

FACT SHEET

Improving support for children with disability

THE ISSUE

The Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) framework in Australia is underpinned by the objective that all children have access to high quality early childhood education that meets their particular needs. ECEC service providers, teachers and educators rely on adequate support to ensure that each child receives equitable access to the support they need in each setting.

The current Inclusion Support Program (ISP) was implemented in 2016 to build on the previous program in place and build on the sector's capacity to provide the best of tailored care for the benefit of all children.

Five years after its initial implementation, we believe the current ISP needs **urgent improvements** to ensure that it meets the needs of children and the sector more broadly. Importantly, ACA believes that the ISP should be **demand driven** rather than a capped allocation.

A review of the ISP would provide the opportunity to re-imagine the support available for both individual children in specific settings as well as provide streamlined, place-based solutions that improve outcomes for our most vulnerable communities as defined by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

In particular, the current limits of 5 hours a day/25 hours a week, during which an additional educator is funded to support the child, means that the child will only receive that tailored support for a certain portion of the day. Beyond those hours, the child is expected to fit in with the usual adult to child ratio settings, which generally isn't sufficient support to meet their specific needs.

This has resulted in significant limitations on the child's capacity to participate at their early learning service, as well as undermining their parents' confidence that their child will be adequately supported whilst in the care of their service. This also limits the parent's capacity to participate in the workforce, as parents have serious concerns about whether their child's needs can be met outside of the additionally funded hours.

ACA therefore recommends increasing the maximum number of hours for additional educator support to match the child's actual hours of attendance.

Meanwhile our vast experience with the ISP has drawn out a unified observation that it is mired in an unnecessary burden of excessive administration. This plays out in a number of ways including the need for an annual Strategic Inclusion Plan (SIP) which could be more efficiently part of a services Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) as part of the National Quality Standards (NQS).

Furthermore, we recommend that funding applications are separated from the implementation of the inclusion principles that are currently required. This would not only reduce the administration for ECEC services but free up Inclusion Agency resources to work more directly with teachers and educators to improve inclusive practice.

The Inclusion Portal has long been a difficult piece of technology to navigate and requires a significant overhaul to reduce the administrative burden for services and support any changes to the ISP.

Additionally, it is clear that program funding has not kept up with the demand. Specifically the hourly funding rate has not increased since 2016. The current figure does not adequately cover the hourly rate of the additional educator as well as any oncosts.

Moreover, the total pool of funding available has not kept up with the ever-increasing participation rates in ECEC across the country and the impacts of COVID-19 on children from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds in Australia.

The need for additional funding also extends to the Inclusion Agencies responsible for administering the system, which are struggling to deal with an excessive backlog of applications.

A NEW FUTURE FOR OUR MOST VULNERABLE FAMILIES

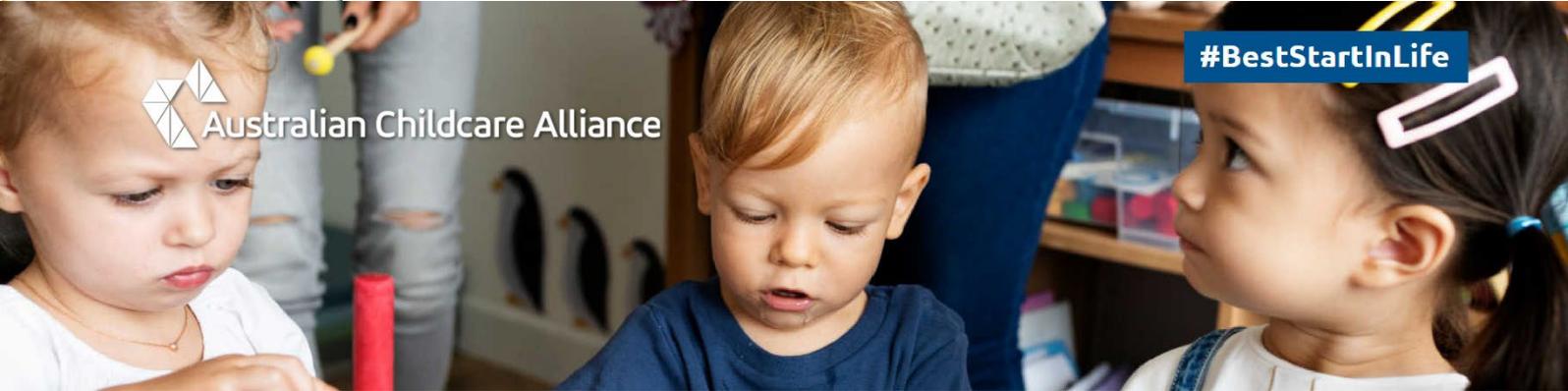
The benefits of high-quality ECEC, particularly for children from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds, are well recognised locally and globally across the education sector, in terms of on improving outcomes for children with regards to school readiness and reducing the number of children who start school developmentally vulnerable.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has clearly identified those communities where disadvantage is more significant, allowing for an easily targeted response.

ACA therefore recommends a system which targets the most vulnerable families, as defined by the AEDC, by assigning additional funding for these identified areas, to employ an additional educator for five hours a day.

The service provider would need to reconcile this funding and provide evidence that it is being used above ratio requirements. This additional educator may hold an ECEC, teaching or allied health qualification as it would be above ratio requirements. The service provider may also wish to focus on educators who understands the cultural context of the children at a specific setting.

We believe now is ideal time to reimagine this very important funding stream to ensure that **every child in Australia** has access to high quality, affordable and sustainable early learning services, and therefore the best start in life.



SOLUTIONS

Employer-focused

We call on all political parties to support our **most vulnerable families** by:

- Conducting a thorough root and branch review of the Inclusion Support Program (ISP).

This should be led by the Australian Government in close consultation with the sector and families. This review must begin before the federal election.

This review must include the following objectives:

- Ensure that the ISP is demand driven to ensure that the benefits of the program are delivered to as many children as eligible.
- Allocate funding for additional educator requirements for children who qualify for Inclusion Support to ensure that the needs of all children are met.
- Increase the maximum number of hours for additional educator support to match the child's hours of attendance.
- Increase the funding rate for additional educators to ensure it adequately covers the hourly rate and on costs for providers and matches the hours attended by children.
- Reduce the need for annual Strategic Inclusion Plans for the service
- Review the administrative processes in place to apply for Inclusion Support funding to ensure they are not overly burdensome.
- Allocate funding for additional educators according to AEDC vulnerability measures.
- Separate the application of funding from implementing inclusion principles in order to:
 - streamline the application process for additional educator funding to remove the excessive administrative burden for both the service provider and inclusion agencies; and
 - allow inclusion agencies to engage with services to promote more inclusive practices, outside of the process of separate funding applications.
- Increase funding of Inclusion agencies to ensure that they are adequately funded to build capacity of the sector's inclusive practices and to meet the needs of the ever-increasing participation rate of children in ECEC in Australia.
- Develop a new Inclusion Portal whose technology architecture is fit for purpose and reduces administrative burden.
- Consider place-based solutions for communities with high support needs or experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage as determined by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

With over **360,000 families** in our care, ACA believes all of Australia's children have the right to the **best start in life**