

5. Closing the gap for rural children

Despite the fact that early childhood is the period of greatest brain development with profound long-term influences, too many rural and regional children lack access to quality early childhood education and care.

A range of barriers must be addressed to ensure high quality ECEC provision is available in rural and remote areas. Access to timely and quality early childhood education and care is a vital part of the solution to solving the widening gap in education, health and life outcomes between city and country.

Lifting quality is key

Lifting the quality of rural and regional services is a key consideration. Lower quality services are more prevalent in disadvantaged and rural and remote communities. More services in rural and remote Australia are assessed as Working Towards the National Quality Standards, and less are rated as Exceeding the standards ([ACECQA](#)).

This gap in quality contributes to the higher level of developmental vulnerability children experience in their first year of school. Whilst around one in five students in major cities starts school developmentally vulnerable, around one in four children are developmentally vulnerable in outer regional areas and nearly one in two in very remote areas ([AEDC](#)). This early gap increases throughout a child's schooling to the point where children in remote communities attend far less school on average than children in cities.

Workforce issues must be addressed

To provide greater access to quality early childhood education and care in rural and regional areas requires the building of a strong rural and regional ECEC workforce. Workforce shortages become more acute the further away from cities that communities are located, with providers in

regional and remote areas facing significant barriers to attracting and retaining staff.

Staffing waivers have been relied upon to ensure service delivery in some remote areas ([ACECQA](#)). A regional and remote workforce development strategy is required to focus on how to recruit and retain educators in rural and remote Australia, including in high-cost centres. This should include trialling models of engaging and skilling up the local community to fill staffing shortages.

Solutions are needed to improve and increase access to professional development

In the past, physical access to ongoing professional learning and development has been a key challenge to ECEC providers in rural and remote areas. To attend in-person training often required travelling for several days, also creating a staff shortage which could be difficult to backfill.

CELA's transition to providing professional development and training online via webinar could become of significant benefit to educators in rural and remote communities, but more is still needed in order to improve infrastructure to ensure all services can access remotely delivered training, and in person training where optimal, including financial support to offset the cost of training.

Modes of service delivery should be fit for purpose

Different models of service delivery may better meet the needs of rural communities such as mobile service delivery enabling children in remote locations to access early childhood education. Playgroups and early education embedded in schools may support children in remote locations to access services otherwise unviable, for example in communities cut off from road access, during wet season extremes.

CELA is committed to closing the gap for rural children

CELA is actively pursuing opportunities to develop innovative models to meet the needs of our rural and regional service providers and advocating for policy to support access and service viability.

Closing the gap for rural children in brief

Key facts

- ▶ Developmental vulnerability increases as you move from city centres – ¼ in outer regional, ½ in very remote areas. This gap continues at age of school entry continues and magnifies the gap.
- ▶ More services are working towards the NQS, 1 in 5 in remote Australia, 1 in 3 in very remote Australia.
- ▶ Finding and retaining skilled staff is more difficult in rural and remote areas. Around 1 in 7 services in very remote Australia have a staffing waiver, and 1 in 10 in outer regional Australia.
- ▶ Children have higher unidentified special needs due to inability to access allied health professionals without lengthy waiting lists.

What changes are we seeking?

- ▶ Support services with appropriate funding models to attract and retain a skilled workforce in regional and remote areas.
- ▶ Targeted professional learning for regional and remote areas.
- ▶ Consideration of viable management models in regional and remote services.
- ▶ Utilise remote learning and telehealth to bridge service access gaps.

Actions we are taking

- ▶ Develop/pilot workforce model.
- ▶ Ensure issues and potential solutions considered in ACECQA workforce review.
- ▶ Ensure that regional issues are represented at NSW Advisory Panel meetings and with State and Federal ministerial representation.
- ▶ Providing affordable and accessible professional development for regional educators.
- ▶ We regularly make proactive calls to our regional members to offer support and discussion about their unique challenges and issues.
- ▶ CELA team understand the key issues faced by regionally based services and are able to work with them to design training, specialised support and resources that truly meet their needs.
- ▶ Utilise our expertise to prepare submissions for regional services, drawing on a wide range of evidence-based research, localised knowledge and understanding to represent community needs.

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- ▶ Ensure regional representation on the Peer Network Champion program so as specific needs are considered in design and delivery of the Network.

What would progress look like?

- ▶ Development of wrap-around models to skill up local community members, including providing financial and academic support, and assistance to engage in work placements.
- ▶ New ACECQA workforce strategy including initiatives on rural and regional Australia.
- ▶ Robust engagement of rural and regional educators in dedicated online training.
- ▶ Improved AEDC outcomes in regional areas.
- ▶ Improved quality in regional areas.
- ▶ Access to allied health professionals at a level of regularity which is effective and meaningful in the life of a child.