

Show us the money ^[1]

Rattler 116 Summer 2015–2016

Author: Howard, Camille & Bryant, Lisa

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Introduction

In 2008, every state and territory government and the Australian government acknowledged: “many Indigenous families miss out on early childhood services even though they stand to benefit most”.

In recognition of this, they agreed to jointly work together to “improve the early childhood outcomes of Indigenous children by addressing the high levels of disadvantage they currently experience to give them the best start in life”.

Seven years later, it is clear that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in NSW are still missing out, despite, or perhaps because of, the multitude of overlapping and everchanging state and federal government programs that exist to provide early education and care.

The question needs to be asked: if as a country we have acknowledged the importance of early education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, why on earth are we providing it in such a way that children and families miss out, access depends on location, services struggle to remain afloat, and so much of the provision is based on haphazard funding that is based on flawed understandings?

A summary of the programs that exist or are about to start shows the problem:

- Budget Based Funded (BBF) services, including Multifunctional Aboriginal Children’s Services (MACS)
- Aboriginal Child and Family Centres
- services funded under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS)
- preschools that receive equity funding for Aboriginal children
- proposed integrated services to be delivered as part of (billionaire) Andrew Forrest’s Creating Parity review.

Some of these programs are funded for one year, some for three. Some are about to have their funding chopped and changed so much that they are scared about their service’s viability.

It’s a “very crappy” system, says Eva Cox, and one that rather than close the gap will likely see more children fall through the cracks. Instead of concentrating on service provision for families, and delivering quality education to vulnerable children, services end up spending valuable time just trying to access funding to stay operational.

“Trying to negotiate your way, if you’re running a service, between a whole lot of different funding formulas takes up an enormous amount of time and energy, and if you’re a communitybased service, you don’t have the staff to do those things. You end up getting a bit from here, a bit from there and a bit from somewhere else.”

Ms Cox also takes issue with the federal government’s plan for Aboriginal services, such as MACS, to transition to a mainstream funding model—whereby services are funded through the proposed new Child Care Subsidy and families’ fees—in a bid to make services self-sustaining. The objective is to have Aboriginal services operate under the same market model as other services, despite the fact that the very nature of the community hubs established in Aboriginal communities exist in ‘markets’ that are unlikely to become viable.

“The government also has this idea that if you’re a service needing support you should be able to work your way out of it within two to three years,” Ms Cox says. “We know that if you’re going to run a service which is very closely connected with the community, has the capacity to offer additional support services and so on, you’re much better with a direct funding model than trying to win your way through a model that was essentially set up for working parents.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]

aboriginal ^[5]

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