LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

No. 283

WRITTEN QUESTION

J Davis to the Minister for Education and Training, Hon Jo-Anne Hersey MLA:

Early Childhood Development

1. **The 2024 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows Northern Territory children have the highest developmental vulnerability in the country, with around 40.8 per cent vulnerable on one or more domains and 26.9 per cent on two or more — almost double the national rates.**

   a. **What is the Territory's specific, written plan to reduce these figures over the next five and ten years?**

      The AEDC is the measure for Closing the Gap Target 4 that children will be developmentally on track when they start school. The specific plan to reduce early development vulnerability is the Northern Territory (NT) Closing the Gap NT Implementation plan. The NT Government, Aboriginal Peak Organisations NT and the Local Government Association of the NT are working together to prepare the third implementation plan.

      This is supported by Priority 1c of the Department of Education and Training (the department) Strategic Plan 2025–2028, to improve access to quality early childhood programs and services to provide a strong start for all Territory children. Access to high-quality early childhood education and care supports children's learning, development and wellbeing and contributes to improved developmental outcomes.

   b. **What interim targets has the Government set for reducing developmental vulnerability, on what date were they set, and in which document are they recorded?**

      Closing the Gap targets and trajectories towards achieving them are only set at the national level. The NT Government has not set separate interim targets for reducing developmental vulnerability. Progress towards Closing the Gap Target 4 is measured through the AEDC and monitored through the Northern Territory's Closing the Gap implementation and reporting arrangements.

2. The AEDC is designed as a planning tool across education, health, disability and family services, not only as a school readiness measure.

a. Which ministers and agencies share responsibility for improving AEDC outcomes in the Territory?

Responsibility for improving outcomes under Closing the Gap Target 4 is shared across the education, health, and children and families portfolios, reflecting the range of factors that influence children's early development.

The Department of Education and Training, Department of Health, and Department of Children and Families each contribute through their respective responsibilities for early childhood education, health, family support and child development.

b. What formal governance structure holds them collectively accountable for delivering that improvement?

Closing the gap governance in the NT is coordinated and monitored through the NT Executive Council on Aboriginal Affairs (NTECAA), which provides overarching governance for the implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap in the NT.

3. What specific changes to service locations, funding or program design have been made because of the 2024 AEDC results?

Recognising the importance of early childhood development, the department restructured in 2025 to provide greater capacity, policy and support for lifting quality in early childhood education and care. The AEDC data informs this work.

The AEDC is used, along with many other measures to identify high-need locations for various initiatives. Recently the AEDC was used by the Australian and NT Governments to identify potential sites for new long daycare facilities through the Building Early Education Fund. Similarly, for the future rollout of additional child and family centres, as described in Action 4.5 of the Closing the Gap: NT Implementation Plan 2023-2024.

The AEDC results across locations are very highly correlated with socio-economic status, Aboriginal concentration in the community and remoteness. These factors are also considered when targeting support for children during their transition to school and once they commence full-time school.

In 2027, government school improvement priorities include a focus on preschool to strengthen early literacy and numeracy with intentional teaching through play-based learning, building strong foundations in language, communication, and mathematical thinking. As preschool is typically children's first point of entry into the school system, it plays a critical role in responding to developmental needs identified through AEDC data and supporting strong foundations for future learning and development.

a. Will the Government publish a public AEDC response plan showing which high-vulnerability communities will receive additional early education, health, disability and family support?

The AEDC is one of a range of data sources used by the NT Government to understand child development outcomes and identify community need. AEDC data is considered alongside other demographic, service, education, health and community-level information to inform policy, planning and investment.

Government responses are therefore not determined by AEDC results alone. Resources and supports are targeted according to identified need through the core business and strategic priorities of relevant agencies, including commitments under Closing the Gap.

4. Thriving Kids is built on delivering supports in children's everyday settings — homes, early childhood services and schools. Within the existing budget and workforce, what specific actions will the

Minister take to embed inclusive early intervention practices in all NT schools and early learning settings, rather than waiting for new Thriving Kids funding?

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and schools are key settings where children learn, develop, and may first have additional developmental needs identified. The department's role is to support inclusive education, facilitate early identification of need, and help children and families connect with the most appropriate supports and services.

Schools and ECEC services already support children through existing inclusive education practices, student support processes, appropriate adjustments and referral pathways. The department will continue to strengthen these approaches by supporting educators to identify and respond to developmental needs early, provide clear referral guidance for families, build educator capability through existing professional learning channels, and strengthen coordination with health, disability and family services. This work will continue within existing resources and does not depend on new Thriving Kids funding.

The progressive rollout of Thriving Kids from 1 October 2026 will complement these existing arrangements. Specialist assessment and intervention under Thriving Kids will be led by NT Health and delivered through their health and allied health services.

5. Will the Minister commit to every NT government school adopting a multi-tiered system of supports, or an equivalent tiered framework, so that universal, targeted and intensive supports are organised inclusively within classrooms?

The department supports schools and students through a Mutli-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Strengthening the implementation of MTSS across schools is a key departmental priority for 2027. The department partners with schools to build inclusive, equitable and safe education environments where all children and students, of all cultures, identities and abilities, can access and participate in quality education.

Recognising that effective targeted intervention relies on strong universal foundations (tier 1), the department's focus is strengthening tier 1 supports across all schools. This approach is underpinned by the NT Teaching and Learning Model, a contextualised framework based on the evidence-based practices aligned to how students learn.

a. Will AEDC and school-level data be used together to decide which schools receive additional coaching and specialist support?

Data plays a key role in informing the allocation of supports. Recent investments have been made in early screening tools, including the Foundational Early Literacy Assessment and Year 1 Phonics Check, as well as dashboards for these assessments.

6. Budget Paper No. 3 for 2026–27 lowers two enrolment targets. Aboriginal preschool student enrolments fall from a target of 1,200 to 1,150 against a 2025–26 result of 1,145, and total preschool enrolments from 2,800 to 2,700 against a result of 2,746. Aboriginal primary and secondary enrolments fall from 13,200 to 13,100 against a result of 12,985.

a. Who decided to lower each of those enrolment targets, on what date, and in which document is that decision recorded?

The process for establishing targets is undertaken annually as part of the Budget Paper 3 development progress and aligns with the Department of Treasury and Finance requirements. Multiple departmental stakeholders contribute to the target-setting process, with final approval of the agency chapters in Budget Paper 3 from the Chief Executive.

b. Is a reduction in Aboriginal preschool enrolment expected in 2026–27 and, if so, on what basis?

Enrolment data for all year levels is available on the department's website https://education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/enrolment-and-attendance.

Aboriginal enrolment in NT Government preschools in 2026 is expected to be lower than in 2025. Projected enrolment figures are estimated using actual enrolment at the beginning of the school year, adjusted for within year change based on the prior 3 years. Published enrolment data for Aboriginal preschool students in NT Government schools show an average Term 2 enrolment of 1008 students in 2026 compared to 1091 in 2025. This coincides with population estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) which indicate a trend of long-term decline for young Aboriginal children in the NT.

c. What is the estimated number of Aboriginal children of preschool age in the Territory, and what proportion of them does an enrolment target of 1,150 represent?

Accurately estimating the number of Aboriginal children of preschool age in the NT is difficult due to uncertainty in population estimates and challenges in defining the Year Before Full-time Schooling (YBFS) cohort. Factors such as mobility, varying school commencement patterns and changes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification mean that estimates are indicative rather than precise.

Measuring preschool participation is further complicated by the variety of settings in which preschool programs are delivered across the NT. Children may access a preschool program through a government school, a non-government school, a long day care service, or other integrated early childhood settings. Participation may also occur across multiple settings.

d. What funded measures are directed to increasing Aboriginal preschool enrolment in 2026-27, and what is the allocation to each? Please identify any of those measures that is also counted toward improving attendance.

The NT Government is committed to Closing the Gap Target 3 to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in year before full-time schooling (YBFS) early childhood education.

Towards this outcome the *Department of Education and Training Strategic Plan 2025 – 2028* includes a priority action to *Improve access to quality early childhood programs and services to provide a strong start for all Territory children.* This year the department set preschool and attendance as 2 of the 2027 School Improvement Priorities.