality ECEC for their children. An effective way to improve community understandings of quality would be to introduce a formal notification of Assessment and Ratings outcomes to all families enrolled within a service. Currently, services are not required to inform families of their rating outcomes, including when they have been rated as 'working towards' the NQS and many families do not understand the quality rating system at all. This means there are limited – if any – consequences for services who do not meet the NQS, nor accountability to families for the rating result. In contrast, all services in the United Kingdom undergo regular rating assessments and there is a requirement that families are informed about the outcomes. This proactive approach in the UK fosters

<sup>37</sup> Government of South Australia. (n.d.). Starting Well. <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/caring-futures-institute/2022/05/24/new-partnership-strengthening-developmental-screening-in-childcare/>

<sup>38</sup> South Australian Government. (2024). Early Childhood Response to the Royal Commission Final Report. Retrieved from [https://earlychildhood.sa.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/876209/public-response-to-royal-commission-final-report.pdf](https://earlychildhood.sa.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/876209/public-response-to-royal-commission-final-report.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). Children's Headline Indicators: Health and Safety. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/childrens-headline-indicators/contents/health-and-safety/delay-in-accessing-healthcare>

greater awareness about quality among families and instils a lower tolerance for services that do not meet high quality standards.

This approach has been supported by research, which finds that parental awareness and understanding of quality ratings significantly influence their choices regarding ECEC services.<sup>40</sup> Providing families with clear and transparent information about service quality empowers them to make informed decisions that align with their preferences and expectations. It also establishes consequences and accountability for poor quality services.

**Recommendation 9.** That the Queensland Government undertake awareness-raising campaigns regarding the National Quality System quality ratings. Additionally, services should be required to formally advise families about the outcomes of assessments and ratings at the service(s) in which they are enrolled.

## 4. Partnering for integrated, place-based and First Nations-led delivery

*This section responds to investment priority five in the draft strategy*

### **Integrated services provide safe, supportive and welcoming environments for families**

In addition to the opportunity to expand existing ECEC as backbone services connecting local childhood development systems outlined in Section 3, Goodstart supports the Government's intention to partner with the non-government sector and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to deliver local, place-based and targeted interventions that respond to the needs of Queensland children, young people, families and communities.

All children should have the opportunity to attend high quality, inclusive and affordable local ECEC services with strong connections to the local service system. Integrated early years services and co-located models have garnered support both in Australia and internationally on the basis they can better cater for children and families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, including in unserved or underserved communities. Research indicates that integrated early years services contribute to improved child outcomes, including cognitive, social, and emotional development. For example, a study by Moore et al. (2017) found that children who participated in integrated early childhood programs showed better school readiness and academic achievement compared to those who did not.<sup>41</sup>

Established in 2018 with the help of Queensland Government funding, the Redlands Integrated Early Years Place exemplifies this collaborative approach. Operated by Goodstart Early Learning, in partnership with The Benevolent Society, this initiative provides comprehensive access to health, support, and community services for children and families in the Redlands area. Situated within the premises of Capalaba State College, the centre offers a diverse range of services, including early childhood educator and teacher

<sup>40</sup> Smith, M., & Shinde, S. (2020). Parental Awareness and Understanding of Quality Ratings in Early Childhood Education and Care Services: A Systematic Review. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48(6), 791–804. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01067-6>

<sup>41</sup> Moore, T., McDonald, M., McHugh-Dillon, H., West, S., Saunders, V., & Priest, N. (2017). Key findings from the evaluation of the Communities for Children Facilitating Partnerships Projects. Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

training, child and maternal health services, playgroups and parenting support – supported by investment from the Queensland Government and investment from Goodstart and the Benevolent Society.

The overarching objective of this initiative is to enhance access to early childhood resources, improve child and parental well-being, strengthen family resilience, promote children's development, and foster community connections. The Early Years Place focuses on empowering families to recognise and address their child's developmental needs, bolster their confidence in engaging with support services, and enhance their parenting skills. The centre provides various professional services, such as occupational therapy, health checks for children, health referrals, and support, along with transition-to-school programs. Additionally, it hosts three weekly playgroups tailored to toddlers and babies, as well as inclusive Fun Fridays for all age groups. Moreover, breakfast is served on Mondays and Thursdays, and the centre opens several afternoons a week to facilitate community engagement among families.

Equipped with children's play equipment, books, puzzles, and messy play stations, the centre offers a conducive environment for holistic child development and family bonding. It acts as a referral point for families who do not (yet) want to engage in formal ECEC services. Ensuring these services are adequately resourced is important to ensuring their long-term success within the community.

**Box 2. Empowering Remote Communities through Culturally Responsive Early Childhood Education and Care: Goodstart's Collaboration with the Ngurupai Community**

In 2020, Goodstart Early Learning initiated a partnership with the Ngurupai (Horn Island) community as part of our "Impact Beyond Goodstart" initiative funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation. The overarching goal was to address disproportionate developmental vulnerability experienced by remote children through the co-design of sustainable, scalable, and culturally responsive early childhood education and care offerings within Australia. Through extensive research and co-design activities conducted in collaboration with two remote communities, Goodstart gained valuable insights into their histories, cultures, strengths, and unmet needs. These efforts culminated in two comprehensive reports: "[Remote Access Matters](#)" and "[Codesigning with Remote Communities in Response to Complex Social Challenges](#)."

Building on the findings of these reports, Goodstart identified the opportunity to reopen the existing Early Childhood Education and Care service on Ngurupai (Horn Island), which had been inactive for almost eight years. Recognised as part of the Paul Ramsay Foundation exploratory work, this initiative aims to provide culturally responsive high-quality ECEC to the children and families of Ngurupai, addressing the significant gap in early learning opportunities in the region.

To operationalise this vision, Goodstart collaborated with the local Traditional Land Owners, the Kaurareg Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (KNTAC) to develop a robust governance structure and partnership model. This partnership approach ensures that the Ngurupai community plays a central role in shaping the early learning service, fostering ownership, empowerment, and self-determination. By privileging First Nations voices and knowledge in the design and delivery of the program, Goodstart ensures that the Ngurupai community remains the primary beneficiaries of the initiative.

Additionally, the success of the Ngurupai playgroup, established in 2023, underscores the community's commitment to early learning and family engagement. The playgroup has not only enhanced learning opportunities for children but also served as a platform for upskilling and workforce development, highlighting the broader socio-economic benefits for the community.

Through a phased approach, Goodstart intends to transition the management of the centre to KNTAC within four years, empowering the community to sustainably lead and operate the facility. In summary, Goodstart's collaboration with the Torres Strait community exemplifies the transformative potential of culturally responsive ECEC initiatives in empowering remote communities and closing the gap in early childhood development outcomes.



**Recommendation 10.** That the Queensland Government build on its experience to date to partner with the non-government sector to invest in and develop approaches to achieve service connection and integration, both when services are co-located and when they are not, depending on the needs of the community.

### ***An ambitious strategy will require a turbo-charged workforce strategy***

The delivery of quality ECEC requires a capable and valued professional workforce.<sup>42</sup> Recent reports by both the ACCC and the PC identified workforce shortages as a key impediment to improving both access and quality in the sector. Both called for significant new initiatives in ECEC workforce and we wholeheartedly welcome the Queensland Government's significant new investments in our workforce, which will make real headway in addressing our workforce shortages in the coming years.

Investment in the ECEC workforce is crucial for delivering high quality ECEC and is necessary to meet current and future demand for ECEC, including increased demand that may arise from a Queensland Government commitment to expand kindergarten programs and the Australian Government's consideration of a universal entitlement of three days for all children. Workforce investment must also consider demand resulting from expanding ECEC places in communities that are currently underserved.

**Table 1. Average monthly new monthly vacancies Queensland**

	Q4 2019	Q4 2021	Q4 2023	Increase
Child carers	397	857	1329	+248%
Early childhood teachers	209	348	453	+117%

(Source: Jobs and Skills Australia, monthly internet vacancies index)

### Teacher Workforce

The draft Productivity Commission report makes a series of recommendations on expanding the ECEC workforce that may require action by the Queensland Government:

#### **a. Reduce barriers to educator upskilling to become teachers (recommendation 3.1) and support innovative delivery of teaching qualifications (recommendation 3.2)**

To meet this, Queensland will need to work with universities to develop and promote accelerated degree programs, expand wrap around support for educators upskilling and offer financial support to providers to give educators paid leave for study and practicum. Some of these measures are now being funded in the Queensland Pathways Program and we welcome the opportunity to proactively partner with Government to address the chronic teacher shortages in our sector.

<sup>42</sup> OECD 2018 "TALIS: Building a High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce" Paris



**b. Improve registration arrangements for early childhood teachers to recognise any ECT level qualification approved by ACECQA (recommendation 3.3)**

This recommendation would bring Queensland into line with New South Wales and Victoria and recent reforms announced by the South Australian Government in response to the South Australian Royal Commission. Representation of early childhood teachers, their union (UWU) and ECEC providers on the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) would support these reforms. This will require legislation to amend the QCT's composition.

**c. Lift mentoring for new early childhood teachers (recommendation 3.4)**

This measure would address the high attrition rate of teachers in their first three years of service. The Victorian Government currently funds a range of mentoring and professional engagement programs for new teachers, and we are excited about opportunities via the Pathways Program to provide similar support to new graduates in Queensland.

Other actions Queensland can take include:

**d. Extending the service location subsidy to all teachers in regional and remote areas**

The Service Location Subsidy introduced by the Queensland Government in 2023 was a very welcome initiative to attract and retain qualified teachers in kindergarten programs in outer regional and remote areas. There are opportunities, in our view, to broaden the subsidy to include all regional areas and all early childhood teacher positions:

- Limiting the subsidy to outer regional creates anomalies. For example, centres in Mackay, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Bundaberg and Dalby are struggling to attract and retain ECTs but cannot access the subsidy. By contrast, centres located in nearby towns, such as Sarina, Mirani, Biloela, Miriam Vale, Gayndah, Chinchilla and Stanthorpe can access it, which is inequitable and can result in services in relatively small geographical areas competing for the same talent pool.
- Queensland risks creating a 'second class' of teachers in centres with two teachers where the teacher in the kindergarten room attracts the subsidy and the teacher not in the kindergarten room (e.g. the Educational Leader) does not. Stabilising the entire teaching workforce would help improve quality and learning outcomes for children across the entire state.

**e. Increasing operational funding for long day care kindergarten programs to support centres to match rates across the sector**

In the three years to July 2024, wages for beginning teachers in Queensland schools will have risen by 14.2% or \$10,449 excluding oncosts. In the same period, operational funding for kindergarten programs in Queensland rose 6.9%, or by about \$2739 for a 22-child kindergarten program. To match the increase in Queensland school teacher rates in full (including 20% on costs), the current operational funding rate for Queensland kindergarten places would need to be increased by \$445 per child per year.

## Educator workforce

Alongside addressing wages, the pipeline for new educators should be addressed by:

- a. Continuing free TAFE courses and additional funding for traineeships for educators
- b. Ensuring VET courses across Queensland in ECEC are of high quality
- c. Expanding access to school-based traineeships in ECEC
- d. Including early childhood educators on skilled migration priority lists and addressing hurdles and delays on visa applications
- e. Funding more professional development opportunities for educators, such as whole of team staff training days similar to the pupil free days available to educators and teachers in sessional kindergartens
- f. Advocating to the Federal Government for a funded wage rise for educators to match rates paid in schools (e.g. for teacher aides).

**Recommendation 11.** That the Queensland Government continue developing and implementing a proactive and well-funded ECEC workforce strategy that:

- Reduces barriers to educator upskilling to become teachers and supports innovative delivery of teaching qualifications;
- Improve registration arrangements for early childhood teachers to recognise any ECT level qualification approved by ACECQA;
- Lifts mentoring for new early childhood teachers;
- Extends the service location subsidy to all teachers in regional and remote areas;
- Increases operational funding for long day care kindergarten programs to support centres to match school rates;
- Funds free TAFE to support access to VET courses in ECEC, extends access to school-based traineeships, and ensures VET courses are high quality;
- Funds more professional development opportunities for educators, such as whole of team staff training days similar to the pupil free days available to educators and teachers in schools and kindergartens; and
- Advocates to the Federal Government for a funded wage rise for educators and including educators on skilled migration priority lists.

## 5. Vision and principles guiding Queensland Government's approach

Goodstart supports the vision and principles articulated in the draft Strategy and believes these could be enhanced with a focus on:

- **Being family-centred** – While implicit in the strategy, its principles may also benefit from recognising the crucial role of families in a child's development and well-being. Families are a child's first teachers and interventions should involve families as partners, providing support, resources, and guidance to strengthen family functioning and promote positive parent-child relationships.

Families also need to be actively engaged at all levels of policy and service development, implementation and ongoing evaluation – an early childhood development system must respond and listen to the aspirations families have for

their children. We can learn from the health sector where these consumer voice and advocacy mechanisms are well established.<sup>43</sup>

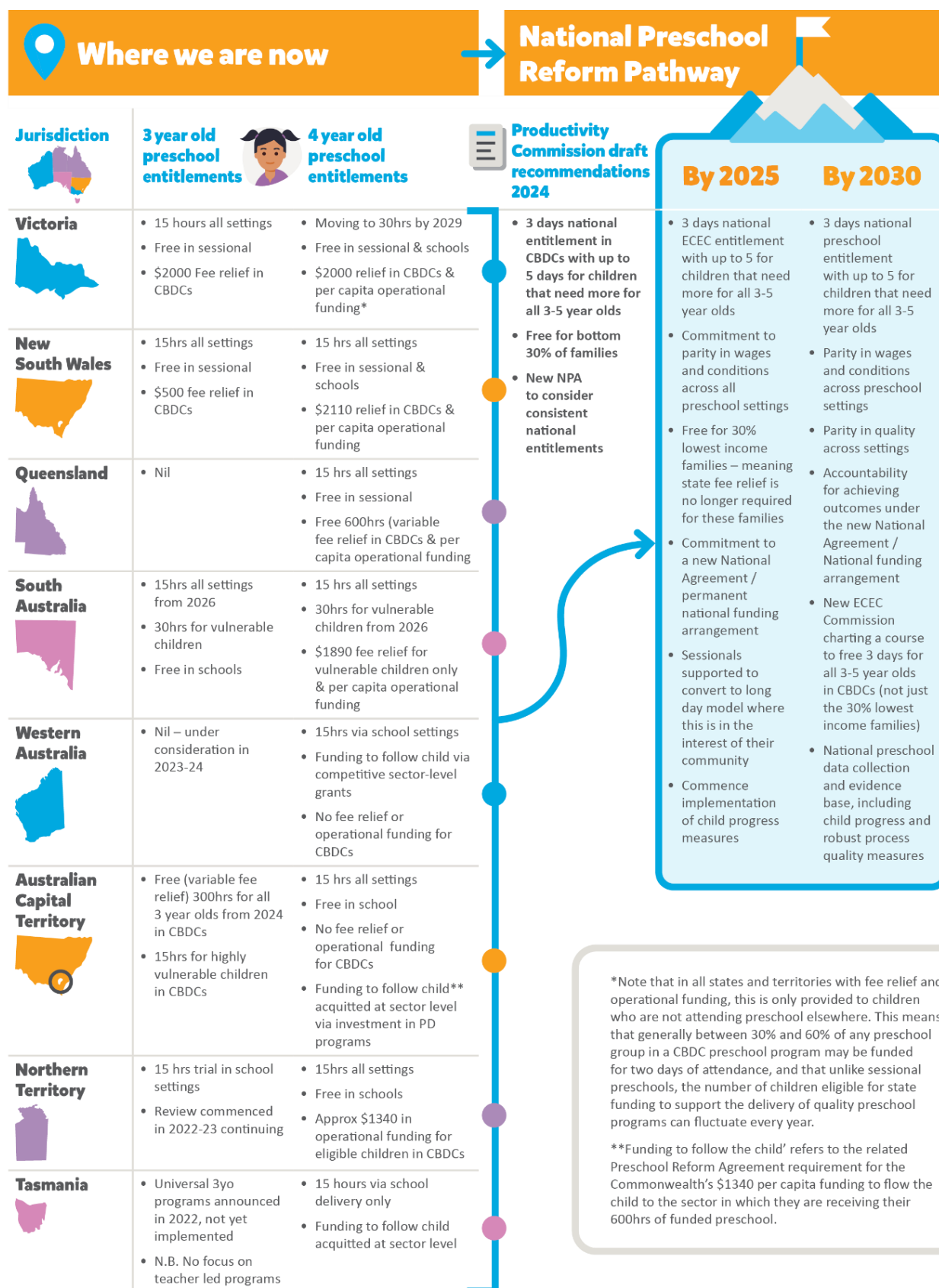
- **Early Identification and Assessment** – While one of the principles is prevention and early intervention, this could be expanded to include explicit reference and commitment to the role of early assessment and identification in early childhood. Mechanisms for early identification and assessment of risk factors and vulnerabilities in children and families must be built into an early childhood development system to identify concerns early and intervene effectively.
- **Accessibility** – While the principles currently include a focus on equity, this could be enhanced with explicit reference to accessibility. Services and supports must be accessible for all children, young people, and families, regardless of socio-economic status, geographic location, or other factors. Barriers to access, such as transportation, language, cultural differences and reasonable adjustments for children with disability, must be addressed to ensure equitable outcomes for all.
- **Transparency and accountability** – As part of the principle to build an evidence-informed early childhood system, governments must take a holistic system approach to stewarding quality, affordability, access and equity in the ECEC system, in partnership with the sector. Ensuring transparency and accountability at all levels of the system is essential for continuous improvement and guiding decisions for future investment. The Queensland Government – through the Department of Education – has made real strides in this direction and should be commended.
- **Service continuity and coordination** – Seamless access to services means they are delivered in a way that reduces the risk of children and families falling through gaps, particularly where services or funding are provided by different levels of government. Seamless access reduces unnecessary duplication and complexity and promotes greater information sharing between all actors in the system.

By incorporating these considerations into its approach, Queensland can create a comprehensive early childhood development system that nurtures the potential of every child, laying the foundation for a thriving and equitable society.

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<sup>43</sup> See for example, National Mental Health Plans.

## Attachment 1. A pathway for national preschool reform



CBDC = Centre Based Day Care