

## *Building Capacity to Strengthen Aboriginal Community Controlled Provision of Early Childhood Education and Care— VAEAI's Public Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into The ECEC Sector.*

### **1. Summary of key points**

VAEAI believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Years Services are a crucial parallel to the ECEC Sector and allow for community control over the cultural and educational development of our children. This long-held practice is exhibited through the development of ACCO Early Learning Centres (ELCs), Aboriginal Children and Family Centres (CFCs) and Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS). VAEAI recommends that the Productivity Commission works to ensure that such organisations and centres are maintained within the Childcare system in Australia.

Preserving ACCO ELCs and services throughout Australia with extended funding and coordination between funding streams will facilitate the growth and expansion of these services within the broader ECEC eco-system. There is much that can be shared and learnt from the connection between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander focused ELCs. This information sharing is important for two key factors:

- 1) The Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that support ACCO ELCs, CFCs, MACS and other Aboriginal services are the experts within their communities and have a deep understanding of how ECEC contributes to closing the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
- 2) The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is dispersed across Australia, meaning that in many cases Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will attend a non-Aboriginal service.

Building cultural bridges between ACCO ELCs and non-Aboriginal ELCs within the pathway towards a universal ECEC Sector in Australia will benefit everyone, create a more cohesive sector, and enhance the ability to attract and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff providing the basis for a more integrated education system overall.

There is a diversity of funding and support options provided to the ECEC Sector broadly and the ACCO ELC sector specifically that needs to be coordinated in order to ensure that the long-term positive impacts of high-quality early years education is available to all Koorie children. The bulk of all service delivery currently comes from private providers who have experienced considerable growth over the past decade. However, this growth is often unequal. During this expansion in the sector, government run and non-for-profit services have remained stagnant over the same time period. This suggests that there is a growing demand for services but limited support by governments to support this growth and absorb the new demand. As such, ACCOs tend to struggle with both the capacity to grow and the ability to attract and retain staff.

In Victoria, this issue is being addressed specifically through the *Best Start, Best Life* policy. The *Best Start, Best Life* reform is a 10-year program for Early Childhood Education and Care in Victoria, with a commitment to improve early learning outcomes for Victorian children, workforce participation for

parents and carers, women, and access to choices for families. These reforms provide 30 hours of free kindergarten for Aboriginal children starting in 2025.

Additionally, the Victorian government has recognised that the gap between supply and demand is not equally distributed throughout the state. As such they have identified areas which they have labelled 'care deserts' where newer (and some existing) suburbs are underserved or not serviced at all. They have committed over the next 10 years to building 50 new ELCs which will be located on school campuses with the view to reducing the transportation burden on families.

Overall, the evidence is clear that high-quality ECEC provision has long-lasting positive impacts on children who attend regularly. This is especially the case for children who fall into various categories of disadvantage, who stand to benefit most from high-quality ECEC provision. Paradoxically however, these are children who are often from the same groups who are the highest risk of exclusion from ECEC services. This can be a result of family choice, lack of access to services, or lack of access to affordable services. This poses a major challenge to the sector to ensure that those who are most at risk of exclusion are given ample opportunity and assistance to participate regularly. Part of the issue remains the complexity of the system as it currently stands, with multiple tiers of provision across both the private and public service delivery models which do not necessarily overlap or adhere to the same delivery standards. Consequently, it is necessary to find ways to integrate the system, facilitating sharing of best practice across the system especially regarding administration and reporting requirements. Linking non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal services in this way will allow for a two-way communication stream that will benefit children across the sector.

In light of this, the Productivity Commission has outlined that their largest challenge in this inquiry is coordinating what is already significant government expenditure in the ECEC sector, much of which is spread across disparate funding mechanisms. Within this, it is important to ensure that Koorie children continue to have access to high-quality services. VAEAI recommends that forms of funding like the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) continue directly to families to provide ongoing support in attending ACCO ELCs, CFCs, and MACS outside of the free kindergarten hours provided through the *Best Start*, *Best Life* reforms.

## **2. VAEAI – Our History in Koorie Advocacy in the Early Years Sector**

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) was first established in 1976 as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (VAECG). The aim of this group was to increase the presence and voice of Koorie people in education and decision making. Today, VAEAI represents the Koorie community in relation to education policy development and strategic programming at the local, state and national levels. VAEAI supports the provision of education and training that reinforces our community's cultural identity and increases awareness in the wider community of Koorie culture and aspirations in education and training.

VAEAI has a holistic approach to education and firmly believes that education is a life-long process that centres on the learner, their families and their community. VAEAI recognises the importance of the Early Years sector as a foundation for life-long learning. Early childhood education and care services in many cases are the first time that Koorie families are entrusting the care of their children outside of the family, who are the first educators. VAEAI seeks to ensure that Koorie families are supported in this first transition, specifically around the provision and access to high quality Early Childhood education programs and services. We advocate for accessible, high quality services that are culturally inclusive for Koorie families. This is coordinated through VAEAI's Early Years Unit.

The VAEAI Early Years Unit also provides advice and monitors participation and outcomes for Koorie children aged 0-to-8 years-old in relation to their development and learning. The objectives of the unit are:

1. To provide advice and support to Children's Services, Koorie organisations, Koorie support staff and other relevant organisations on culturally relevant service development and delivery;
2. As a partner to the State Government on education, to advocate for Koorie children aged 0-8 through contributing to policy development focused on improving participation in, and outcomes from, early years services and programs; and
3. To monitor trends in education policy and programs that impact Koorie children.

VAEAI's Early Years Unit is also responsible for contributing to the ongoing development and monitoring of the implementation and outcomes of state-wide and commonwealth strategies and programs in early childhood education and care as they relate to Koorie learners and families. This includes providing direction and support to ensure the alignment of VAEAI efforts with the priorities of the Marrung Education Plan, and VAEAI representation at government and other stakeholder meetings.

This work is guided by VAEAI's internal consultative structure, which is centred around Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs). The Early Years Unit also facilitates two-way communication between Koorie communities and other stakeholders, including state and commonwealth government departments and agencies, as well as providing support and advice to Indigenous and non-Indigenous services that provide early childhood education and support for young Koorie children.

### ***Creating an inclusive sector for all Koorie Children in Victoria***

As Victoria's peak Aboriginal body for education VAEAI is committed to strengthening culturally responsive inclusive practices across the Koorie early years services including MACS, CFCs, ACCO ELCs, playgroups, In-home support and home-based learning, and non-Aboriginal services attended by Koorie children. VAEAI's strong LAECG network allows local Koorie communities members a direct voice in decision-making and provides a two-way communication stream with service providers to enhance both their cultural awareness and inclusiveness.

VAEAI also employs staff in a range of targeted roles to further enhance this process. The Early Years Unit Coordinator's work provides advice and support to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal early years service providers including through policy work and specific programs and professional development, as well as to local, State and Commonwealth governments. The Early Years Unit Coordinator works closely with VAEAI's Early Childhood Advisory Committee and works collaboratively with VAEAI staff in relation to education programs targeted at children aged 0-8 years old. The Early Years Manager is responsible for contributing to the ongoing development and monitoring of the implementation of Statewide strategies in Early Years and the transition to school education. The Manager is involved in regional, state and national strategic forums and committees which inform thinking and planning related to building the capacity of the early years and schools sector, responding directly to the community and their aspirations for Koorie learners and their families. These roles are supported by Brokers and Facilitators as well as the Early Years Specialist Education Representative. The Early Years Specialist Representative is an elected position and acts to represent VAEAI on Early Childhood related activities at state and national bodies and conferences. They also provide strategic advice for the Early Years Unit within VAEAI.

As a whole the Early Years Unit has a clear focus on working within the ECEC systems to create a positive climate for learning and development, building community engagement in learning and development, and creating excellence in teaching, learning and development for early childhood education. This includes a number of programs currently funded by the Victorian Department of Education which aim to strengthen the sector for all Koorie children in Victoria.

- Balert Gerrbik is a program that focuses on Koorie Families as First Educators (KFFE) and supports Koorie families to provide a strong foundation for their children's early learning and development.
- Bupup Balak Wayipungang (formerly the Koorie Preschool Assistance Program) is designed to improve outcomes from birth through to the transition into schooling. VAEAI works with Wayipungitj workers in local community-based organisations to enhance access and participation for Koorie children in kindergarten programs, and promoting delivery of kindergarten programs that are inclusive of Koorie children.
- School Readiness Funding, which is designed to be a menu of evidence informed programs and supports to strengthen children's learning and development outcomes. This is a key resource available to all kindergartens and long day care services to build capacity and facilitate growth. VAEAI has, and continues to, develop resources and materials including sessions about how to make early childhood education and care services Koorie-inclusive.
- Koorie Kids Shine is a program that ensure Koorie kids have access to a minimum of 15 hours of free kindergarten per week. This program has increased both enrolments and participation of Koorie kids within the ECEC sector, and VAEAI continues to provide advice and support to the Department of Education to ensure cultural relevance and community uptake of the program.

- Aboriginal Languages in Kindergarten is a crucial program that VAEAI participates in alongside Victorian Aboriginal Corporations for Languages (VACL) and the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) to increase the revitalisation of Aboriginal languages within the Marrung Aboriginal Education strategy. VAEAI supports over 20 kindergarten and ELCs to teach an Aboriginal Language.
- Koorie Inclusive Practice Development is a program funded by the National Indigenous Australians Agency to deliver 8 free Professional Development session each year, Train the Trainer in-person sessions, Kindergarten yarning circles and Victorian Aboriginal resource kits.
- Early Childhood Aboriginal Pathway Scholarships are scholarships for Aboriginal people wanting to become early childhood educators or teachers. VAEAI provides advice and support to the Department of Education to assist with community uptake and strategies to continue to attract and retain staff within the sector.
- VAEAI also works closely with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) to contribute to the national voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children within the Commonwealth government.

Through this work, VAEAI understands that the current funding mechanisms that support this vital sector need to be streamlined in order for ACCO ELCs, CFCs and MACS to make the most of the growth opportunities on offer. Among the key barriers to capacity building are reporting requirements that are discrete and siloed. Creating opportunities for centralising reporting will allow centre leaders to focus appropriately on running the educational aspects of their centres. Additionally, reporting requirements need to be reframed to more adequately account for the Aboriginal inclusive practices.

### ***Recommendations***

**Funding:** VAEAI recommends that funding to the Early Years sector from various governmental departments is streamlined to avoid silos developing. Funding that is provided to ACCO ELCs and services in a flexible way that can be distributed at the discretion of the centre will allow services to respond more directly to the needs of their communities. Currently, fragmented funding and funding based on programs limits the ability of services to provide the full benefits of ECEC to Koorie children.

**Specialist Services:** In Victoria, the Department of Education recently introduced a Mental Health and Wellbeing menu that schools have access to which has embedded a range of specialist services within schools. There is clear evidence that early intervention has direct and life-long benefits for all learners and increases their opportunities to pursue their educational aspirations. VAEAI recommends that Productivity Commission investigates opportunities to provide a similar opportunity for the ECEC sector so that Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists and Psychologists can be embedded within services. Where possible providing opportunities for integration with the NDIS will relieve the application burden from parents and caregivers and allow for a streamlined approach to early intervention within ELCs. This will also reduce the workload on educators allowing a more direct focus on the pedagogical aims of the service.

**Professional Development:** VAEAI has heard throughout our community consultation that there is strong demand but limited opportunity for Professional Development within the ECEC sector. By providing funding and time allocations for ACCO ELCs and services to attend professional development will allow services to remain open supporting working families, allow centres to gain

deeper understanding of reforms within the sector, and engage with continuous education to better serve their communities.

**Attracting and retaining staff:** As the Early Years sector has evolved over recent decades, the requirements for professionalisation has also evolved. This has created a gap between the work expectations and salary expectations of staff. It is essential that centres have staff who are well training in providing trauma informed care, are able to nurture children with complex and additional needs and are well-prepared to facilitate relationships between departmental organisations such as child protection and out-of-home care services. VAEAI recommends that the Productivity Commission examines and if needed reassess the award and qualifications standard requirements to ensure that they are commensurate to the contemporary demands of each role within the ECEC sector.

**Transport:** VAEAI has consistently heard that transportation is a barrier to participation and enrolment in the ECEC sector. Many families, struggle with public transportation systems that can be difficult to access or in some cases don't exist. By locating transportation options within ACCO ELCs and services there is an opportunity to increase engagement and participation with services as well as to provide the additional benefit of community building outside the service centre. VAEAI recommends that ACCOs should be funded to provide busing services that encompass all levels of compulsory education from Early Years through to High School so that all Koorie learners will have reliable access to transport.