



YWCA CANBERRA

**Submission to the 2020 Review of the Disability Standards
for Education (2005)**

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Acknowledgement of Country

YWCA Canberra proudly recognises the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to own and control their cultures and pays our respect to these rights. YWCA Canberra acknowledges the need to respect and encourage the diversity of Indigenous cultures and to respect Indigenous worldviews, lifestyles and customary laws. We extend our respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and will continue to always be Aboriginal land.

About YWCA Canberra

YWCA Canberra is a feminist not-for-profit organisation that has provided community services and represented women's issues in Canberra since 1929.

Our mission is 'We strengthen communities by supporting girls and women through our services and advocacy' and our vision is 'Girls and women thriving'.

We provide essential, quality services for women, girls and families in the ACT and surrounding regions. We work in the areas of children's services, community development, homelessness and affordable housing, youth services, personal and professional training, women's leadership and advocacy.

We are externally accredited against the [Quality Improvement Council \(QIC\) Health and Community Service Standards \(7th Edition\)](#). Accreditation against the QIC standards support us to improve client and community engagement, diversity and cultural appropriateness, management systems, governance and service delivery, while committing to a cycle of continuous quality improvement. In addition to the QIC standards, we are accredited against the following external client related service standards for our key areas of work:

- [Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission](#)
- [National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Aged Care](#)
- [National Regulatory System for Community Housing](#)
- [Registered Training Organisations Standards](#)

We also benchmark our work in homelessness and affordable housing against the Community Housing Standards. Through our national Affiliate Association with YWCA Australia, we are part of the World YWCA network, which connects 120 countries across the globe.

As a member of Children's First Alliance, YWCA Canberra also supports their submission to this Committee.

Introduction

YWCA Canberra welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback into the *2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education (2005)* (hereafter referred to as ‘the standards’). We are committed to improving the experiences of children with disabilities and their parents and carers who access our services. As local providers of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), School Aged Care (SAC), vacation care and Family Day Care we provide services to more than 2000 children each week. YWCA Canberra currently provides services to 76 children who have been assessed as having additional or high needs. All 76 children are enrolled through our School Aged Care (SAC) services.

In the past, we have proactively sought opportunities to provide feedback to the Commission for Children and Young People regarding the wellbeing of children with disability in early learning settings. Despite growing numbers of children with special needs attending mainstream schools and outside school care settings, very little has improved for children, families and providers. Without policy commitment and improved funding and administrative support available through the Australian Government’s Inclusion Support Program, progress to accommodate the needs of children with special needs and meaningfully improve outcomes for children with disabilities and their families will be limited.

This submission presents YWCA Canberra’s reflections on how the standards do not apply to early learning centres and how this affects both the representation of children with disabilities in early learning and parental expectations into the future. We also use anonymised case studies to illustrate how the standards operate on-the-ground in the School Aged Care setting. The submission concludes by referencing how reporting requirements for additional funding support and the recent cessation of site assessments by the Australian Government’s Inclusion Support Program has consequences for both children, parents and carers as well as the capacity of service providers to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities and the needs of their non-disabled peers.

Early Learning Centres

Case Study 1

The parents of a wheelchair bound child with high needs, aged 8 years sought to enrol them in one of our early learning centres. The centre was a stand-alone building constructed in the 1990s. The child's needs assessment meant they required assistance with all activities of daily living, including nappy changing. Given the child's age, physical lifting and use of toddler change tables was not possible. Further, inaccessibility of the nappy changing space meant manoeuvring a wheelchair was not possible. Options available to staff to change the child in the event of a soiled nappy were limited. The centre contacted the then provider of the Inclusion Support Program to seek support to rent or locate equipment such as hoists or change tables that could accommodate a child of this age with high needs. Despite an overwhelming need, support was not readily available, and the centre was unable to accommodate the child.

There is overwhelming evidence supporting the value of early childhood education on the wellbeing and development of children and on longer term economic outcomes.¹ Despite this, the individual and community benefits of early learning are not evenly distributed and attendance of children with disabilities in early learning centres is not commensurate with their representation in the broader population. This discrepancy is observed at both the national and state level.² In the ACT, 8.2 per cent of children aged 0-5 years in the community population have a disability, however their representation in

early learning centres has been recorded at 2.7 per cent.³

The number of early learning centres in Australia has grown by 15.4 per cent nationally⁴ and in the ACT, the number of children aged under four attending formal early learning centres increased by roughly 1100 children in the three years between 2014 and 2017.⁵ The momentum to meet service demand has seen sustained construction in the supply of new

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *The power and the promise of early learning* Working paper 186, <http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP%20%282018%2922&docLanguage=En> (p. 31).

² Productivity Commission 2019 Report on Government Services (2020) *Early Childhood Education and Care* <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

³ Ibid, table 3A.12

⁴ Bankwest (2019) *Future of business: focus on childcare* <https://www.bankwest.com.au/content/dam/bankwest/documents/business/insights/focus-on-childcare-report-2019.pdf>

⁵ ABS Childhood Education and Care June 2014 and 2017 Catalogue number 4402.0 <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/4402.0?OpenDocument>

centres. Despite the sector's expansion and the strong societal emphasis on inclusion, there has not been a coordinated effort to incorporate structural adjustments into new site developments that may accommodate children with disabilities.

While the standards apply to educational settings, including preschools and kindergartens, they do not currently apply to early learning centres. This is an arbitrary distinction and one that means children with disabilities, and their parents or carers, are often excluded from broader social participation at their earliest years. Exclusion at such an early age is particularly detrimental as it can become normative and repeated in different settings into the future. That the standards do not apply to early learning centres explains to some degree the underrepresentation of children with disabilities in services; parents, tired of centres not able to accommodate their child's needs or being turned away at the point of disclosure, simply stop looking to enrol their children into early learning.

YWCA Canberra provides early childhood services to children from as young as 6 weeks of age. Due to the age of children in early learning services and the variation children display in achieving key development milestones, some disabilities or delays may only become apparent to educators after enrolment. In some cases, it may be an early educator who first alerts a parent or carer to the possibility of a developmental delay or disability. In these cases, the role of the early learning centre and staff is crucial in being able to sensitively communicate with parents and respond appropriately following qualified assessment of the child.

Given this reality, the exclusion of early learning centres from the standards has the potential to disenfranchise children, parents and carers and eventually staff who may struggle to accommodate a child in a setting where the disability standards do not apply. It has also been noted that parental denial about a development delay remains a significant challenge for early learning educators across settings.⁶ Our services have also seen how fear of discrimination affects how parents make casual bookings for care, such as vacation care, where parents may not disclose a child's disability at the point of enrolment. This failure to disclose places a significant burden on both the provider and the parent at the point of drop off as our service staff adjust to accommodate the child whose disability has not been disclosed in advance.

Recommendation: Amend the standards to apply to Early Learning Centres.

⁶ Warren, J.D., Vialle, W. & Dixon, R.M (2016) *Transition of children with disabilities into early childhood education and care centres*: University of Wollongong
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4025&context=sspapers>

Recommendation: Adequately fund the Inclusion Support Program to cater for the needs of children with disabilities and potentially lift their representation in early learning centres.

School Aged Care

Case study 2

A six-year-old child who was non-verbal, communicated via a tablet and needed full assistance with walking, toileting and eating was enrolled to attend one of our SAC programs. The parent also sought to enrol their child in the holiday program. The environment of the program was not able to comfortably accommodate the child's needs as there were no accessible toileting facilities at the school which hosted the SAC. The child's feeding needs also required constant observation and verbal reminders to 'chew' and 'swallow'. The educators at the program had no training in the very specific and high-needs care required by the child and the service's ratio entitlement was unable to support an additional staff member to meet the child's needs.

YWCA Canberra provides School Aged Care (SAC) to children from kindergarten to 11 years across 16 sites in Canberra. Across these sites, we provide services to 76 children who have disability. These services are located within an established school venue and provide care to enrolled children in the hours immediately prior to and after the standard school timetable.

Unlike early learning centres, SAC providers are subject to

the standards. However, while early learning centres are centre run and operated, SAC sites are located within a specific part of a school setting (typically a hall) which the provider has been given permission to use. This arrangement significantly curtails the provider's capacity to make 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate the needs of a child with disability, in line with the standards. As the venue is located within a school setting, access to the premise also requires staff to set-up and pull-down the setting each day. This daily requirement restricts the capacity of a service to provide structural continuity to a student as storage or setting adjustments are not available. This limitation means that while a student may have access to structural adjustments and specialised equipment during school hours, this material support is not accessible to SAC educators while the student is in their care. Another consideration is that continuity of service is dependent on triennial tender processes. This may be disruptive where a child has been previously accommodated by one provider only to no longer be accommodated by a subsequent provider.

Not only may this limitation relate to structural support, the centre-based educator to child ratio requirements of school age children do not align with how a child with disability is accommodated in their school setting. By way of example, the current situation is that a SAC

Case study 3

Children with additional needs who attend mainstream schools receive their education in lower density settings where staff to student ratios can be as low as one-to-two with a teacher or educational support staff working to meet the needs of each child in a controlled space. At the end of the school day, when the child attends the on-site school aged care site, they can be sharing the space with up to 100 children where the ratio is one staff member to 11 children. For many this transition overstimulating and can trigger behavioural changes that result in a site being locked down. Further, where children require toileting assistance, two staff members need to accompany the child to the toilet if one is available. The situation is such that educational support staff will routinely end their teaching day by toileting children prior to their transition to on-site SAC. This negotiation between school and SAC staff alleviates some pressure for SAC service who will otherwise need to take staff 'off ratio' to assist a child in toileting. YWCA Canberra has been successful in applying for additional funding for part-time support at some SAC centres, but the part-time nature of the funding arrangement means the needs of children with disability, who may attend on days where additional funding is not available, are not fully met.

provider is funded to supply only one special needs educator per environment. There is no requirement or incentive for providers to vary this ratio based on the number of children with disabilities who attend a given SAC setting. In SACs where more than one child has a disability this ratio has impacts on the provider's capacity to maintain ratio while also accommodating the needs of children with disabilities.

The discrepancy in ratio requirements between what the child experiences in the school setting and what can be accommodated in the SAC setting is challenging for providers to overcome. The *per environment* ratio setting for SAC compounds an already difficult situation that providers face in not being able to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate

children with disability. These limitations can impact on the enjoyment and behaviour of children with disabilities, their non-disabled peers and staff providing a crucial service to parents.

Recommendation: Amend the standards so 'reasonable adjustments' reflects the limitations of the education setting and transfers responsibility to state and territory education departments or the relevant independent school authorities who operate school sites where SAC services are delivered.

Recommendation: Amend the national quality standards so educator to student ratios, for children of school age, reflect the number of students with disabilities enrolled in an educational environment.

Administrative Considerations

We also use this submission to draw attention to the physical site assessments previously conducted by Inclusion Support Program provider, which in the ACT is subject to triennial tender processes. Physical site assessments have recently ceased (a change that predated the COVID-19 pandemic) in favour of a phone consultation. As a not-for-profit service provider, we are genuine about wanting to accommodate the unique needs of children with disabilities and take care to undertake assessments and apply for funding support in a timely and professional manner. However, the changes which have resulted in remote consultations being the preferred assessment tool, mean our staff are not able to access the qualified support and advice during site visits. Further, the onerous nature of funding requests which often require parents to annually report on the condition and prognosis of their child, even where improvement is medically impossible, frustrate good-faith efforts to accommodate children as swiftly as possible. The nature of these processes fail to account for the administrative burden many parents and carers of children with disabilities regularly endure in attempting to navigate the intricate channels of reporting and support. As a provider, we see firsthand how inefficient processes impact on the wellbeing of parents who want their children to be accommodated safely and comfortably at a convenient early learning service.

Recommendation: Reinstate physical site assessments conducted by the Inclusion Support Program provider to streamline responses to support claims and provide on-site advice for staff in early learning centres.

Recommendation: Take steps to remove the Inclusion Support Program funding test that requires parents to report annually on the condition and prognosis of their child.