CELA
Advocating for Early Education

CELA focusses advocacy across five key priorities

1.
Achieving quality early education

2.
Building a stable workforce that is nurtured and valued

3.
Ensuring viability for community and small providers

4.
Improving access for Australia's vulnerable children

5.
Closing the gap for rural children

An important part of our work at CELA is year-round advocacy on behalf of our members, representing the interests of community and small providers. Advocacy means we play a role in speaking with governments to highlight issues and potential solutions, and to help legislators understand how policies affect early education service providers and ultimately the families we support. CELA advocates across five key priorities. CELA's CEO Michele Carnegie undertakes a range of approaches on behalf of members, including:

▶ Liaising with State and Federal Ministers to explain issues and provide solutions

▶ Liaising regularly with senior agency staff who brief and appraise State Ministers

▶ Via our publications Amplify and Broadside we report on issues of importance to our sector

▶ Member of multiple advisory panels where we represent the perspective of community and small providers

▶ Providing targeted submissions to important reviews such as the NQF, Workforce Strategy and EYLF

To advocate effectively we ensure that we understand the views and needs of our members through:

▶ Listening to feedback via Member conversations

▶ Undertaking Member Surveys on specific issues

▶ Our Learning & Development program which connects us with several thousand educators annually

▶ Our collective CELA leadership expertise

1. Achieving quality early education

Ensuring that all children in Australia have access to affordable, high quality early education and care is one of CELA's key principles and underpins our commitment to achieving best practice nationally.

Success means that increasingly, more centres and services will meet and exceed quality standards and ultimately best practice will become the norm across our sector.

Quality is now measured via the National Quality Standard (NQS) which sets a high national benchmark for early education and care services. The NQS assesses 7 Quality Areas that are important outcomes for children. Most services throughout Australia have now been quality rated, at least once.

The area most frequently identified as requiring improvement is QA1 Educational Program and Practice, the key quality area that impacts children's learning and development (ACECQA).

We understand that services in some areas may find it harder to lift quality than others. Nearly a quarter of services in the most disadvantaged SEIFA areas are rated as Working Towards, compared to under a fifth of services in the most advantaged areas. Similarly, more than a quarter of services in major cities are rated as Exceeding the NQS compared to less than a fifth of services in remote and very remote Australia (ACECQA Occasional Paper 7 June 2020).

Instructional support is vital

Research also shows wide differences in the level of emotional and instructional support that children receive, especially when they are babies and toddlers. The E4Kids study (Cloney et al., 2017) revealed that instructional support is the key to promoting children's higher order thinking skills and creativity, and that levels of instructional support are low across all services – and lower still in low socio-economic areas.

A qualified workforce leads to better school readiness

Other studies (Degotardi and Gill 2017, Warren and Haisken-DeNew 2013, LSAC, Manning et.al 2017) reveal that access to a trained workforce is key, with evidence that babies and toddlers acquire more language, and children are better academically prepared for school, when their teachers are well qualified.

CELA's is committed to supporting quality improvement

CELA is committed to quality improvement. This commitment includes supporting, encouraging and engaging more services to meet and exceed the quality standards so that children can access high quality services regardless of where they live.

We are committed to helping our members to build key capabilities in Educators, such as the capacity to reflect and to build relationships with others (Jackson 2020).

CELA will continue to develop strategies and resources to improve quality standards across our sector via:

▶ Professional development training and resources.

▶ Targeted quality improvement initiatives.

▶ Advocating to state and federal governments to support workforce development across the sector, and in particular targeted at low socio economic and rural and remote areas.

Quality early education advocacy position in brief

Key facts	Quality of early childhood education varies across Australia:
	▶ 1 in 4 services in most disadvantaged SEIFA areas are Working Towards the National Quality Standards.
	▶ Just 1 in 4 services in major cities are Exceeding the National Quality Standards.
	▶ Children who attend high quality early education are likely to know more words per minute as babies, and to perform better in school.
	▶ Community providers are more likely to provide higher quality early childhood education and care than profit driven providers.
	▶ Workforce shortages are impacting the ability of many centres to provide quality service.
What are we seeking?	▶ An ECEC Workforce Strategy to enable small, stand-alone centres to attract and retain skilled, diverse staff who meet children's needs.
	▶ Commitment to supporting and expanding community provision.
	▶ Ongoing professional learning to lift quality - especially in QA1 Educational Program and Practice.
	▶ Changes to education qualifications to ensure they meet service needs.
	▶ Greater parental understanding of the National Quality System and involvement in the Quality Improvement Process.
Actions we are taking	▶ CELA's submission to the National Workforce Strategy, represented the view of our members, addressing immediate and long-term solutions and how workforce and quality are intrinsically linked
	▶ Communication with Minister Tudge in collaboration with like-minded peaks about the success of community providers in the achieving high quality
	▶ Communicating with Minister Tudge in collaboration with like-minded peaks about the urgent need to address workforce shortages now
	▶ We are devising innovative workforce models in conjunction with peers and other like stakeholders.

	▶ We have delivered practical training to 300 educators in Communicating Quality Ratings to provide the tools which support them in being part of lifting parental understanding of quality ▶ Regular representation at State Advisory Panels ensuring that a clear and consistent message regarding quality are heard ▶ Regular representation at State Advisory Panels ensuring that a clear and consistent message is sustained in relation to quality across the sector and the vital role that community and small providers play in this ▶ Provide quality, affordable and accessible professional learning opportunities, for individual educators and whole teams, so as skill gaps can be filled ▶ Shine a light on real life stories about quality practice in Amplify and Broadside
What does progress look like?	▶ ACECQA workforce strategy responds to needs of small and community providers. ▶ Lifting parents' understanding of quality so as they include this in their decision-making process when making choices for their children ▶ Government initiatives which support quality improvements across all service types ▶ Supporting more CELA members to be rated as Exceeding ▶ Retention of qualifications and ratios in NQF ▶ Action taken on the strategies put forward to Minister Tudge to address immediate workforce shortages

2. Building a stable workforce that is nurtured and valued

Quality early childhood education and care depends upon the calibre and strength of our workforce. A stable workforce is also essential for building responsive relationships with children and families.

CELA understands the challenges and concerns facing the ECEC workforce, both now and into the future. Our members must be able to attract and retain quality entrants, manage workload and levels of workforce stress, and provide professional development, pathways and recognition.

ECEC sector students and trainees need better support

Member concerns conveyed via CELA's own research reinforce research findings from ASQA and the Mitchell Institute about the varying levels of understanding and preparedness of graduates. CELA will continue to work with training providers and universities to inform, build and develop consistent models of training to ensure early childhood educators are well equipped to enter and excel in their chosen profession.

Skills shortage needs to be addressed

While the key to building the quality of ECEC in Australia is the attraction, retention and development of the workforce, currently the sector is facing a severe skills shortage. There are not enough graduates flowing through university early childhood education and care degrees to fill vacancies emerging in the next three years. Vacancies are occurring across every level of the sector, with growing reports of shortages at the essential Certificate III level.

Attrition is high

There is clear evidence that attrition in the sector is high with comparatively poor conditions of employment now motivating up to 30% of educators to change jobs within 12 months, and many leaving the sector altogether (Thorpe et.al 2020). Levels of upskilling are high, but many educators leave the ECEC sector due to higher wages available within the school education sector.

Evidence also shows negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our members, with increasing levels of anxiety, and increases to workload experienced by ECEC staff continuing to educate children when much of the country worked from home (CELA, Front Project).

Better employee conditions are key

Looking ahead, we see benefit in services being provided with greater support to enable educator voice through participative decision making, building alignment with organisational goals and to enable, promote and reward professional learning.

Improving some conditions of employment within the sector will take time to address – we know those services with a supportive workforce culture experience lower rates of attrition.

CELA is committed to strengthening our sector workforce via:

- ► Providing training and resources to help services attract, support, develop and retain skilled, quality early childhood educators.
- ► Working individually and with aligned peer networks to advocate for workforce development.
- ► Steering professionalisation of workforce through provision of career pathways, collaboration on a sector workforce strategy and achieving pay and conditions to attract and retain diverse, high-quality entrants.

Stable workforce in brief

Key facts	▶ Each year, a third of educators change jobs.
	▶ Many educators leave the sector in the first five years.
	▶ One in three services report unfilled vacancies.
	▶ An extra 30,000 educators and 7,000 more ECTs will be needed within 3 years.
	▶ Workforce shortages are more acute in regional and remote areas.
	▶ Staffing waivers are increasing. Over 10% of long day-care services have a waiver, which is up 25% on 2019 (ACECQA).
	▶ Workforce preparation is insufficient in many instances (Jackson, 2020).
What are we seeking?	▶ Achieving ECEC remuneration equal to primary schools to stop drift from ECEC to schools.
	▶ Support to retain workforce including professionalisation of workforce, access to professional learning, capacity to upskill.
	▶ Targeted scholarships in areas of need.
	▶ Research into best practice placements.
	▶ Peer networks to build support.
	▶ Support to ensure quality of RTO delivery such as industry accreditation of outcomes.
	▶ Retention and attraction payments for selected services before they are in crisis
Actions we are taking	▶ Workforce training in the form of identification and provision of professional learning to fill skill gaps.
	▶ Regular representation at State Advisory Panels ensuring that a clear and consistent message is sustained in relation to workforce issues and how they impact the community and small providers.
	▶ Regular representation with State and Federal Ministers ensuring that a clear and consistent message is sustained in relation to workforce issues and how they impact the community and small providers, in particular, pay, recruitment and retention.
	▶ Developing innovative workforce models.
	▶ Input to ACECQA Workforce Strategy, especially needs of community and small providers.
	▶ Collaboration with like-minded Peaks, providing solutions to government for common workforce issues, such as pay, recruitment and retention.
	▶ ASQA industry accreditation trial.
	▶ Early Education Leaders Peer Network initiative.

	▶ Shine a light on real life workforce issue in Amplify and Broadside. ▶ Support our members in meaningful ways through 1800 support line, essential operational resources and quality training opportunities. ▶ Engage in vital research such as the Exemplary EC Educators at Work research project with Macquarie University and Early Childhood Educator Wellbeing, Work Environment & Quality Interaction Project also with Macquarie University.
What would progress look like?	▶ Successful peer networks. ▶ Input to ensure the ACECQA workforce strategy responds to needs of small and community providers ▶ Development of innovative workforce development models including training to meet skill gaps ▶ Action taken on the strategies put forward to Minister Tudge to address immediate workforce shortages

3. Ensuring viability for community and small providers

Community and small providers of early childhood education and care provide crucial services as a centre point for many communities across Australia. We are acutely aware of the important role they play and of their unique challenges and vulnerabilities.

These smaller providers collectively comprise a vital part of our early childhood education and care infrastructure. Most approved providers across Australia are in fact small and community providers, with their services making up over 30% of all early childhood education and care services (ACECQA).

Community providers need better financial support

Research shows that community managed services are more likely to provide high quality early childhood education and care, with over 40% of community managed not for profit services operating at a level which exceeds NQS quality ratings (ACECQA).

However, our small providers do not have the resources or financial reserves of networks of providers. Their capacity to withstand economic shocks is much lower than large service providers.

They are typically unable to cross-subsidise in circumstances where economic shock occurs in a specific geographic region. This lack of security was felt acutely during 2020, when bushfires and COVID-19 meant that many services could not operate, or that they operated on reduced enrolments for prolonged periods of time.

Services expended reserves to keep staff employed during COVID-19. This has placed many in an even more vulnerable position should they be required to accommodate policy priorities that affect their bottom line, or in the event of further economic shock (CELA, Front Project).

These vital smaller services across Australia are more likely to operate in low socio-economic communities, and rural and remote communities. Many are the only early childhood education and care providers in their locale. They cannot benefit from economies of scale found in larger regional centres, can struggle with professional isolation, and yet still ably perform a wide variety of roles as key community service providers (Front Project, unpublished).

Community sector governance faces unique challenges

Our community managed sector is also underpinned by community governance. This involves voluntary committees of parents who have limited time to dedicate to the management of services. In communities where committees turn over regularly, this poses unique challenges to setting and adhering to a long-term vision and strategic plan to secure viability.

CELA is dedicated to supporting community and small providers

CELA is striving to ensure the importance of community and small providers is elevated. Community management provides enormous social benefit within a community, including social connection, utilisation and development of skills within a local community and grass roots empowerment. We recognise the vital role our community and small providers play in the education and nurturing of future generations. We are exploring new ways to ensure they are better supported to remain viable. We will work with aligned peak bodies to collectively advocate for support to ensure viability of our crucial small and community providers.

Viability for community and small providers in brief

Key facts	▶ Community and small providers make up over 30% of all ECEC services.
	▶ Community providers more likely to operate in low SES communities and rural and remote communities where there are no economies of scale.
	▶ Community and small providers lack capacity to cross subsidise.
	▶ Front Project research shows stand-alone services are most likely to be vulnerable to economic shocks.
	▶ Community governance model may limit access to expertise.
What changes are we seeking?	▶ Short term viability grants.
	▶ Long term funding model based on actual costs of delivery.
	▶ Governance models to remove burden from committees whilst keeping community connection.
Actions we are taking	▶ Building a clear evidence base on the costs and benefits of the community based sector.
	▶ Collectively advocating for solutions.
What would progress look like?	▶ Creation of a new CELA network offering small and community providers a sense of belonging, a representative voice and economies of scale by belonging to a member body.
	▶ Developing and trialling models to improve provider support and build economies of scale

4. Improving access for Australia's vulnerable children

Our most vulnerable children have the most to gain from early childhood education but are less likely to attend. Prior to COVID-19 over 750,000 children were living below the poverty line – this figure is likely to increase due to the economic impact of COVID-19 (CELA).

There are multiple barriers to vulnerable children accessing early childhood education and care, which include cost, transport and availability of safe, culturally responsive services.

During COVID-19 we saw major behaviour change when free childcare was introduced. A significant number of vulnerable children attended long day-care for the first time or increased their hours. Once fees resumed, services reported these children no longer attending. CELA is deeply concerned that thousands of vulnerable children are again invisible having now been removed from early childhood education and care.

The COVID effect and a heightened need for funding for vulnerable children

Given that COVID-19 will continue to impact our community, it is vital that an ongoing commitment is made to funding outreach in order to locate and provide early childhood education to Australia's vulnerable children.

As a result of the social and economic impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, levels of child vulnerability in Australia are also likely to have escalated. Rates of family violence are reported to have increased, including amongst vulnerable migrant and refugee communities (Domestic Violence NSW, Homelessness NSW).

While the enduring effects of COVID-19 on children and families cannot yet be estimated, the escalation in calls to services including Beyond Blue and the Kids Helpline indicates increased levels of vulnerability felt across many communities.

The effects of increased vulnerability on children's development have also been observed by early childhood educators. Many children in their final year of care before primary school were observed to have impaired concentration and difficulties with social skills after an extended period at home. These developmental vulnerabilities were widespread in some services, indicating that many children have experienced increased vulnerability in 2020.

CELA is committed to ensuring improved access for vulnerable children

It is vital that Early Childhood Education and Care services are supported to continue to work in partnership with community providers to ensure children and families receive the support they need.

CELA is advocating for additional support and resourcing to enable the early childhood workforce to identify and respond to the increasing incidence of child vulnerability. We are also focusing specific training on this area.

CELA is also advocating to support providers to engage vulnerable children and families. We are seeking a relaxation of the activity test to ensure access to ECEC for children with parents in precarious work situations, and removal of unnecessary barriers to families accessing the Additional Child Care Subsidy.

The 2021-22 Budget has announced changes (coming into effect on 1 July 2022) to the Child Care Subsidy which will remove the cap for high income earners, and provide additional subsidy (to 95%) for second and subsequent children aged under 6 in care. CELA will advocate that this increase in Child Care Subsidy should be provided to low income families for all children in care to maximise access to early childhood education and care.

Improved access for vulnerable children in brief

Key facts	▶ Over 750,000 are living in poverty.
	▶ Children from low socio economic families are more likely to start school behind their peers and stay behind.
	▶ Services in the most disadvantaged areas are less likely to be assessed as exceeding than those in advantaged areas.
	▶ ECEC makes a large difference to the lives and vulnerable children – the most vulnerable benefit the greatest.
What changes are we seeking?	▶ Supporting services to engage all children by removing cost, transport and cultural barriers.
	▶ Building educator understanding of how to identify and respond to vulnerability through their initial education and ongoing professional learning.
	▶ Evidence on which types of services are needed in a community to support vulnerable children and best practice models to provide this.
	▶ Funding for services in addition to ECEC.
Actions we are taking	▶ Advocating to government to support engagement of vulnerable children while properly resourcing services with skilled staff to best meet the needs of children and families.
	▶ Delivery of learning and development to enhance service's capacity to respond to vulnerable children.
	▶ Building evidence base on what best practice models are for vulnerable children through members' case studies.
	▶ Regular representation at State Advisory Panels ensuring that a clear and consistent message is sustained in relation to vulnerability and the need for educators to be equipped with the skills to support vulnerable children and families, particularly in complex communities.
	▶ Engaged by members to write funding submissions for additional resources to meet their specific needs.
	▶ Advocating for the child so they are at the centre.
	▶ We advocate for quality. Vulnerable children benefit the most when they are regularly attending quality early education programs.
	▶ Contribute expertise to the Supporting Families into Early Childhood Education project with NSW Education, Health and Communities and Justice

Improved access for vulnerable children in brief

What would progress look like?

▶ Widening of activity test to respond to vulnerability in response to advocacy, and increase in minimum rate of child care subsidy

▶ Shaping of pilot program to support ECEC to respond to vulnerability in a joined up approach following AEDC release.

▶ Delivery of learning and development to enhance service capacity to respond to vulnerable children.

▶ Services properly funded to employ allied health professionals to regularly work with children and mentor staff

5.Closing the gap for rural children

Despite the fact that early childhood is the period of greatest brain development with profound long-term influences, too many rural and regional children lack access to quality early childhood education and care.

A range of barriers must be addressed to ensure high quality ECEC provision is available in rural and remote areas. Access to timely and quality early childhood education and care is a vital part of the solution to solving the widening gap in education, health and life outcomes between city and country.

Lifting quality is key

Lifting the quality of rural and regional services is a key consideration. Lower quality services are more prevalent in disadvantaged and rural and remote communities. More services in rural and remote Australia are assessed as Working Towards the National Quality Standards, and less are rated as Exceeding the standards (ACECQA).

This gap in quality contributes to the higher level of developmental vulnerability children experience in their first year of school. Whilst around one in five students in major cities starts school developmentally vulnerable, around one in four children are developmentally vulnerable in outer regional areas and nearly one in two in very remote areas (AEDC). This early gap increases throughout a child's schooling to the point where children in remote communities attend far less school on average than children in cities.

Workforce issues must be addressed

To provide greater access to quality early childhood education and care in rural and regional areas requires the building of a strong rural and regional ECEC workforce. Workforce shortages become more acute the further away from cities that communities are located, with providers in regional and remote areas facing significant barriers to attracting and retaining staff.

Staffing waivers have been relied upon to ensure service delivery in some remote areas (ACECQA). A regional and remote workforce development strategy is required to focus on how to recruit and retain educators in rural and remote Australia, including in high-cost centres. This should include trialling models of engaging and skilling up the local community to fill staffing shortages.

Solutions are needed to improve and increase access to professional development

In the past, physical access to ongoing professional learning and development has been a key challenge to ECEC providers in rural and remote areas. To attend in-person training often required travelling for several days, also creating a staff shortage which could be difficult to backfill.

CELA's transition to providing professional development and training online via webinar could become of significant benefit to educators in rural and remote communities, but more is still needed in order to improve infrastructure to ensure all services can access remotely delivered training, and in person training where optimal, including financial support to offset the cost of training.

Modes of service delivery should be fit for purpose

Different models of service delivery may better meet the needs of rural communities such as mobile service delivery enabling children in remote locations to access early childhood education. Playgroups and early education embedded in schools may support children in remote locations to access services otherwise unviable, for example in communities cut off from road access, during wet season extremes.

CELA is committed to closing the gap for rural children

CELA is actively pursuing opportunities to develop innovative models to meet the needs of our rural and regional service providers and advocating for policy to support access and service viability.

Closing the gap for rural children in brief

Key facts	▶ Developmental vulnerability increases as you move from city centres – ¼ in outer regional, ½ in very remote areas. This gap continues at age of school entry continues and magnifies the gap. ▶ More services are working towards the NQS, 1 in 5 in remote Australia, 1 in 3 in very remote Australia. ▶ Finding and retaining skilled staff is more difficult in rural and remote areas. Around 1 in 7 services in very remote Australia have a staffing waiver, and 1 in 10 in outer regional Australia. ▶ Children have higher unidentified special needs due to inability to access allied health professionals without lengthy waiting lists.
What changes are we seeking?	▶ Support services with appropriate funding models to attract and retain a skilled workforce in regional and remote areas. ▶ Targeted professional learning for regional and remote areas. ▶ Consideration of viable management models in regional and remote services. ▶ Utilise remote learning and telehealth to bridge service access gaps.
Actions we are taking	▶ Develop/pilot workforce model. ▶ Ensure issues and potential solutions considered in ACECQA workforce review. ▶ Ensure that regional issues are represented at NSW Advisory Panel meetings and with State and Federal ministerial representation. ▶ Providing affordable and accessible professional development for regional educators. ▶ We regularly make proactive calls to our regional members to offer support and discussion about their unique challenges and issues. ▶ CELA team understand the key issues faced by regionally based services and are able to work with them to design training, specialised support and resources that truly meet their needs. ▶ Utilise our expertise to prepare submissions for regional services, drawing on a wide range of evidence-based research, localised knowledge and understanding to represent community needs.

Closing the gap for rural children in brief

	▶ Ensure regional representation on the Peer Network Champion program so as specific needs are considered in design and delivery of the Network.
What would progress look like?	▶ Development of wrap-around models to skill up local community members, including providing financial and academic support, and assistance to engage in work placements. ▶ New ACECQA workforce strategy including initiatives on rural and regional Australia. ▶ Robust engagement of rural and regional educators in dedicated online training. ▶ Improved AEDC outcomes in regional areas. ▶ Improved quality in regional areas. ▶ Access to allied health professionals at a level of regularity which is effective and meaningful in the life of a child.