

# Submission to the Review of the Universal Access National Partnership



## About Queensland Independent Schools

**Community confidence in the independent schooling sector remains strong with more than 123,000 students enrolled in 218 independent schools across Queensland. These schools educate approximately 15 percent of the state's total school-age population and about 20 percent of all secondary students.**

The strength of the independent schooling sector lies in the rich mix of education choices and opportunities Queensland independent schools provide families. Independent schools are as diverse as the students and parents who make up their close-knit communities. Of Queensland's 218 independent schools: 125 operate or are affiliated with early childhood services; 184 educate children with disability; 110 cater for students for whom English is a second language or dialect; 194 enrol Indigenous students; 75 offer international education programs; 33 provide boarding services; and 18 cater specifically for students who have disengaged from mainstream education.

Common to all independent schools is their commitment to strong student outcomes, high standards of behaviour, and the welfare and wellbeing of students.

Over the past 10 years enrolments at Queensland independent schools have increased by 21 percent. This growth is a clear indication that parents value an independent education and are prepared to invest their after-tax incomes in their child's schooling.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) is the peak body representing Queensland's independent schooling sector. Independent Schools Queensland represents the interests of its 218 member schools, fosters choice in education and protects the autonomy of independent schools. ISQ is a not-for-profit organisation and membership to ISQ is voluntary.

ISQ acknowledges the significant investment made by the Australian Government in supporting universal access to early childhood education, through both the former National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (NP ECE) and the current National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (or UANP).

Research has clearly articulated the benefits of access to and participation in, a quality preschool program, with evidence indicating the significant educational, social and economic benefits, particularly to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who are developmentally vulnerable.

The UANP has enabled the delivery of the Queensland Government's Kindergarten Funding Scheme and facilitated significant progress towards the achievement of universal access, increasing the proportion of four-year olds participating in an approved kindergarten (preschool) program in Queensland to exceed the target of 95%. With over 125 affiliated early childhood services, the independent schooling sector in Queensland has embraced delivery of quality preschool programs to families in their wider communities and contributed significantly to the increase in preschool participation.

With the current extended UANP concluding at the end of 2020, ISQ strongly advocates for a continuation of this level of funding.

For the purposes of this document and recognising that Queensland refers to the approved program prior to full-time school as kindergarten, the term preschool is used in place of kindergarten.

## Question 2:

### **What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?**

Currently, there is no single data source to measure performance under the UANP. ISQ believes data sharing and harmonisation of data collection should be considered in order to better inform outcomes. Services are required to complete both the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection and the Queensland Early Childhood Education and Care Census. Long Day Care services are also providing enrolment and attendance data via the portal for Child Care Subsidy (CCS). Should future arrangements require the provision of preschool attendance data, the administrative burden on top of current data collection requirements would have significant impact. Opportunity exists to support the implementation of a comprehensive, shared data collection process.

## Question 3:

### **Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?**

The successful lifting of kindergarten participation rates in Queensland has been achieved through the implementation of the Queensland Kindergarten Funding Scheme. For Independent Schools Queensland, this has proven to be an efficient and effective model of funding delivery that has incorporated targeted subsidies to facilitate low or no-cost preschool for some families. The delivery model also includes support and funding for indigenous families, children with disability, and children of refugees and asylum seekers to access and participate in preschool programs.

ISQ believes more consideration needs to be given to the context in which Queensland operates, the targets set by the UANP around participation of indigenous children, and provision made to enable more effective arrangements to support indigenous participation in preschool.

Current research shows the developmental benefits for low income families and disadvantaged and vulnerable children in attending a quality preschool program from an earlier age. ISQ believes the impact and effectiveness of funding could be improved if targeted UANP funding was available to engage these priority groups from 3 years old.

## Question 4:

### **How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?**

Independent schools make an important contribution to the successful delivery of preschool programs in Queensland with over 125 early childhood services co-located on member school sites, delivering approved kindergarten programs, with this number increasing annually.

Independent schools deliver approved preschool programs via long day care or dedicated preschool models with some schools offering both. The delivery model is usually determined by the needs and/or preferences of the families in their communities. These communities are diverse and as a result, preschool programs in the independent schooling sector deliver programs underpinned by a wide range of approaches, philosophies, religious and cultural beliefs. They are delivered in a range of locations and socio-economic environments, regional and metropolitan and including areas of high disadvantage; and incorporate support for indigenous, vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

The majority of preschool program delivery on independent school sites is via long day care which reflects the need of communities with working parents. However, growth in dedicated preschool service models continues to increase - 110% in the last 9 years.

The flexibility of delivering a preschool program for 600 hours per year enables preschool programs co-located on independent school sites to align with individual school terms. This in turn simplifies planning for families and assists with the transition to school. This school-based preschool delivery model encourages parent/carer belief and support of preschool as an essential year of learning and in turn increases participation rates.

For early childhood services in the independent sector, accessible kindergarten programs; quality, appropriately qualified teachers; financial support for families; special needs funding; and support for vulnerable, disadvantaged and indigenous children and families are made possible by UANP funding in addition to Queensland State Government funding programs and parental contributions.

## Question 5:

### **Based on your experiences, should changes be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before full-time school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?**

The intersection between UANP funding and Child Care Subsidy (CCS) inclusion support funding in preschool programs in long day care services has been problematic. Children participating in a funded preschool program in a service in receipt of CCS, have been unable to access inclusion support for the time they are in the program. As the preschool program is usually a substantial

proportion, if not all, of a child's enrolment in the service, both the child and the service are at a significant disadvantage in terms of support for appropriate inclusion in the program.

As mentioned in Question 3, ISQ believes the impact and effectiveness of UANP funding could be improved if targeted funding was available to engage vulnerable and disadvantaged families and children from 3 years old, in a preschool context. The benefits for children in these priority groups in attending a quality preschool program from an earlier age are evidenced in research. Some services include three-year olds in the preschool program where vacancies exist, the priority, however, is to fill places with those children of eligible preschool age. Families of three-year olds participating in these preschool programs are generally charged higher fees to accommodate the lack of funding. This situation can, in turn, preclude those families and children that would most benefit from preschool engagement at this younger age. ISQ advocates for the implementation of UANP funding in the form of 600 hours per year of a preschool or equivalent program for vulnerable and disadvantaged three-year olds.

Since the implementation of the UANP, Queensland has successfully and significantly lifted the rates of participation of children in preschool programs. This has been achieved through targeted subsidies and programs to support long day care services and dedicated preschools to deliver quality, accessible 'approved kindergarten' programs and strong partnerships between service providers and peak bodies in all sectors. The UANP funding has enabled these sectors to work collaboratively to lift participation rates, raise the profile of preschool in the community, and ensure all children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children, have access to and can benefit from a preschool education, regardless of the community in which they reside.

ISQ recognises the need for long-term commitment to an on-going universal access funding model. Current and previous arrangements have not provided certainty with respect to on-going funding, as the national partnership is extended a year at a time. Certainty of funding allows for governments, sectors and communities to engage in long-term, cost effective planning.

Independent Schools Queensland appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission. For a comprehensive understanding of the diverse requirements of the early childhood sector in Queensland, ISQ encourages further consultation in any future reviews of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.