

Indigenous Closing the Gap goals 'back a generation'^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Changes to childcare funding could set Australia's Closing the Gap goals back a generation by making it more difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to access appropriate services, the peak body representing Indigenous childcare has said.

Early childhood education was reintroduced as a formal Closing the Gap target in December, almost three years after the initial target of getting 95% of Indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in some form of preschool lapsed unmet.

On Wednesday the 2016 Closing the Gap report set out the new goal of getting 95% of all Indigenous four-year-olds, not just those in remote communities, enrolled in preschool by 2025.

But the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) says the user-pays funding model proposed under the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2015 would threaten the viability of Aboriginal-run child and family service centres, halve the number of subsidised childcare hours available to low-income families that don't meet a new "activity test" requirement, and further disadvantage Aboriginal children.

The legislation is currently before a Senate committee, with public hearings to start in March.

SNAICC deputy chief executive officer, Emma Sydenham, said the decision to scrap the Budget Based Fund, a top-up for those services that couldn't cover their costs with fees or individual child subsidies, 80% of which were Indigenous, may force centres to close.

"Their focus is only on the needs of particularly vulnerable children and families in their communities," Sydenham told Guardian Australia. "Their focus is not on how to meet the bureaucratic needs of these policies."

Sydenham said the changes do not account for the complex needs of Indigenous families, including high rates of children with child protection orders. In areas such as Alice Springs, as many as 85% of all kids enrolled in childcare are under some form of child protection order.

"Often if kids are in out-of-home care, the Aboriginal child and family service is the only genuine cultural contact that they have," she said.

Sydenham said Aboriginal-run child and family centres supported the whole community.

"Now is a really pivotal moment to ask whether we are really going to embed this progress or whether we are going to put progress back a generation."

The education minister, Simon Birmingham, said Indigenous children would be "better supported and provided for" under the new system.

"Budget-based funding is clearly not working in a fair or transparent way when the current system offers some childcare centres \$35 per child in support and others get \$54,000 per child," Birmingham said.

The proposed childcare funding model arose out of a Productivity Commission report in 2015 and the \$40bn package was announced as a centrepiece of the 2015-2016 federal budget.

That Productivity Commission report said that only 70% of Indigenous children attended some form of preschool the year before starting primary school in 2013, compared with more than 90% of the broader population, and estimated that closing that gap would require a further 15,000 early childhood education places.

Under the new policy, families on less than \$65,000 a year are only eligible for 24 hours a fortnight of subsidised care – half the previous entitlement – unless they meet the activity test. The current system gives parents who participate in work-related activities for at least 15 hours a week access to 50 hours of subsidised care per fortnight. To get that level of care under the new model, parents have to do more than 24 hours of activity a week.

SNAICC deputy chairperson, Geraldine Atkinson, a Bangarang/Wiradjuri woman and president of the Victorian Aboriginal Education

Association, said early childhood education was even more necessary in those families who may not meet the new requirements.

“While reducing early childhood service access for vulnerable families is an adverse outcome in itself, Indigenous services are particularly impacted given the high proportion of vulnerable children and families they serve,” Atkinson said. “A focus on change in the early years is fundamental to closing the gap.”

In August, then social services minister Scott Morrison said the \$274m Community Child Care Fund “safety net” would be available to Indigenous services previously funded under the Budget Bonus Fund.

The safety net also includes packages of between six and 13 weeks of increased childcare support for families that self-identify as being at “serious risk”, an option Sydenham said many families would not take because of the stigma or fear that child protection would get involved.

A spokesman for Birmingham told Guardian Australia on Monday that access to the Community Child Care Fund would be decided on “what will provide the best outcomes for vulnerable Australian children”.

-reprinted from The Guardian

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