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Attention: Education and Employment References Committee

Please accept this letter as Children and Young People with Disability Australia's (CYDA) submission to the Inquiry into the State of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) System in Rural, Regional and Remote Communities. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comment on this important work.

About CYDA

CYDA is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability, aged 0–25 years. Our vision is that children and young people with disability fully exercise their rights, realise their aspirations, and thrive in inclusive communities. Our work centres on rights-based advocacy, lived experience, and evidence-informed policy.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Lands on which this submission has been written, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal Land.

Background: Children and young people with disability and ECEC

Children represent a significant and growing proportion of people with disability in Australia. In 2022, around 5.6 per cent of children aged 0-4 years had disability, up from 3.4 per cent in 2015.[1] Younger cohorts were more likely to have high support needs, with many requiring assistance with everyday activities and experiencing multiple types of disability, reflecting the complexity of supports required for this group. For children with disability in the early years, early intervention is therefore crucial for identification and support as they transition into educational settings.

CYDA's work on ECEC

In this submission we draw on our previous work related to ECEC, including:

- CYDA's (2025) Masking is Not Thriving Report: Survey of 1535 Young People with Disability, Families and Caregivers in Relation to Thriving Kids
- CYDA's (2025) Submission on Quality and Safety in Early Childhood Education and Care
- CYDA's (2024) Submission on the Draft Report of the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care
- CYDA's (2023) Submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System
- CYDA's (2025) Submission to the Disability Standards for Education Review
- CYDA's (2025) Submission on Changes to the Disability Standards of Education
- CYDA's (2023) Disappointment and Discrimination Report: Surveys of the Learning Experiences of Children and Young People with Disability
- CYDA's (2023) Response to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

CYDA consistently hears from our community that ECEC must be based on principles of universal design, that are tailored to diverse needs and that give children with disability the best and most equitable start in life. It must be delivered by a workforce with disability affirming and neuro-affirming training and capabilities. Trusted supports, continuity of care, and culturally responsive supports are especially important.

CYDA is supportive of an ECEC system that meets Australia's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,[2] Convention on the Rights of the Child,[3] the final recommendations of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability,[4] the inclusive vision of Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31,[5] the Disability Standards for Education,[6] and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.[7]

General comment

CYDA welcomes the Committee's Inquiry into the State of Australia's ECEC System in Rural, Regional and Remote Communities as an opportunity to discuss the experiences of children with disability in ECEC in rural, regional, and remote communities.

Access and provision of quality ECEC to children with disability based on the principles outlined above meets challenges in rural, regional, and remote

communities with less service availability, internet access, and transport connections, as well as unique intersectional dynamics and a transient workforce.

We anticipate that these challenges may become even more pronounced with the national rollout of the Thriving Kids program, to be delivered by state and territory governments. CYDA is concerned that children 0-8 years are being removed from the NDIS and placed into mainstream settings that may not be fully ready or equipped to deliver inclusive and rights-based supports.

We are also concerned that delivery may not be equitable across locations. Under Thriving Kids, educational and care settings will be expected to deliver disability supports, including ECEC. It is therefore a vitally important time to consider the needs of children with disability in rural, regional, and remote communities.

The following recommendations respond to Terms of Reference (ToR) (a), (b), (d) and (e) of the Inquiry, and are intended to support implementation of ECEC for children with disability in rural, regional, and remote communities. They focus on embedding rights, inclusion, choice, and control in ECEC settings, while putting safeguards in place to identify and address ableism and prevent further inequity.

CYDA's Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1.1 *Ensure consistency in inclusive ECEC for children with disability through strengthened Disability Standards for Education*

Recommendation 1.2 *Address heightened gaps for First Nations children with disability*

Recommendation 2.1 *Train ECEC workforce in disability affirming and neuro-affirming practice using the National Best Practice Framework in Early Childhood Intervention*

Recommendation 2.2 *Create clear inclusive ECEC processes and resources to assist with the provision of disability affirming care, despite the transient nature of the ECEC workforce*

Recommendation 2.3 *Embed continuity of care and trust by strengthening networks with parents, disability and allied health professionals*

Recommendation 3.1 *Ensure regionally-weighted and place-based resourcing of Thriving Kids funding*

Recommendation 3.2 *Provide equity-weighted federal funding to priority cohorts (disability, multicultural, LGBTIQA+, regional/remote), including targeted funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations*

Recommendation 4.1 *Follow the recommendations of First Nations sector leaders such as SNAICC to ensure a First Nations-led response*

CYDA's Recommendations in detail

1. ECEC service gaps

This section responds to Term of Reference (a) the extent and nature of ECEC service gaps across rural, regional, and remote Australia.

Recommendation 1.1 *Ensure consistency in inclusive ECEC for children with disability through strengthened Disability Standards for Education*

CYDA consistently hears that children with disability experience varying levels of support across ECEC services, limiting families' choice and control over where their children can safely and meaningfully participate. As outlined in CYDA's submission to the Disability Standards for Education Review, we recommend strengthening the Standards to incorporate the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) to promote greater consistency in inclusive practices and support across ECEC services. [8]

Incorporating the ISP into the Standards would strengthen accountability and help address geographical inequities in access to inclusive ECEC. The Productivity Commission's 2024 inquiry report highlights significant disparities in ECEC availability, with many regional and remote communities having limited or no local services. Outside school hours care (OSHC) is also less likely to be available in schools outside major cities.[9] Strengthening the Standards, alongside adequate funding for the ISP, would help ensure children with disability can access consistent, inclusive ECEC regardless of where they live.

Recommendation 1.2 *Address heightened gaps for First Nations children with disability*

CYDA's recent survey findings highlight significant disparities in access to services and continuity of support for First Nations children with disability.[10] In particular:

- **Geographical barriers:** Almost half (47 per cent) of First Nations parents and caregivers surveyed lived outside major cities, compared with 22 per cent of all participants. This increases exposure to barriers associated with distance, workforce shortages, and travel costs.
- **Continuity of support:** While continuity of service delivery was a priority for all survey participants, it was particularly critical for First Nations families and those in regional and remote areas, who face greater barriers to accessing consistent, appropriate support.

CYDA recommends that these issues of disparity be urgently addressed through priority funding and First Nations-led initiatives, as we detail in *Recommendations 3.2 and 4.1*.

2. ECEC workforce

This section responds to Term of Reference (b) challenges in attracting, training and retaining a qualified ECEC workforce.

Recommendation 2.1 *Train ECEC workforce in disability affirming and neuro-affirming practice using the National Best Practice Framework in Early Childhood Intervention*

CYDA has consistently called for the need for more disability inclusion training for ECEC staff to be able to implement early identification and support. This is particularly important in rural, regional, and remote communities, where workforce shortages, high staff turnover, and limited access to specialist training and allied health professionals can create additional barriers to inclusion.

The quality and safety of ECEC environments are inseparable from the quality of the workforce. Children with disability rely on consistent, trusting relationships with educators who understand their communication, behaviour, and support needs. In rural, regional, and remote areas, workforce shortages and reliance on casual or less experienced staff can undermine continuity of care, particularly where families have limited alternative ECEC services.

CYDA's survey of student experiences of ECEC showed that when educators lack time, support, or training, they can misinterpret a child's distress or behaviour, leading to exclusionary practices such as time-outs, reduced hours, or early pick-up calls.[11] Conversely, when educators receive training in inclusive practice and behaviour support, outcomes for all children improve.

A national workforce strategy that recognises inclusion as a necessary capability is essential. This includes paid time for educators to plan collaboratively with families and allied health professionals and clear incentives for long-term retention. When staff are supported to build meaningful relationships and confidence, children with disability experience stability and belonging—the foundations of safety and learning.

CYDA recommends that all ECEC staff are trained in disability and neuro-affirming practice, using the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention as an evidence-based tool.

Recommendation 2.2 *Create clear inclusive ECEC processes and resources to assist with the provision of disability affirming care, despite the transient nature of the ECEC workforce*

Building on Recommendation 2.1, CYDA recommends developing clear processes and practical resources, such as guidelines, to support consistent, high-quality, disability-affirming care despite the transient nature of workers in ECEC services. CYDA's existing Disability Standards for Education resources for teachers provide an example of how practical guidance can help educators meet their obligations under the Standards, support the onboarding of new staff, and ensure continuity of

knowledge and inclusive practices. Such resources are particularly important in rural, regional, and remote communities, where workforce shortages, staff turnover and reliance on casual or temporary educators can disrupt continuity of support for children with disability.

Nationally consistent guidelines and resources specifically designed to support the inclusion of children with disability in the ECEC sector would support the onboarding of new staff, strengthen educators' understanding of inclusive practices, and reduce reliance on individual staff members to maintain specific knowledge of support needs. Resources should include practical guidance on reasonable adjustments and accessible communication approaches, as well as clear processes for documenting and transferring information with appropriate consent and privacy safeguards, to help maintain continuity of support during staff transitions.

Recommendation 2.3 *Embed continuity of care and trust by strengthening networks with parents, disability and allied health professionals*

Another way in which ECEC services can increase their disability knowledge and level of support is by deepening their connections with parents, disability and allied health professionals. This would involve leadership by senior management in developing local, place-based relationships that will ultimately benefit the child.

This recommendation further supports *Recommendation 2.1* which calls for a national workforce strategy that includes paid time for collaborative planning with families and allied health professionals. It is informed by best practice and evidence-based recommendations by the Child and Family Disability Alliance in their recent submissions and advocacy.[12]

3. Effectiveness of existing Commonwealth programs and investments

This section responds to Term of Reference (d): the effectiveness of existing Commonwealth programs and investments aimed at improving ECEC access in rural, regional; and remote communities.

Recommendation 3.1 *Ensure regionally-weighted and place-based resourcing of Thriving Kids funding*

CYDA is concerned that inconsistencies in the rollout of Thriving Kids across states and territories risk creating further geographical inequities in access to early childhood supports, particularly in rural, regional, and remote communities.

CYDA's recent Thriving Kids survey highlights the additional barriers faced by families outside metropolitan areas. Of the 274 regional and remote respondents (22 per cent of total respondents), all were parents or caregivers, with 61 per cent supporting a child aged 0–9 years.[13] Key findings included:

- **Limited service availability**: Workforce shortages, long travel distances, and service cancellations create significant barriers to accessing consistent support.
- **Higher costs**: Families face additional out-of-pocket expenses, including travel costs, to access essential services.
- **Need for targeted investment**: Families called for regionally-weighted commissioning, travel loadings, and direct employment of clinicians to strengthen local workforce capacity and continuity of support.

CYDA recommends that Thriving Kids adopt a regionally-weighted, place-based funding approach that reflects local workforce availability, service gaps, and the additional costs of delivering supports in rural, regional, and remote communities. Funding must respond to geographical inequities rather than reinforce them, ensuring children with disability can access timely, appropriate, and consistent support regardless of where they live.

Recommendation 3.2 *Provide equity-weighted federal funding to priority cohorts (disability, multicultural, LGBTIQA+, regional/remote), including targeted funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations*

CYDA recommends that Commonwealth ECEC funding adopt an equity-weighted approach to ensure resources are directed towards children and communities facing the greatest barriers to access and inclusion. This includes children with disability, children from multicultural, LGBTIQA+, and First Nations communities, and those living in rural, regional, and remote areas. Funding models should recognise the additional costs of delivering inclusive ECEC, particularly where children with disability experience intersecting barriers.

CYDA supports the Productivity Commission's 2024 recommendations for significant reform to achieve universal access to ECEC, including meaningful implementation of the proposed ECEC Development Fund.[14] This fund would support expanded service provision through grants, block funding, and low-interest loans, particularly in rural, remote, and underserved communities. CYDA also calls for an expansion of the existing Inclusion Development Fund[15] to better support ECEC services to address complex barriers to inclusion for children with disability.

Importantly, equity-weighted funding must include dedicated investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to strengthen culturally safe, community-led ECEC services. As discussed in the following section, this should be accompanied by greater decision-making authority and control over funding and service delivery for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

4. Challenges that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations face in providing access to ECEC

This section responds to Term of Reference (e): the challenges that Aboriginal community-controlled organisations face in providing access to ECEC services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Recommendation 4.1 *Follow the recommendations of First Nations sector leaders to ensure a First Nations-led response*

CYDA echoes calls from the Front Project in their submission to this Inquiry,[16] to support a First Nations-led response by following the recommendations of First Nations sector leaders such as SNAICC.

SNAICC have called for a unique framework and standards for First Nations early childhood services, developed through joint decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, communities and peaks; and the establishment of a National ECEC Commission in partnership with First Nations peak bodies.

To ensure cultural safety and alignment with Closing the Gap targets, access and referral processes for First Nations children to ECEC services should be co-designed by First Nations communities including Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations.

CYDA also supports self-determination as a First Nations policy priority, as outlined in First People's Disability Network's Cultural Model of Inclusion.[17] First Nations children and young people with disability frequently remain unidentified, unsupported, and untreated during the years when early intervention has the greatest impact. Supports and processes that are culturally safe, accessible, and family-centred play a critical role in addressing underlying drivers of disadvantage, breaking intergenerational trauma, protecting wellbeing, and acting as a protective factor against child removal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make a submission. If you have any questions about CYDA's submission, please contact CYDA's Head of Policy and Research at lizhudson@cyda.org.au.

Yours sincerely

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CEO, Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Endnotes

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2026) Children and Young People with Disability, 2022 findings
[2] United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
[3] United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child
[4] Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023) Final Report
[5] Department of Social Services (2024) Australia's Disability Strategy 2024 Update
[6] Department of Education (2005) Disability Standards for Education
[7] Coalition of Peaks & Australian Governments. (2020). National Agreement on Closing the Gap
[8] CYDA (2025) Submission to the Disability Standards for Education Review
[9] Productivity Commission (2024) A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry Report
[10] CYDA (2025) Masking is Not Thriving Report
[11] CYDA (2023) Surveys of the Learning Experiences of Children and Young People with Disability
[12] CAFDA (2026) Submission to the NDIS Access Changes Consultation; CYDA (2026) Submission to the NDIS New Framework Planning and Support Rules consultation endorsed by CAFDA; CAFDA (2025) Federal Election Platform
[13] CYDA (2025) Masking is Not Thriving Report
[14] Productivity Commission (2024) A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry Report
[15] Inclusion Support Program updated guidelines (2025) The Inclusion Development Fund
[16] The Front Project (2026), Submission #53, Submissions received by the Committee
[17] First Peoples Disability Network (2018) FPDN Landmark Report: Culture is Inclusion.