



**Aboriginal Peak  
Organisations**  
NORTHERN TERRITORY

**APO NT Submission**

**July 2023**

**NT PRESCHOOL REVIEW  
DISCUSSION PAPER**

APO NT would like to thank the Department of Education (DoE) for providing the opportunity for feedback on the 2023 NT Preschool Review 2023 - Discussion Paper. We acknowledge the recent commitment to resource an independent Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> voice on education through the establishment of the NT Independent Aboriginal Education Peak Body work with APO NT.

APO NT would also like to acknowledge its member, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT<sup>2</sup>) who have been a leader in progressing the sectors understanding of the vital role that Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCOs) play in supporting quality outcomes for children and young people. Furthermore, drawing our attention to the opportunities for collaboration between ACCOs and with mainstream education in the NT. Our acknowledgement extends to AMSANT members; Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (CAAC), Danila Dilba Health Service<sup>3</sup>, and the Wirli Wirlinjang Health Service<sup>4</sup> for their leadership in health and education.

#### **CALL TO ACTION**

Northern Territory Government, Department of Education work in partnership with Aboriginal families and community-controlled organisations to lead the way to develop and implement first class, culturally responsive early childhood programs that support Aboriginal children to thrive.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Key principles reflected in this review and recommendations to include – family centred approaches and equity of outcomes.
2. All preschools should prioritise investment in the local Aboriginal workforce at all levels.
3. CAAC preschool readiness program, and other Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations programs be considered in the revised approach delivering preschool in the NT.
4. Full evaluation of the transition from pre-school to school, inviting education experts and community members input into a new framework to support this transition.
5. The barriers to education be addressed as a matter of urgency.
6. Bi-lingual play and education be fully implemented in preschools and early childhood programs across the NT.
7. Preschool be delivered to all Aboriginal children from aged 3 for a minimum of 20 hours per week.
8. Preschools and early years centres work in partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled family support services.
9. Where relevant and desired by the community, Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations be given the opportunity and resourcing to have early childhood programs transitioned to their organisations.

<sup>1</sup> The term Aboriginal is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples residing in the NT.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amsant.org.au/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ddhs.org.au/services/anfpp-parenting-support>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.wurli.org.au/ww-family-partnership-program/>

## Introduction

APO NT is an alliance of Aboriginal organisations working to promote and protect the rights of Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory (NT). The APO NT alliance comprises the Central Land Council (CLC), Northern Land Council (NLC), Tiwi Land Council (TLC), Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA), Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network (NTIBN), Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory (AHNT) and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT). The member organisations of APO NT are united in their commitment to improving conditions for Aboriginal people across broad political, economic, social, and cultural areas. Since APO NT's establishment in 2010, our members have been working to develop proactive and constructive policies on critical issues facing Aboriginal people in the NT and strive to influence the work of the Australian and NT Governments.

Underlining our collective work is the right to self-determination, which is detailed and expressed in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People. The primacy of this cannot be understated. As representatives from peak Aboriginal organisations in the NT, we share the aim of protecting and advancing the wellbeing and rights of Aboriginal people and communities in several key areas. Local involvement, ownership and control underpins APO NT's work in advocating for practical and sustainable solutions for Aboriginal people. These are then predicated on policy conditions that support Aboriginal self-determination, including commitments to needs-based funding, building the community-controlled sector and centring Aboriginal decisions in how national strategies are implemented on the ground.

## APO NT's submission

We state the need for there to be a human rights approach to education. We reaffirm the statement by our member CAAC that:

*"Any policy or program aimed at addressing the educational needs of Aboriginal children, young people and adults must explicitly recognise the right to self-determination under international agreements"<sup>5</sup>.*

Reviews such as the NT Preschool Review, and any recommendations from this, need to be grounded in the principles and articles set out in relevant international human rights conventions and declarations. For your reference, the UN instruments that include self-determination and education, relevant to indigenous peoples across the world are listed below<sup>6</sup>:

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- The convention on the Rights of Peoples with Disabilities
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Declaration on the Rights of People belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic minorities.
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE)

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<sup>5</sup> CAAC Submission to the NT Department of Education's Education Engagement Strategy: Discussion Paper July 2021 <https://www.caac.org.au/advocacy/policy-submissions-publications/>

<sup>6</sup> UN Human Rights Instruments listings <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-listings>

Whilst the review references the NT 10-year Generational Strategy<sup>7</sup>, it needs to align more fully with the following strategies and initiatives:

- National Closing the Gap Implementation Plan and key priority reforms<sup>8</sup>
- NT Closing the Gap Implementation Plan<sup>9</sup>

It also needs to reflect the Australian Government's responsibility and commitment to 'implement national policy re: equality of opportunity and treatment in education'<sup>10</sup> with a focus on equity of outcomes. In direct response to the questions posed in the discussion paper, you will find below several statements and recommendations for your consideration.

### **Section 1.1**

#### **How can preschool contribute to a contemporary early childhood system in the NT?**

The DoE have such a unique opportunity to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities to reform and lead early childhood programs; creating culturally safe, bi-lingual educational spaces where children can thrive. Whilst educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in the NT are the worst in the country, poor outcomes are not inevitable.<sup>11</sup> This trajectory is avoidable for many children. Culturally responsive, evidence-informed programs are essential to contemporising the early childhood system in the NT, to address the substantial inequities re: access to quality early childhood education. By adopting the above recommendations and call to action, DoE will be able to deliver high quality, contemporary early childhood education systems in the NT.

### **Section 2.3**

#### **What are the biggest barriers for children and families to participate in preschool in the NT?**

One of the biggest barriers that has been identified through APO NT engagements 2022-2023, highlights non-Aboriginal educators' low expectations of Aboriginal students and their families. Another significant barrier is a lack of investment in the Aboriginal education workforce. APO NT consistently hear that staff do not feel valued, they lack training and other professional development opportunities, with no clear career pathway considered within education. Aboriginal Educators matter! They are essential to the quality of education, and educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. There is clear evidence from longitudinal studies that demonstrate, when 'black students have black educators', they are more likely to graduate and enrol at university.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dss.gov.au/families-and-children/programs-services/children/northern-territory-reform>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/commonwealth-closing-gap-implementation-plan-2023>

<sup>9</sup> [https://aboriginalaffairs.nt.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/1039814/closing-the-gap-implementation-plan-web.pdf](https://aboriginalaffairs.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1039814/closing-the-gap-implementation-plan-web.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Convention against discrimination in Education 1960 (CADE) Article 4

<sup>11</sup> A child health and early childhood core services model for the NT developed from the 2-day cross sector workshop 2016 titled "What are the Key Core Services Needed to Improve Aboriginal Childhood Outcomes in the NT? Progress and Possibilities".

<sup>12</sup> 2018 Teachers Expectations Matter [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w25255/25255.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25255/25255.pdf)

APO NT also suggests the review panel consider the recent CAAC Submission, NT DoE Education Engagement Strategy, July 2021<sup>13</sup>, which identifies key barriers that require addressing:

- Transport to and from school
- Lack of cultural responsiveness and cultural safety
- Schools lack of resourcing to support developmentally vulnerable children and their families.
- Lack of investment in bi-lingual play and education
- Low adult literacy levels
- Staff turnover, lack of investment in local workforce

### Section 3.1

- **How can preschool be improved to better meet the needs of children, families, and communities?**
- **How can preschool be delivered in culturally relevant ways?**
- **How can preschool be more locally responsive and integrated with other services?**

As outlined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, *‘Indigenous peoples have the right to determine, design, deliver and access education in their own language and own culture’*<sup>14</sup>. There needs to be recognition that *“Formal education was often seen as a way to assimilate Indigenous populations, separating children from their families, their cultures, practices and languages”*<sup>15</sup>.

The significantly low percentage of Aboriginal Children assessed as developmentally ready to enter school is an area for immediate remedy. It is unacceptable that only 16.4% of Aboriginal children are deemed developmentally on track to start to school, particularly given that 74.9% of these children were enrolled in pre-school<sup>16</sup>.

It is assumed that children are not ready for school but rather, as APO NT asserts, it is schools that are not ready for children. It is important that early childhood system reform, results in safer places for children and families, and not places of cultural assimilation. APO NT agrees with the sentiments of this review; you cannot separate early childhood care and early education. Therefore, it is important to consider the continuity and transitions between these. A culturally responsive system that meets the needs of children, families, and communities will have the following imbedded:

- Investment in the local Aboriginal workforce within all levels of preschool.
- Investment in local decision making re: governance and delivery of preschool.
- Commitment to bi-lingual play, learning and education.
- Planned transition of services such as childcare and school readiness programs to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO’s).

There are current examples of programs that are effective. These include the CAAC pre-school readiness program, and the Australian Nurse Family Partnership program (AFNPP) that has been adapted by Danila Dilba Health Service in the Greater Darwin area, Wirli Wirlinjang Health Service,

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<sup>13</sup> CAAC Submission to the NT Department of Education’s Education Engagement Strategy: Discussion Paper July 2021 <https://www.caac.org.au/advocacy/policy-submissions-publications/>

<sup>14</sup> UNDRIP <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>

<sup>15</sup> UNESCO United National Educational Forum 2016

<sup>16</sup> 2021 data from closing the gap data dashboard <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard>

CAAC and delivered in Central Australia,<sup>17</sup> reflecting culturally relevant, locally responsive, integrated family support and health services. These models are best practise and should be acknowledged as such.

As referenced in the review, APO NT agrees in principle that preschools are an important place where partnerships can be formed to provide collaboration between early years providers and family supports, becoming early childhood hubs. However, this is only endorsed where a trauma informed approach and practice is embedded in program delivery. There must be safeguards set up in negotiation with the community to ensure policies and practices provide safety for children and families. This is to avoid retraumatising approaches such as removal of children.

### Section 3.2

- **What is the right age for children to start preschool? Expanding access to early learning through preschool.**
- **Do parents want to attend preschool with their child?**
- **If yes, under what circumstances are they more likely to want to attend?**

APO NT endorses the recommendation by the AMSANTs submission to the 2023 NT Preschool Review, that preschool should be available to all Aboriginal children from aged 3 for a minimum of 20 hours a week, with the optimal access being 30 hours.

APO NT members advocate for families to have choice. Despite deficit narratives, families want to be engaged with their children's learning. Thus, the centres set up to enable this, must also have a focus on adult learning to empower Aboriginal people to participate and take control of intergenerational practices.<sup>18</sup>

Education institutions must be set up in ways where families feel safe and connected to these centres. It is essential that there is a sense of ownership and decision making, to ensure the NTG meet their human right obligations regarding self-determination. It is important that any Aboriginal child is seen within the context of their family, and their community. Without family support and input into children's education and learning, regardless of the approach, the benefits will only reach so far.

Report written by Christine Williamson, Senior Project Officer

Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT

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<sup>17</sup> A child health and early childhood core services model for the NT developed from the 2-day cross sector workshop 2016 titled "*What are the Key Core Services Needed to Improve Aboriginal Childhood Outcomes in the NT? Progress and Possibilities*" pg. 20-21.

<sup>18</sup> CAAC Submission to the NT Department of Educations' Education Engagement Strategy: Discussion Paper 2021. <https://www.caac.org.au/advocacy/policy-submissions-publications/>