



# REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION STRATEGY:

Ensuring every child in regional and  
remote NSW gets the best start to life

2017-2022

# Minister's Message



## **The Hon Sarah Mitchell MLC**

Minister for Early Childhood Education

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

Assistant Minister for Education

In 2016, the NSW Department of Education embarked on a journey to map and identify the unique challenges faced by regional and remote early childhood education services, and communities. At the heart of this exercise was a real need to understand how these challenges impacted children and families in these localities, and explore how the department could better design and deliver programs to services operating in these areas.

With a disproportionate number of Aboriginal children growing up in disadvantaged regional and remote areas, improving access to quality early childhood education in partnership with Aboriginal communities is also key to the department's efforts to overcome Aboriginal disadvantage in education.

The Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education Strategy builds upon the foundations of the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint for Action, released in 2013, and will be an essential guide for us on how to best support the needs of regional and remote communities.

As a country member, born and raised in Gunnedah, I understand the context in which early childhood services operate in regional and remote NSW. I believe strongly that every child in NSW has the right to a quality early childhood education, no matter where they live, or what their family circumstances are.

I am pleased to announce this Strategy, and would like to thank all the stakeholders who contributed to its development through the extensive consultation stage.

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# Context

Research shows that children who participate in quality preschool programs are more likely to arrive at school equipped with the skills they need to engage in learning. We also know that the longer term benefits of preschool include further educational achievement, improved economic participation, and higher levels of general wellbeing. Importantly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds obtain the greatest benefits from quality early childhood education.

In NSW, 27% of four and five year olds that enrol in early childhood education do so in a regional, remote or very remote setting (ABS, 2016). However, children growing up in regional, remote or very remote areas are more likely than their metropolitan counterparts to be developmentally vulnerable at the start of school and below the national minimum standard in both literacy and numeracy as their schooling progresses. Children from disadvantaged family backgrounds also continue to be over-represented in regional and remote areas.

Since 2013, enrolments of Aboriginal children in early childhood education in regional and remote communities have increased. However, Aboriginal children remain twice as likely as non-Aboriginal children to be developmentally vulnerable, with the proportion of vulnerable Aboriginal children increasing along with the remoteness classification of the area where the child lives (AEDC, 2015).

This is why it is particularly important that high quality early childhood education is accessible and affordable in regional and remote communities. Accessibility is not just about bricks and mortar; it also encompasses early childhood education environments and preschool programs that are inclusive of all children and families.

In 2017, there are over 370 community preschools and mobile services, and around 580 long day care centres operating in regional and remote NSW. It is important to acknowledge the unique context in which these services operate, with



remoteness and isolation often giving rise to challenges in attracting and retaining qualified staff, fluctuating enrolments and the overrepresentation of disadvantage in the local community.

The Rural and Remote Education Blueprint for Action was released by the NSW Department of Education in 2013, to support actions to reduce the gap in educational achievement between rural and urban students. One of its objectives is to strengthen early childhood education for children in rural and remote communities. To this end, the department has developed initiatives including a regional and remote scholarships program, capital works funding and outreach grants for non-metropolitan preschools.

This Strategy will build on these efforts, drawing on extensive research and consultation to shape the development of programs and services to support the needs of regional and remote early childhood services, children and communities. It will guide both the Department's initiatives as well as community-level efforts to improve outcomes for children in regional and remote communities.

# Principles

## Local Solutions

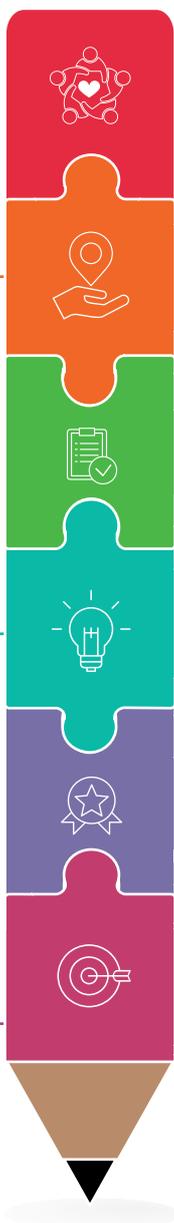
Local solutions are most appropriate for local problems. Locally developed approaches should be prioritised over one-size-fits all solutions.

## Innovative approaches

Innovative approaches to service delivery in regional and remote communities should be encouraged where there are unique challenges, and systems that may work in cities are ineffective or unsuitable.

## High expectations

There should be an emphasis on high expectations, including an expectation that over time, children in regional and remote areas have comparable access to early childhood education to children in urban areas.



## Cultural Respect and Inclusion

Early childhood education services should be encouraged and supported to engage with Aboriginal communities and other cultures in respectful, culturally inclusive ways.

## Evidence and evaluation

Decisions should be based on strong evidence and evaluation which identify 'lessons learned' and map existing gaps in program design and service delivery.

## Universal access and the National Quality Framework

Approaches to regional and remote policy and delivery should align with the government's early childhood education commitment to universal access and quality learning environments.

# Key Drivers of Success



## Driver 1:

### Working with Distance – Developing innovative solutions to overcome the physical challenges associated with distance

#### Vision:

Families and children in isolated communities can access affordable transport to attend their nearest preschool program

All children have access to a preschool program close to their home or to a high quality distance preschool option

All early childhood education services have the necessary infrastructure and technology to enable children in regional and remote areas to have equal learning opportunities as children in metropolitan areas

#### Actions:

- Support government and non-government organisations to develop state-wide and community-level preschool transport initiatives, in partnership with early childhood education services
- Support the creation of new mobile preschool services and the expansion of existing mobile services to include more venues in regional and remote areas
- Explore the potential to extend distance preschool provision to all children in need in regional and remote areas
- Provide advice to early childhood education services regarding best practice use of technology to support opportunities for learning in regional and remote communities



## Driver 2:

Attracting, developing and retaining a high quality workforce – Recognising that improving quality in early childhood education requires an investment in our workforce

### Vision:

University qualified early childhood teachers deliver high quality preschool programs in every regional and remote community

Early childhood education workers in regional and remote areas are supported at each stage of their career

Regional and remote early childhood education services are able to attract and retain qualified staff and have access to relief staff to cover absences, including attendance at professional development

### Actions:

- Support ongoing professional development for the early childhood education workforce in regional and remote areas
- Establish regional and remote networking events to connect the early childhood education workforce
- Introduce incentives to attract university qualified staff to regional and remote early childhood education services
- Develop a state-wide workforce strategy to target issues of recruitment and retention of staff



## Driver 3:

### Engaging Aboriginal Communities – Improving the provision of culturally appropriate early childhood education for Aboriginal children

#### Vision:

All Aboriginal children are enrolled in quality early childhood education for at least 600 hours a year in the year before school

Early childhood education services are engaged with Aboriginal communities and preschool programs incorporate Aboriginal culture and knowledge

An increased number of Aboriginal early childhood education workers are employed by services in regional and remote communities

All early childhood education workers participate in cultural awareness training, enhancing their ability to support the learning outcomes of Aboriginal children

#### Actions:

- Consult with local Aboriginal elders and Aboriginal community organisations on matters including the design of early childhood education settings, pedagogical approaches and the organisation of community events
- Attract Aboriginal community members to early childhood education careers through scholarships or traineeships.
- Support the early childhood education sector to reduce barriers to access for Aboriginal children and families.
- Promote the delivery of cultural awareness training to all early childhood education workers
- Develop culturally appropriate methods of communication with Aboriginal families around the importance and benefits of early childhood education, including through the use of community liaison officers



## Driver 4:

Flexible Service Delivery – Recognising that flexible operating models have the ability to significantly increase participation in early childhood education, and have a positive impact on local communities

### Vision:

New and innovative solutions to provide children with access to early childhood education are supported where traditional models of service delivery do not meet community needs

Greater integration exists between early childhood education services and other community services in regional and remote areas

Early childhood education services are able to leverage existing infrastructure in the community to deliver high quality preschool programs

Flexible funding arrangements continue to support the sustainability of regional and remote early childhood education services

### Actions:

- Fund a range of existing and new early childhood education services and initiatives in regional and remote areas, with a focus on areas with no or limited early childhood education provision
- Promote the use of existing community infrastructure, including schools infrastructure, to support the delivery of face-to-face and distance preschool
- Support partnerships between early childhood education services and other community organisations, including local health services and schools



# Conclusion

The actions set out in this Strategy have been framed broadly, to allow for the development of solutions that meet the needs of different regional and remote communities. The challenges faced in inner regional areas will be very different to those experienced by very remote communities. Even between communities with a similar remoteness profile, what will and won't work will depend on each community's unique characteristics, including demographics, local institutions and organisations and existing infrastructure. Approaches that take into account and are relevant to the local context are most likely to help deliver accessible and high quality early childhood education.

Action taken under the Strategy should be informed by evidence and evaluation, drawing on lessons learned to achieve their intended outcomes. Where approaches that work in the city are proven to be ineffective in regional and remote areas, innovative approaches to service delivery and access to early childhood education should be encouraged and supported.

The delivery of early childhood education in regional and remote communities should be flexible, responsive and collaborative with local Aboriginal children and families. Ensuring that early childhood education settings are inclusive of Aboriginal families and communities is a crucial step in addressing the gap in participation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

Attending high quality early childhood education has been shown to give children a sound foundation, equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive. By supporting access to high quality preschool, it is envisaged that this Strategy will guide both the Department's initiatives and community-level efforts to ensure that every child in regional and remote NSW gets the best start to life.