



Submission – Thriving Kids Initiative

To: House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability

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About Catholic School Parents Australia

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) is recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education as the national body representing and advocating for the parents and guardians of over 765,000 children and young people who attend 1737 Catholic schools across Australia. CSPA works in collaboration and consultation with the National Catholic Education Commission.

Catholic School Parents Australia

CSPA is the peak national body representing the parents and carers of over 765,000 children in 1737 Australian Catholic schools. This represents over 20% of all Australian students. Notably there are over ten remote areas in Australia where the only school is a Catholic school.

CSPA's membership is made up of the Catholic school parent associations of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the ACT.

In turn, each member parent body plays an advocacy role for all parents and carers through their local school parent bodies. CSPA Member State and Territory bodies also work in liaison with their Catholic education authorities at diocesan level and with their State Catholic education commissions.

Introduction

CSPA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Committee's inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative.

The Thriving Kids initiative is an important step toward ensuring that children under the age of eight with mild to moderate developmental concerns and disability are identified and supported earlier and more effectively. By establishing a national system of supports, the initiative seeks to improve outcomes for children and families through consistent, equitable access to services.

CSPA strongly supports the intent to scale and strengthen existing mainstream and community services—enabling families to access assistance within the settings they already know and trust, such as schools, early learning environments, and local community organisations. This approach reduces barriers to access and ensures that support is practical, timely, and responsive to each child's circumstances.

We also acknowledge the continuing role of the NDIS in supporting children with permanent and significant disability. Clear pathways and strong collaboration between the NDIS and the Thriving Kids initiative will be essential to avoid service gaps or duplication, and to ensure families receive the right support at the right time.

As the national body representing Catholic school families, CSPA emphasises the need for:

- Early identification and intervention that is family-centred and culturally responsive.
- Stronger collaboration across education, health, and community services to ensure supports are coordinated and accessible.
- Parent and carer engagement as a cornerstone of design and delivery, recognising their role as the first educators of their children.

CSPA looks forward to working with the Committee and other stakeholders to help shape the Thriving Kids initiative so that all children can grow, learn, and thrive in environments that support their development, wellbeing, and inclusion.

Evidence-based information and resources that could assist parents identify if their child has mild to moderate development delay and support parents to provide support to these children:

At CSPA, we know that parents play a vital role in their child's development. Parents are often the first to notice the small but important changes in their child's behaviour, communication, or learning. Yet many families tell us they feel uncertain about what to do next, or where to turn for help.

That is why we strongly support the Thriving Kids initiative and the development of clear, practical, and evidence-based resources to guide families. Parents want tools that give them the confidence to act early when they notice something might not be quite right.

From listening to Catholic school families across Australia, we believe these resources will work best when they are:

- Easy to understand and co-designed with parents and educators, using plain language and practical examples.
- Shared through workshops and webinars in school communities, where parents already feel connected and supported.
- Culturally inclusive, especially for First Nations families and families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.
- Respectful of faith and values, recognising that these shape how many families make decisions about their children's wellbeing.
- Linked with school systems, so that parents, teachers, and health professionals can work together quickly when early intervention is needed.

CSPA believes that when families are equipped with the right tools, children are more likely to receive the support they need at the right time. By empowering parents, the Thriving Kids initiative can strengthen the partnership between families, early childhood, schools, and health professionals—helping every child to grow, learn, and thrive.

Effectiveness of current (and previous) programs and initiatives that identify children with development delay, autism or both, with mild to moderate support needs and support them and their families:

CSPA acknowledges the important work already being done through government and community-led initiatives to identify and support children with developmental delays, autism, or both. These efforts are valued, but feedback from Catholic school families highlights that accessibility, consistency, and coordination remain key challenges.

- Parents have shared that while programs such as early childhood screening through maternal health services, or wellbeing initiatives offered in schools, show great promise, their impact is often held back by.
- Families already struggle to access assessments or reassessments (especially for children diagnosed very young), raising questions about how changes can be navigated.
- The proposed process risks treating all children the same, when needs vary widely and require tailored support.

- Parents can be misled to expect “prescribed plans” like medicines that will make their children more “normal.” This works better for lower support needs but is inadequate for higher needs.
- The cost of accessing assessments and services remains a significant barrier for many families.
- Inconsistent implementation across states, territories, and school sectors.
- Limited integration between health, education, and family services.
- Insufficient follow-up support for families once a concern has been identified.

From the perspective of Catholic school families, there is a clear call for change. CSPA recommends:

- Establishing a national framework for early identification and support, flexible enough to meet the needs of local communities.
- Core funding is often more valuable than therapy, as it enables participation in school, therapies, and community activities.
- Therapy requires “buy-in,” and some children may not benefit if they are not ready or motivated.
- Increasing investment in community-based referral pathways, so families can access the right help close to home.
- Embedding parent agency strategies into program design and delivery, ensuring families are active partners rather than passive recipients.

Above all, parents tell us they want clearer communication, timely referrals, and ongoing support—not one-off assessments or fragmented services. Families are seeking reassurance that once their child is identified as needing help, there is a pathway that truly supports them every step of the way.

CSPA believes that with stronger coordination, respectful engagement, and a nationally consistent approach, the Thriving Kids initiative can deliver meaningful and lasting support for children and families.

We strongly support the development of mechanisms that ensure children with mild to moderate support needs experience smooth, coordinated transitions across early childhood, primary, and secondary education. Parents consistently tell us that transitions—whether between services or moving from one stage of schooling to the next—are moments of real vulnerability, when essential supports can easily be lost, delayed, or disrupted.

Families have identified the following challenges:

- Fragmented communication between health, education, and family support services, leaving parents to act as the “go-between.”
- Gaps in continuity of care plans, particularly when children move between schools or into new regions.
- Limited visibility of past assessments or interventions, meaning new teachers or support staff may not have the information needed to help a child from day one.

To address these concerns, CSPA recommends:

- Case coordination roles within schools or regions, dedicated to walking alongside families and ensuring supports remain in place through every transition.
- Shared digital records accessible across sectors, with strong privacy protections, so that critical

information travels with the child rather than being lost in the system.

- Clear transition protocols that actively include parent voice, giving families confidence that their child's needs will be recognised and supported without interruption.
- Therapeutic needs should be addressed collaboratively within schools. Current excuses prevent genuine in-school integration, missing opportunities for student benefit.
- There has been little explanation of how the initiative will be implemented, how children with higher support needs will be distinguished, and what tailored supports will look like.

Parents value systems that are predictable, transparent, and responsive, and that acknowledge the emotional as well as the practical impact of transitions. With stronger coordination and intentional planning, the Thriving Kids initiative can ensure that no child is left behind when moving between stages of learning or care.

Equity and intersectional issues, in particular, children who identify as First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse:

First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families often face overlapping barriers to their children's wellbeing and education. These include navigating complex systems, economic disadvantage, experiences of trauma, and racism or exclusion that reduce trust in schools and services.

Distinct challenges also need recognition:

- **CALD families:** Language barriers and differing cultural expectations can limit parent-school engagement and children's participation in activities.
- **First Nations families:** The legacy of colonisation, dispossession, and systemic racism continues to drive inequities in education, health, and community participation.

Proposed Solutions for the Thriving Kids Initiative

- **Dedicated Parent Engagement Funding:** Support schools to partner with both bicultural and First Nations liaison workers.
- **Culturally Safe Parent Workshops:** Co-designed with CALD and First Nations families to explain supports and pathways.
- **Recognition of Parent Voice:** Ensure both groups are represented in school and system-level consultation.
- **Partnerships with Communities of Trust:** Build on connections with First Nations, CALD, and faith networks.
- **Training for Educators and Health Professionals:** Cultural competence, trauma-informed practice, and language accessibility.

Case Study: “J” – A CALD Family Experience

Profile

“J” is the daughter of “P”, a Tongan mother raising her family within the Catholic school system. I was diagnosed with an intellectual disability in Year 2. Despite a supportive school environment, her family faced significant barriers in accessing the early supports she needed due to their migration status.

Challenges

- **Citizenship restrictions:** Under Australian–New Zealand migration rules, J did not gain access to Australian citizenship until she was 10 years old. This meant that during her crucial early school years, she was not eligible for many disability and learning support services.
- **Missed intervention window:** The delay in eligibility meant that early intervention, which is vital for children with intellectual disability, was unavailable at the time it could have made the greatest impact.
- **Financial strain:** Without access to government-funded supports, the family was forced to rely on limited personal income for assessments and interventions. Many essential therapies were simply out of reach.
- **Cultural stigma:** Within her community, P also struggled with the cultural stigma of discussing disability openly, which added to feelings of isolation.

Support and Intervention

- Catholic school staff provided as much in-class support as possible within their resources, but systemic funding barriers limited the specialist help available until citizenship was granted.
- A local parent advocacy program eventually connected P with other CALD parents navigating disability and migration issues, reducing her sense of isolation.

Outcome

By the time J gained citizenship at 10, she was finally eligible for supports, but years of critical early learning had been missed. P reflected that while the school environment was welcoming, the policy gap around eligibility left her child disadvantaged compared to her peers.

The experience highlighted the inequity CALD families on temporary visas or awaiting citizenship face when raising children with additional needs.

Key Insight

The Thriving Kids initiative must ensure that eligibility for disability and wellbeing supports is not restricted by migration status. Children like E cannot afford to wait for citizenship to access early intervention. For CALD families, this creates an enduring gap that disadvantages children academically, socially, and emotionally.

Case Study: Refugee High School Students with Disability

Profile

Many refugee young people arrive in Australia with pre-existing disabilities or learning difficulties. For those entering high school, the settlement journey coincides with a critical educational transition. One such student, “A”, arrived with permanent residency but also with an undiagnosed intellectual disability that had been noted in school reports from the refugee camp.

Challenges

- **Delayed access to supports:** Although “A” had permanent residency, the family could not begin the NDIS registration process until after arriving in Australia. This meant the first year of high school—when the need for support was most urgent—was spent without access to the therapies, aids, or specialist services that would have enabled her to thrive.
- **Missed early intervention:** By the time the NDIS process was completed, more than a year had passed, and the window for early and intensive intervention during transition into high school was lost.
- **Cultural stigma:** Within the family’s community, disability carried a strong stigma. Parents were hesitant to discuss their child’s needs openly or seek help, which compounded delays and added to their sense of isolation.
- **Educational disadvantage:** Without appropriate supports, “A” struggled to keep pace academically and socially, leading to disengagement from learning and feelings of being left behind.
- **Support and Intervention:** Catholic school staff provided pastoral care and in-class adjustments where possible, but resources were limited, and specialist services were not available until formal NDIS approval was granted.

Over time, the school connected the family with a bicultural worker who built trust, explained systems in culturally appropriate ways, and reduced stigma around accessing disability services.

Outcome

Once NDIS eligibility was secured, “A” was able to access learning supports and therapies, which improved her participation and confidence. However, the delay meant she remained behind academically, and her family reflected that if support had been available from the start of settlement, the outcome would have been very different.

Key Insight

Refugee students with disability are most vulnerable at the start of their settlement journey, yet current systems place barriers in the way of timely access to supports. For refugee children with permanent residency, the NDIS registration process should be able to start offshore before arrival. This would ensure that vital supports are in place from day one of school in Australia, allowing them to begin their education on equal footing with their peers. Addressing cultural stigma through bicultural engagement further strengthens outcomes, helping families feel confident, supported, and included.

Gaps in workforce support and training required to deliver Thriving Kids.

CSPA believes the success of the Thriving Kids initiative will depend on ensuring that schools have the resources, staff, and funding needed to provide timely and effective support for children with mild to moderate developmental delays.

Parents consistently share that while educators and school leaders are compassionate and observant, they cannot be expected to carry this responsibility alone. Teachers often lack the specialised training or time required to identify and respond to developmental concerns, and many schools simply do not have access to the allied health professionals needed to provide early intervention.

CSPA therefore highlights the importance of:

- Additional, sustained funding directed to early childhood and schools, enabling them to employ or access allied health professionals, specialist support teachers, and wellbeing staff as part of the school community.
- Workforce transfer to early childhood and schools, ensuring that expertise from health and community sectors is available within education settings, where children spend most of their time.
- Training and professional development that equips early childhood and school staff to work alongside these specialists, fostering genuine interdisciplinary support around each child.
- **Teacher Training for Development Delays and Wellbeing**
Teachers often lack specific training to identify and respond to mild to moderate developmental delays. Strengthening their capacity in this area is vital, not only for early intervention but also for addressing the wellbeing of both students and families. Being told a child is “behind” can trigger feelings of blame, anxiety, or low self-esteem in parents and students. For children, this can sometimes manifest as disruptive classroom behaviours, compounding existing learning difficulties.
- **Differentiated Learning in Diverse Classrooms**
Australian classrooms commonly include students working at multiple academic levels. Teachers need greater professional learning opportunities to implement effective differentiation strategies that ensure all students can engage meaningfully in the curriculum. Without adequate training, differentiation risks either diluting the learning for advanced students or leaving those requiring support further behind.
- **Time and Resources for Task Modification**
Modern classrooms demand more than a single “modified” task. To meet the needs of diverse learners, teachers are often creating multiple differentiated tasks for both formative and summative assessments. Given teachers are already time-poor, additional resourcing and structured support are essential to make this process manageable and sustainable.
- **In-Classroom Support for Implementation**
Even when teachers are trained and prepared, they cannot deliver inclusive and tailored curriculum effectively without adequate classroom support. Teacher aides, learning support staff, and collaborative planning time are critical to ensuring that differentiation and wellbeing practices are delivered consistently and equitably. Teachers are already feeling burnt out and providing adequate support for a diverse range of learners is essential for retention.

With adequate resourcing and the right people embedded in schools, the Thriving Kids initiative can move beyond identification to provide practical, on-the-ground support for families. Strengthening the workforce within schools will not only improve outcomes for children but also build trust, reduce waiting times, and make services more accessible to families in the environments they already know and rely on.

Domestic and international policy experience and best practice:

Mechanisms that would allow a seamless transition through mainstream systems for all children with mild to moderate support needs:

CSPA acknowledges that many schools already have support staff in place to assist students who may be more susceptible to bullying. Most notably, these include Wellbeing Leaders, Learning Diversity Leaders and other Pastoral Care staff, who provide direct emotional and social support to students, helping to foster a safe and caring school environment.

In addition, many Catholic schools employ Cultural Liaison Officers who are instrumental in bridging the gap between families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the school community. These staff members help parents and carers understand school policies, behavioural expectations, and available support services.

While the presence of these roles is highly valuable, a consistent national framework on bullying would ensure a more equitable and effective approach across all schools. Such a framework should mandate specific support strategies, professional learning, and training for all staff, including those already working in wellbeing and inclusion roles.

This would not only improve the quality of support available but also strengthen the confidence and satisfaction of parents and students from minority and vulnerable groups when bullying incidents occur. National consistency would reinforce a shared commitment to dignity, inclusion, and respect in every Australian school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

CSPA believes the Thriving Kids initiative is a powerful opportunity to change the story for children and families. Parents consistently tell us they want earlier support, clearer pathways, and services that truly work together. Too often families feel like they are left to carry the load on their own—navigating complex systems, repeating their story, and waiting far too long for help to arrive.

This initiative has the potential to make things different. By placing families at the centre, embedding support in early childhood, schools and communities, and ensuring equity for every child, it can build a future where parents feel confident that their child will be noticed, supported, and celebrated. Above all, it can help children grow into their potential—thriving at home, at school, and in life.

Recommendations

CSPA recommends that the Committee and Government:

- **Put families at the heart:** Ensure parents are genuine partners in designing and reviewing supports, with resources that are clear, practical, and co-designed.
- **Make early childhood and schools places of support, not just learning:** Provide ongoing funding so early childhood and schools can have allied health staff, wellbeing leaders, and specialist teachers available where children spend most of their day.
- **Smooth the transitions:** Create dedicated case coordination roles, shared records, and clear protocols so that children don't lose support when moving between services, schools, or regions.

- **Guarantee equity for every child:** Remove barriers based on citizenship or migration status. Invest in bicultural workers, interpreters, and culturally safe programs that reflect the voices of First Nations and CALD families.
- **Strengthen the workforce around children:** Train and support teachers, wellbeing staff, and health professionals to work together, building teams around each child.
- **Keep it simple and accessible:** Develop easy-to-navigate pathways and timely referrals, so families know where to turn and can access help when they need it most.

In short, the Thriving Kids initiative can succeed if it listens to parents, values their lived experience, and ensures no child slips through the cracks. With the right support, every child can be given the chance to flourish.