

MEDIA RELEASE

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Preschool target met, but worsening child protection and youth justice outcomes sound alarm

The latest Closing the Gap data paints a mixed picture for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, celebrating a major milestone in preschool enrolment while highlighting worsening outcomes in child protection and youth justice.

The Productivity Commission's annual update of data for Closing the Gap targets reveals Target 3 on preschool enrolment has been met, while other targets on developmental readiness for school, out-of-home-care (OOHC) and youth detention are worsening or stalling.

Catherine Liddle, CEO of SNAICC – National Voice for our Children said this year's Closing the Gap data tells two very different stories.

“It shows what's possible when governments invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children early but it also shows the devastating cost of failing to carry that investment in developmental outcomes, school readiness and through the rest of childhood,” Ms Liddle said.

“Meeting the Closing the Gap preschool enrolment target is a milestone worth celebrating and is further indication that when early education becomes more accessible, our families eagerly take it up.

“However, enrolment rates are only part of the picture when it comes to accessibility and suitability of early education for our children and families.

Targets around developmental readiness for school are worsening, which indicates that enrolment does not inherently lead to improved outcomes without a focus on quality, continuity and cultural safety.

“Participation must now translate into better outcomes.

“Governments have a huge opportunity to get things right for our children in the early years if they double down on investing in the services that Aboriginal families and communities are asking for.

“However, one success cannot mask the reality that too many of our children are still entering out-of-home care and too many young people are still being caught up in the justice system.”

Ms Liddle said worsening targets around rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and youth justice systems should be setting off red flags for federal, State and Territory Governments.

“The worsening out-of-home care outcomes reinforce what the sector has been saying for years - we cannot remove our way to better outcomes for children,” Ms Liddle said.

“We need greater investment in Aboriginal community-controlled early intervention and family support services that keep children safe at home, connected to kin, culture and community.

“Similarly, a lack of meaningful progress on youth detention tells us we're still investing too late.

“The preschool enrolment target shows governments can shift the dial when they invest in the right places.

“The lack of progress on OOHC and youth detention should act as a reminder that the same ambition is now needed further along a child's journey, with sustained investment in prevention, early supports and Aboriginal-led solutions.

“This report is both a proof point and a warning. When governments partner with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, children thrive. When they don't, the consequences are written across the targets that continue to stall and worsen and felt every day in the lives of our children and families.”

END

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