

Improved Transitions to Schools Project

Final Report

Belconnen – A Village for Every Child

November 2022



Improved Transitions to Schools Project
ARACY

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[Suggested citation](#)

Barker, B. (2022). *Improved Transitions to Schools Project: Final Report*. Canberra: ARACY.

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Acknowledgements

ARACY would like to thank the schools and staff who participated in this project. We deeply appreciate their valuable contribution and willingness to share and discuss their experiences and viewpoints, particularly during a difficult period for schools, brought about by the pandemic.

This project was made possible by funding from A Village for Every Child.

1. Introduction: A Village for Every Child

A Village for Every Child (Village) is an initiative that aims to improve systems across Belconnen, ACT, so that children are physically healthy, socially and emotionally strong and ready to engage in learning and life, and all parents are supported, empowered and equipped for 'best possible' parenting. Its focus is on pre-birth to 5 years. It does not deliver services, have clients and nor is it a program, but it uses a collective impact framework that operates outside the system, working with those in the system to bring about the system change.

In Belconnen, approximately 1 in 3 children start school at risk or vulnerable on one or more of the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive and communication domains, which is higher than the national average (AEDC, 2018). This means they experience a number of challenges that interfere with their ability to physically cope with the school day. In Belconnen there are currently over 110 child and family services including child & maternal health, family support, Early Childhood Education Centres and playgroups. Despite all the efforts of these services and programs many children in Belconnen are falling behind.

Village came out of the West Belconnen Local Services Network (WBLSN) which was established in 2015. The WBLSN had four main projects, one of which was to create system change leading to better outcomes for children living in the West Belconnen region. When funding for the network ceased, the early childhood focus was selected as the most appropriate for future activities and Village was established.

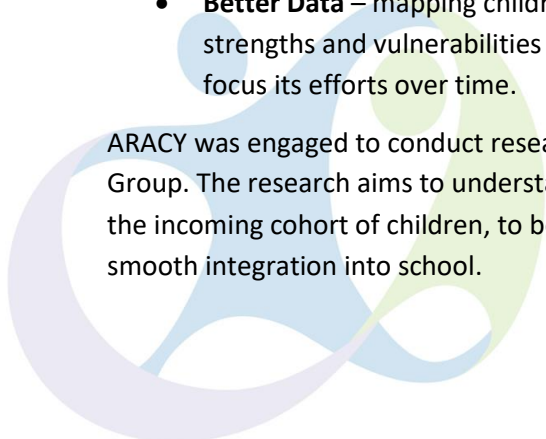
1.1 Village projects

Village includes a Backbone Team, Leadership Group and Working Groups. The Working Groups bring together practitioners, community members and other cross sector representatives who are interested a particular area of system change (project) that is relevant to them. These are action-oriented groups who work together to inform and progress the system changes.

There are three areas of focus for the working groups:

- **Improved Transitions to Schools** – supporting improved transitions for children and their families between ECEC settings, preschools, and schools
- **Improved Service and School Connections with Families** – improving parenting capacity by increasing childhood development knowledge, positive parenting practices, access to child & family support services and by forming positive relationships between families and schools early in a child's life
- **Better Data** – mapping children and families in the Belconnen area, their demographics, strengths and vulnerabilities as well as data that demonstrates where the Village should focus its efforts over time.

ARACY was engaged to conduct research on behalf of the Improved Transitions to Schools Working Group. The research aims to understand the types of information schools and teachers need about the incoming cohort of children, to be able to provide appropriate educational strategies to ensure smooth integration into school.



1.2 Project background

The purpose of the Improved Transitions to School project is to support improved transitions for children and their families between ECECs, Family Day Care and preschools to formal education. This will be achieved through two key strategies:

- identifying what information teachers need about the incoming cohort of children and using this information to assist schools in providing appropriate educational strategies to ensure a smooth integration of those children into the education sector); and
- demonstrating whether strengthened relationships between ECECs, preschools and schools support better information flow about individual children so that each child's transition between these educational stages is smoother and more effective.

ARACY was engaged to undertake the first of these strategies, namely to conduct a qualitative research program to assess the information required by teachers – in addition to the AEDC outcomes – to prepare for their incoming cohort.

1.2 Research objectives

The overarching objective of the research was to understand what information preschool and kindergarten early educators need about the incoming cohort of children to be able to provide appropriate educational strategies to ensure a smooth integration of those children into the formal education sector.

Specific research questions included:

- What information do teachers need to know about students entering preschool and kindergarten in order for them to provide appropriate educational strategies to ensure a smooth integration of those children into the education sector?
- When do schools and teachers need this information?

2. Methodology

The project centred around the consultation of principals, school leaders, early years executive teachers, preschool, and kindergarten teachers within the Belconnen Schools Network. Schools were invited to take part in a short interview to capture their experiences and viewpoints.

Preparation for this activity involved an ethics application and recruitment process. ARACY was granted ethics approval for consultations through the ACT Education Directorate's Analytics and Evaluation Branch.

It was intended the research would commence in July 2021 and reporting occur by early October 2021. However, delays in processing ethics applications due to COVID-19 meant that approval to conduct the research was received in April 2022, approximately seven months after lodgement.

Overall, a total of n=5 schools accepted the invitation to participate in the research, comprising interviews and small groups with n=3 principals and n= 12 staff (preschool and kindergarten teachers). Due to the pressures on ACT schools resulting from lifted COVID restrictions during the 2022 winter season, some schools were unable to participate despite indicating a willingness to be involved. Interviews and small groups were conducted in Term 3 (August and September 2022) and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes in duration, depending on the number of participants consulted.

An ARACY researcher conducted the consultations using a structured Interview Protocol, which had been reviewed by members of the Village's Improved Transitions to Schools Working Group (refer to Appendices). To help ensure the process was smooth and efficient for participants, interviews were offered online or in person. All schools opted to conduct the consultations in person, except for one.

Broadly, the interviews sought to explore what teachers need to know to be better prepared to support their incoming cohort of students; and when this information is required.



3. Understanding the context

This consultation was conducted in schools after the halfway mark of the school year; in Term 3. Recruitment of participants (teachers and school leaders) to take part in the consultations was challenging during this time, largely due to the pressures on ACT schools brought about by lifted COVID restrictions during the 2022 winter season. Aside from the consultations that occurred, additional schools were willing to be involved but were unable to commit to interviews due to staff shortages.

Although not part of the research scope, there was a considerable discussion about the impacts of COVID on schools and staff, in many cases having significant flow-on effects for transition processes. The impacts of COVID on students and families were also discussed at length, with the consultations highlighting that cohorts of families feel disconnected from their child's school due to COVID restrictions, and that behavioural, independence and resilience issues are rife among young students. Across several interviews it was emphasised that the effects of this period will be felt over years to come.

“We’ll definitely be feeling this 5 years down the track, it’s been big on schools.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

“Play is so important, and kids have learnt a lot through COVID. Through their behaviour they’re showing us they’re not ok. More kids will just get up and leave, more kids are trying to get out of the classroom than we’ve ever had before; because they’re saying to us ‘this environment isn’t working for us’. So the temptation for some schools is to become more punitive, whereas my philosophy would be, let’s find out where they’re at, and help them to learn through the learning strategies they have, and if that’s play, let them play. Because that’s so important. We’ll assist with their wellbeing and then get them back to learning. But I know not all schools will respond that way, and for transitions, that concerns me.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

4. Requirements for smooth transitions

It was agreed by most participants that transitions are not limited to the child; they impact the child's family and the school also. Relationships are seen as key to smooth transitions, with open communication between home, school, and the previous educational setting (where applicable), being the most important factor. Relationships are seen as particularly important when a child has learning issues or challenging behaviours, and schools agreed that timely information was helpful, i.e. when a parent shares information and is open about information as early as possible, before the child starts with the school.

"I think there's lots of transition points throughout a student's life. It's from the home to playgroup, from playgroup to preschool, from preschool to Kindy, from junior school to middle school, to senior school, then senior school to highschool, so there's transitions all the way through. Transitions into school are about a supported movement from one setting to another, for a child. Whether that be academically, emotionally, socially, it's all encompassing. It's going to look different for every child. But it's about meeting that child's needs at that point in time; and working together as a team, so with the child, teachers, family member, so that everyone's on the same page, and supportive and working towards the same goals. We very much see school and home as a partnership." (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

"Smooth transitions benefit everyone – students, families, teachers. Any background information allows us to be more prepared. It's a priority for children with special needs so they're prepared for the changes coming up. Term 4 is a big transition term; in addition to Transition Day or Moving Up Day, we are in discussion with parents and teachers, and we might offer more as well." (Executive teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

For some it was acknowledged that part of the 'ideal' transition is the ability to see children through babyhood and toddlerhood, in the community, before they make the transition to school, e.g., by getting to know the family through other siblings at the school, or when families attend on-site activities, such as playgroups and fetes. That ability to 'eyeball' children was viewed as a key element of a successful transition. It was acknowledged that COVID has impacted schools' capacity to have families on site, and therefore those opportunities to get to know children before they begin school, in the community, have been reduced.

"For children not interacting with the education system before school: that's where community is so important, but because we've been so divided and in our houses for a couple of years, that sense of community is fractured and makes it even more complex. I am not confident I know, or



know of, most 2 and 3 year olds in this community [like I once would have done].” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

4.1 Are schools ready for children and families when they transition?

Several themes emerged from the consultations regarding the capacity for schools to provide smooth transitions for families. These are discussed in turn.

Connections with ECECs

The first theme was around relationship connections between schools and early childhood education and care settings (ECECs), and the value placed on the knowledge of a child that ECECs have. While consultations rarely discussed the incidence of information coming from ECECs, some noted small numbers of students who attended both ECEC and preschool, or students transitioning to preschool from ECECs, and the lack of information received for the purposes of transitioning to school. ECEC knowledge of a child is either not considered or is received on an inconsistent basis, and is dependent on families sharing the information.

“Information from daycares isn’t readily available for preschool teachers setting up their classes.” (Preschool Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“Some ELCs are fantastic and they send a little transition story with children, and some don’t so there’s a bit of inconsistency for us. One current preschool child was accompanied with a story about him because they were getting him excited about preschool, and he’s had a successful transition, possibly because of that. He’s the only one I’ve ever seen, and his Mum shared it with the Orientation Pack, with the Information About My Child; she attached it to that.” (Executive Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

Schools raised the issue that some families may not actively share information from ECEC educators, because it ‘isn’t a good news’. This highlights the issue of relationships between schools and ECECs, and the need for efforts to ensure the story of a child is shared, for the benefit of that child’s school transition. This may require awareness raising among families to ensure the benefits to the child are adequately understood. One educator suggested a change to school enrolment forms:

“I think it’s bizarre we need parent consent to contact the ECEC. The parent might say ‘we’ve never had any problems at childcare’, and we’ll think ‘oh great, they must have some fantastic strategies, let’s give them a call’. And the parent won’t agree for whatever reason. That seems to be a logistical barrier to everyone being on the same page. Could that be on the centralised enrolment form? ‘Do you give consent for the school to contact the ECEC?’”(Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

Valuing the story of a child

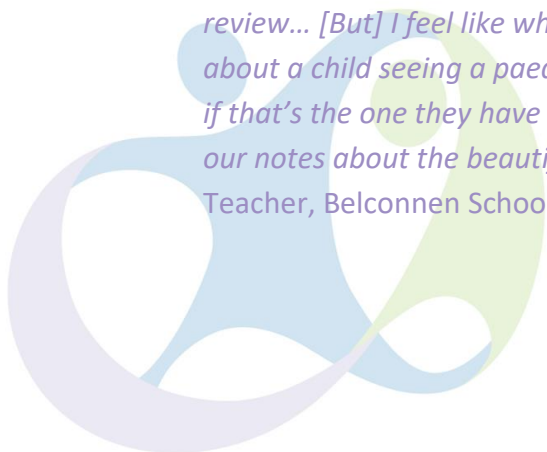
During the discussions another theme arose about the perspectives of school educators regarding the story of a child prior to their transition to school. While there seems to be a growing and greater understanding of the importance of the early years, there was some concern expressed about the attitudes of some teachers (“not all teachers, but some teachers”), regarding the wealth of learning that has already happened before school begins, and the valuable knowledge held by a child’s family about them.

“Everybody in schools understands there needs to be a transition process. But it comes down to what is your fundamental belief about early childhood education, the people who are in it, and what kids learn from those experiences, and your value of the family and what information they bring as well. And I will say it happens less, but I used to hear preschool or Kindy teachers say, ‘now I need to teach them how to learn’ whereas my perspective is kids are great learners anyway, they’ve learnt so many things to get them to where they are now, so it’s the fundamental shift in what you believe children and families bring as early learners within a school setting. (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

“If you believe that children are just empty vessels that are required to be filled by your brilliance as a preschool teacher or kindergarten teacher, then it’s the biggest wasted opportunity, I think, of any transition in education. Because 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds are amazing, they’re very clever, and they know a lot about the world. And their families certainly know a lot about them.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

This theme was also raised in a discussion regarding transition notes between preschool and kindergarten teachers, where some frustration emerged regarding the use of transition notes. In this case Preschool teachers described writing extensive transition notes which could go unused or be misused:

“...and in those notes everything is labelled: where they’re at intellectually, gross motor style, fine motor, socially, are they of EALD status, everything that we know, and what meetings we’ve had with the parents. Who’s child has seen a paediatrician and this is where they’re up to and the next review... [But] I feel like when we do that process, teachers hear the part about a child seeing a paediatrician and they asterisk that child’s name, as if that’s the one they have to look out for, without reading further to see all our notes about the beautiful things that child has done.” (Preschool Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)



This comment was challenged by a teacher who had previously worked in kindergarten, and who described how she was coached when she began:

“When I was learning to be a new teacher one of the things I was told was ‘don’t look at the notes from transition because you’re a fresh teacher with a new child, they could be completely different with you’. But I think having the transition notes allows you – if you’re a good teacher – not to make a judgement, [instead] this is just going to help me in case I need some extra support with that child, or how am I giving the best transition for that child if I don’t know all the information?” (Preschool Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

The issue of information about a child was also described as ‘academic’ by another.

“Teachers would [want all the information before a child starts school] but it’s kind of academic before they have the child in their class. It doesn’t have meaning for them, really, until Day 1. So it’s almost like there needs to be some sort of briefing after week 2 of having the child because there’s real value in having both – having a fresh start without ‘judgements’ about a child, because I also think that can be a disadvantage to a child who has additional needs, but a staff meeting also. (Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

Who is my teacher?

The final theme emerging from the consultations regarding the capacity for schools to provide smooth transitions for families refers to the staffing of classes. The consultations indicated that final staffing of classes in most schools is often unknown until the week before school is due to start. ARACY is aware of an ACT Early Childhood School that used to send postcards to children just before school started for the year, from their teacher. This ensured children had a reminder about school starting, and knew their teacher was thinking of them.

This simple act would certainly help pave the way for a smooth school transition if it were possible for most schools, however, the consultations raised the issue of the challenges involved with staffing before the school year begins.

“There’s a Plan A then there’s a Plan M by the time school starts. There’s so many changes: staff might leave, we might recruit new staff, there’s changes with combinations of staff, or changes with combinations of students as well; a teacher who might fit best out of the younger years might then fit best in the older years because of things occurring; there’s so many different variables in how staffing is made.” (Executive Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“We do at least two transition visits, they visit Kindy and vice versa, so the current Kindy teachers get to know them, and the preschool students get to know the school. This is always done in the Kindy classroom for the following year. But there’s no given with Kindy teachers staying the same. We try not to change a whole team every year, we leave a core, and then build a team around it.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

Another issue emerging under the umbrella of staffing, was in relation to resourcing classes adequately to ensure the youngest students receive the best start to their schooling journey. Some expressed concern that preschool classes are not staffed appropriately to resource the needs of each child starting school.

“If we had that people power in Term 1 to get the children sorted with routine, how to play, separation, we would feel like we’re setting them up for success. What schools are doing at the moment is worse – wait til crisis mode until we put something in place to help that child/situation.”
(Executive Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“My thing is that in the beginning, in preschool, that big transition to school there should be a decent number of funded staff from the government to make sure, there’s a lot happening, it’s a big class, how do we make sure we’re meeting the needs of everyone if we don’t have the ratios quite high? I’ve come from Victoria where there’s always the teacher, diploma and a Cert III, so there’s always three adults regardless, and the class size is 15-18, so it just gives you that [buffer/opportunity for early intervention]. If we had three people to help everyone in the routine, the play skills, the independence, separation from families, we could take a step back and assess the situation with individual children a bit earlier which would help us get the support.” (Preschool Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“It’s a great irony in education that we get small tutorial classes in tertiary education but preschool classes with over 22 kids. Its bizarre.” (Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)



5. Current transition practices

The consultations with school staff commenced with a framing question designed to elicit current practice regarding transition processes at schools. Most described that the experience of COVID has interrupted usual transition processes, however there are some opportunities coming from the COVID transition model that may be adopted going forward.

5.1 Transition processes

As the research was focused on schools rather than ECECs, was the main transition points for those interviewed was either to preschool, or from preschool to kindergarten. COVID impacts aside, transition processes were roughly similar across schools.

Typically, processes involved:

- **Transition/ Orientation Days:** visits during the year with preschool students and children transitioning from other settings, visiting the kindergarten classrooms and Principal's office; using the library, the playground, and the canteen. Some mentioned pre-schoolers using the school gym for gross motor skills activities.
- **Lunch cover:** School staff, in some cases executive teachers and school leaders, doing lunch cover in preschool to gain some familiarity with students before transitioning to kindergarten in the following year.
- **Family engagement opportunities:** Following enrolment offers, inviting families on a school tour, to the fete; signing them up to receive the school newsletter; asking families to complete an 'about you' story for their child; inviting families to a school picnic.
- **Information sessions:** Holding practical information sessions for families, often in Term 4, to provide clear expectations of what students will be doing in kindergarten.
- **"Speed dating" or handover days:** Preschool (previous) teachers and kindergarten (new) teachers discussing each student, often in Orientation or 'O-week', held in the week before students commence the school year. A few weeks into term, they may meet again to share more notes once a kindergarten teacher has gotten to know the child a bit more.

Schools described some of their processes as follows:

"For Kindy, the Exec teachers meet with the child and family to gather relevant information which is passed to the teachers. This happens ahead of the child arriving, so teachers can build a picture and know what to expect. If there's anything else we need to know, we go through the Exec teacher before we start a conversation with the family." (Kindergarten Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“Once we do the orientation sessions for the preschoolers, the teachers and I, and the Exec, spend 10 mins going, ‘ok, name, came to group fine, engaged in a story, loved singing the song, so ok no real concerns there’, then ‘my gosh, did you see name, screamed the whole time, wouldn’t leave her mother, couldn’t come to group’. But I know not every principal does that. I do it because its so important to me. But other Principals might say, ‘the Exec can manage it’. Those initial observations might turn out to be wrong but they give us a really good start. But I’d like to pair that with information from the families, from ECECs. What a rich picture we would have of a child.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

“We have Orientation sessions, where they come to visit the school. The kids get to play, they get to touch base with us, ask any questions, we get to observe and make our own notes, so when it comes time to prepping classes and divvying up behaviours and medicals, there’s a lot of complexities to putting a preschool class together – we have our notes.” (Preschool Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“Preschool is very much part of our school. Even though we’re physically separate. Our two preschool teachers are ex-staff members, which is really important, because they understand where the kids are going and what the expectation is when the kids move here to the school. We do all our PL [professional learning] and staff meetings together. We staff the preschool at lunch time with staff from the school, to give us an insight into the kids. We make sure a number of our Kindy teachers are in the preschool in the year before so they’re looking at the kids, so we’ve got all that information coming across.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

5.2 Impacts of COVID on transition processes

The consultations highlighted the ways in which COVID has impacted transition processes, including activities for preschool students transitioning to kindergarten, parent information sessions and family engagement opportunities.

Schools discussed that to manage COVID when emerging from lockdowns, preschool children were not able to have the ‘normal engagement’ with school. For example, preschool students were unable to visit the library or principal’s office which would normally be a regular part of their week. One principal emphasised that “for six months, those children couldn’t have normal engagement with the school, which impacted them in the next year.”

Information sessions for families were transitioned to online platforms instead, and many schools felt this had been a positive development, allowing families the flexibility to attend from their home at a convenient time or to watch a recording, as needed.

“It’s actually been amazing and I’m going to suggest we run it online again, because parents can attend from the comfort of their own home, we run it at a convenient time (6:30pm) so we’re making sure we’re providing that opportunity for parents to come, and we also record it so anyone not there can watch it.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“What’s better for families? Is face to face better? Not always, it’s very complex.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“As long as we can get that information to families, how it’s done shouldn’t really matter.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

Others described the ways in which opportunities to build relationships with individual families had been compromised, and finding that balance was difficult. In some ways, not having families on premises allowed processes to become more streamlined – e.g., starting classes in the morning without ‘lingering parents’ – however, in the longer term, relationships with families were impacted.

“We don’t have access to the parents as much as we would, we would normally be inviting them in during Kindy and saying, ‘here’s a workshop, this is how you support your child at home, come in and listen to the teachers and do some activities.’ We still put them online. But there’s less uptake. Don’t have daily contact at the door when our Kindy teachers can provide real time feedback, or ask questions, or make suggestions. We don’t have that anymore because there’s that distance.” (Kindergarten teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“COVID supported some things. We’ve been able to say we’re not bringing that practice back. But we’re also not seeing the parent engagement. It leads to ‘anxiety’ from families – they don’t know what’s going on, they don’t know what the environment is, which is tricky. Finding that balance is tricky as well.” (Kindergarten teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“The transitions from parents in the morning, we had to change our process in preschool from inviting our parents in, spending the morning doing quiet activities together. We stopped it because of COVID. We don’t want to implement it, because at times we need the cutoff; we need to close the gates, because they [students] want to hold onto their parents. So there’s been a few times with transition where we’ve had to tell a parent, ‘can you please leave?’ We need to cut it.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

6. Information requirements for teachers/schools

Schools noted that successful transitions come with class configurations, which typically occur in Term 3, and that information feeding into this process would ideally be available six months before classes commence. Others expressed that ideally this information would be available in Term 2 so teachers could follow-up in Term 3. However, it was mentioned that often, some information is only provided one week out from school starting, when interviews with parents generally happen.

The types of information seen as most valuable is that which provides an indication of a child's social and emotional capacity, more than a sense of academic ability. Behavioural information is also seen as key – whether a child has the ability to self regulate, and their capacity for expressing their needs.

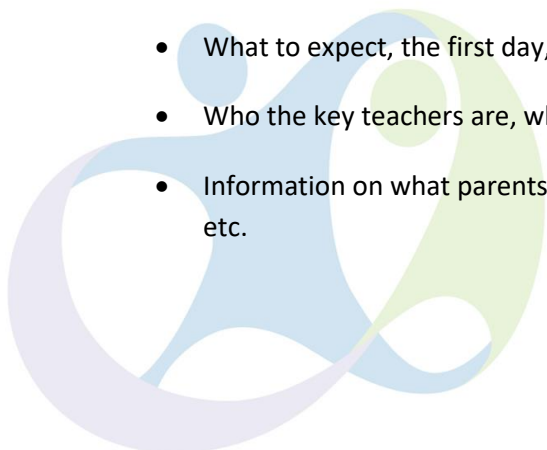
There was agreement that the types of information required by teachers are:

- Communication levels (capacity to express needs)
- Social and emotional regulation
- Strengths/difficulties
- Toileting
- Medical history
- Family background – norms and expectations
- Holistic, qualitative information.

It was noted where students have disability, more lead time is preferable, particularly where Capital Works are required. However, it was often noted that families with children in this situation would often be upfront and forthcoming with this information on behalf of their child.

Schools also noted that feeding into smooth transitions are clear expectations of what a child will be doing at school. One school mentioned providing a presentation to parents in Term 4, which covers important information such as:

- What to pack on first day of school
- Where go, what do on first day
- What to expect, the first day, week, term
- Who the key teachers are, who students will go with
- Information on what parents can do to prepare their child, carrying backpacks, toileting, etc.



7. Transition statements and the broader context

During the consultations with schools, it was explained that the purpose of the research was to better understand what teachers need to know to be better prepared to support their incoming cohort of students; and when this information is required. It was also explained that the findings would be used to feed into the development of an improved transition process, including the development of a Transition Statement.

While schools were unanimous in their support for ensuring positive transition experiences for all students and their families, the concept of Transition Statements received mixed feedback, largely focused on the quality of the information and how it would be used. Questions were raised including:

- Who's doing them?
- Who's moderating the information?
- What workload is required?
- What are the expectations around these?

It was suggested that if something was universally implemented across the ACT as documentation that would travel with the child/family, the *absence* of that information would also raise an alert about that child/family.

Discussions about Transition Statements often led to a broader discussion about the need for stronger connections between health services and schools. One of the key issues mentioned was a disconnect between the ACT Child Health Blue Book (and the services involved in the Book), and schools.

“Would it be like a Blue Book? That would tell us so much – if they come to school without a Blue Book or a Transition Statement; straight away we can flag this family for more support, so its how you see it.” (Executive Teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“The absence of a Transition Statement would also be good indicator, or good background to have, to know they haven't engaged with anything previously.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“We still have poor connections between the Blue Book, all health services involved in that book, and school. There has to be a better way for us to connect and understand. If a health professional has a concern in that space, and yet if nothing happens – I get that it's complex and we don't want to intervene too early, and we don't want to set them up on the wrong trajectory – but somehow I'm not 100% convinced NDIS does this or

does it well, and I'm not saying the early intervention system we had in the ACT was the best system ever, but it connected people. And brought those small group, play-based programs of intervention. Which helps parents find out about things. People don't ask questions if they don't have relationships. If they don't put themselves out there. That's been the downfall of NDIS because it's mostly individually based.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

“Awhile ago there were a lot of intervention playgroups around Canberra. Families would be identified through a number of things – maybe through a social worker, or Therapy ACT, those sort of groups were good for developing awareness and parents could then talk to the preschool teacher with a bit more confidence. We know it's sometimes a bit scary to talk to these people [points to other teachers, laughs], I acknowledge that. I've found that with a couple of parents – sometimes it's scary to go into preschool if you haven't been there before. It's the first step into an educational setting sometimes if you haven't been to childcare... Not everyone goes to childcare...” (Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

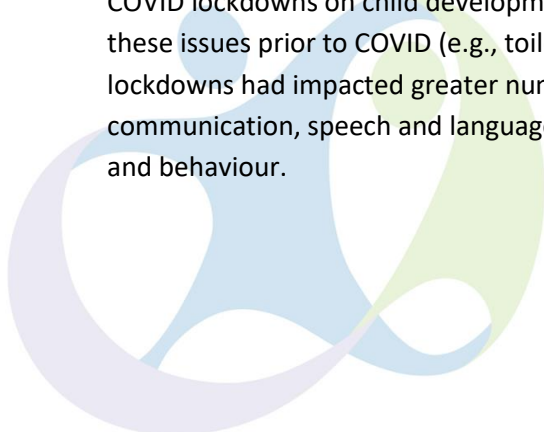
Consultations often moved into broader discussions about the capacity of schools and early years teachers to connect families confidently and supportively with services, when they observed students needing support. Educators expressed concern that some children displaying higher needs (emotional, behavioural, or otherwise) were not being assessed before attending school. These discussions highlighted several issues, including the:

- impact of COVID lockdowns on child development
- challenges of raising issues with families
- awareness and availability of assessment services and early intervention supports.

These are discussed in turn.

7.1 Impacts of COVID lockdowns on children

The consultations highlighted that most schools feel strongly they are witnessing the impact of COVID lockdowns on child development. In some cases, educators had begun observing some of these issues prior to COVID (e.g., toileting independence, challenging behaviours), but many felt the lockdowns had impacted greater numbers of children across a broader range of areas such as communication, speech and language development, fine motor skills development, socialisation and behaviour.



“We’ve noticed speech and language this year. Some children in preschool we’re often finding they will say a whole blurb, and we can’t understand what they’ve said.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“The fine motor skills are not there.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“These children were 2 and 3 years old when they would normally go to storytime, playgroups, but COVID hit, so they were in lockdown instead. A huge chunk of socialisation is missing.” (Executive teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“We’re not surprised by the AEDC data because we see it in our classes here. I’ve had to put an LSA in each of my Kindy classes, because they’re not where we would expect our kindergarten classes to be. They really struggle, and I have 3 of my strongest teachers on kindergarten this year – I’m very confident that it’s not bad teaching. Our kids are nowhere near where previous cohorts have been.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

“I do think it’s COVID-related. We’re seeing the impact of children having had two years of working with staff in masks. You’re not getting the full information that kids will get from seeing faces (unconscious stuff), not clearly able to see how words are formed.” (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

“COVID has impacted families by locking them away from extended families, so they don’t have another set of eyes seeing something that child is doing, and people didn’t send their kids to child care after COVID because they thought they were too vulnerable. And we could see the difference in them. If they haven’t accessed any ECEC, if they haven’t got any social life, then it’s very hard for them to transition to Kindy, which is more structured and routine-based. And we have to step back and build the social skills first before they get into the routine.” (Executive teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

Schools also noted more social difficulties in class and on the playground, with resilience levels at lower levels. Toilet independence was also raised as a growing issue.

“Issues around toileting are growing – it used to be one child, toileting wasn’t a large issue. Now, we’re bringing in specialists, supporting toileting, changing children, we’re doing that in kindergarten, and by increasing numbers. And having those conversations with parents about how to toilet

your child; how to successfully support your child to toilet. It's mind-blowing." (Principal, Belconnen Network)

"An increase in toileting issues. So many come with nappies to 4 year old preschool, and Kindy..." (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

All these impacts, observed across a greater number of children, have had significant effects on the teaching profession. Many experienced educators expressed the extent to which the last several years have brought about unprecedented levels of stress and hardships in their school communities, and on staff themselves.

"Through my 15 years as a preschool teacher, I feel like the behaviour is getting worse and worse. I don't know what it is. It could be with COVID; there's been a lot of pressures on families, and that filters down, the stress, anxiety, it gets brought to school. When I started my career, it was 'oh he pushed me' type of thing. Now we have preschoolers flipping tables, actually lifting tables and flipping them. To me that is like, what is going on?!" (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

"It's also that families are extremely stressed. I have more calls on my student equity funds than I've ever had before in any time of my principalship." (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)

"I've been teaching for 10 years and this is one of the most challenging years of teaching I've had, and I've always worked in high needs/special needs schools, so that says something." (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

"My team and I are exhausted, like it's week 10 Term 4. Yesterday I had a mum in here crying because she went to refill her kid's Ritalin prescription – we fought hard to get a diagnosis because they're really impacted by their ADHD at school. It's so hard to get a diagnosis, so hard to support the family to get there, but we got there, we've seen a change in behaviour, they're finally starting to learn. So she goes to fill the Ritalin script and it's long-term out of stock. She can't get into the paediatrician for 6 months to get a different script, and you have to have a different script, and a GP can't do that. She just came in here crying. Those things are happening in our community. These are really tricky times." (Principal, Belconnen Schools Network)



7.2 Challenging conversations with families

Schools also expressed the challenges of alerting families to potential development issues in their child. Some felt there was a lack of knowledge about child development within the community more broadly, which impacted families accessing early intervention services. Others suggested some parents could be closed, in denial or outwardly rejecting of suggestions to consider having an assessment made.

“There’s stigma, baggage. Some parents don’t want to hear that their kid’s different.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“In preschool sometimes we see situations where, obviously parents love their child, but they might be clueless about child development, so a child development service could have been accessed way before coming to preschool. That would be the ideal.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“It’s hard because we’re unable to put some things in place for some students going into Kindy for next year if the parents are in denial.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“We’re going through this right now where it’s been a semester with the students, and the growth we’ve seen isn’t at the development that we’d like to see. And so we’re now asking parents and having that discussion about our observations, our concerns. That it might be time we access some allied health. The majority of parents are really receptive, they’re like ‘yep, that’s what we’re seeing at home as well’. But there are some that disagree with our observations and they’re feeling they can’t or don’t want to have the discussion with us.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

It was acknowledged that schools and teachers need to form trusting relationships with families before trickier conversations, such as those around child development issues, can be had. Given it was commonly expressed that family engagement opportunities had been limited due to COVID, it is evident this trust may not have developed prior to these conversations occurring, impacting the success of some interactions with parents regarding their child.

“And it’s not just the children. We need to get on the parents’ side. They need to know that we care, that we’re open to any type of conversations with them, for us to then say, ‘hey have you ever thought about CDS?’ But you have to get that relationship with the parent before you can go and spring it on them and say ‘we think your child needs to have speech therapy’. That takes time.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“I also think parents’ own experiences with school really has an impact on how receptive they are to things when you bring it up as a teacher to a parent, because my own experience has been you start talking to parents at the start of the year and they’ll have their guard up, but by the middle of the year, once they’ve realised we’re trying to help, support, they’ll start to open up a little bit more, and that’s when you’ll hear they’ve had some quite negative experiences. So that really is a blocker for some families.”
(Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

7.3 Accessing health services and supports

The consultations revealed that teachers often feel pressure to make judgements about whether a child would benefit from supports or services, such as the [Child Development Service](#) through the Community Services Directorate (CDS), because of expectations on funding requirements, or feeling there is a limited window of opportunity to make a positive impact before a child exits the early years.

“We aren’t those [health] professionals, we’re teachers. I might have an inkling that a child has some learning difficulties or whatever, but sometimes I don’t feel comfortable saying to a parent, ‘thankyou for allowing allied health to come out; here’s all the things that have been noted’. I’m not a doctor. I can’t say, ‘they need to have physiotherapy, they need to have this...’. That also adds onto a teacher’s workload doesn’t it? Plus we get it wrong sometimes.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“We’re finding it so difficult at preschool, because there’s so many complexities from outside organisations, like allied health. Take the preschool matrix area for funding, for example – we need the funding, but if we don’t provide evidence for the funding we don’t get it for some of our kids coming through. The tight turnaround to get that paperwork done is crazy, because we see these kids (only) 5 days/fortnight, so in a term that’s only 25 days. How are we supposed to be able to get to know these children in that way to be able to comment that they need speech, or physio, or they need an observation from allied health, or we need an extra person..?”
(Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

“It’s so challenging, and some kids also take some time to warm up, so we may think maybe there’s some cognitive things there that we didn’t notice because we thought they were just very shy, because they’re settling in. By the time we get to know these children well enough, now you’ve got to



submit all this paperwork.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“By the time they’re six years old the door is just slammed shut. Poor old preschool and Kindy teachers are trying so hard to get parents to engage in the support services, or even the assessment services.” (Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

“In preschool we try to push for action. We’ve got a parent who has shut us down, but in my mind I know there’s so many things that are going to happen in primary school, when he transitions that he’s going to find very, very challenging. If we can’t get him that support now, what will happen..?” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

In some cases, schools described a ‘siloiing of services’, which in turn led to feeling uninformed about which services can do what, and how they can be engaged to support a child. A desire for greater connection between schools and health services was expressed, with opportunities like drop-in clinics being made available on site at schools.

“I would love to get more educated on CDS, because I’m sending these parents there and I don’t even know what they’re all about apart from the pamphlet we have. We have parents come to us and they say ‘I went to CDS, and they said why did you send us?’ We don’t really know a lot about them, apart from that pamphlet, and then we’re referring these parents to go and see them.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“In some ways teachers are being asked to make uninformed decisions almost, because they don’t know the children well enough, there’s no health training, we don’t have therapists on the site. It would be wonderful to have CDS doing clinics in schools, instead of these silos that operate around support services, I don’t think are doing anyone any favours.” (Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

“What those siloed services require is resourceful, assertive parents to access them and to follow. Often the ones slipping through the gaps are the ones who aren’t resourceful, they’re not assertive, they could have language barriers, they might have disabilities themselves, so we’re just failing them, over and over.” (Community Coordinator, Belconnen Schools Network)

It was suggested that a ‘school readiness’ screening be added to the Blue Book, so that families are aware of these types of assessments, and conversations with educators are more normalised.

“Sort of like the Kindy health checks, but targetting the things that are in allied health services, like psychologist, speech therapist, and a heads up that this might happen in preschool, so we’re not in a position where we’re springing it on the parents. It will be like ‘do you remember doing the 4 year old health check?’ and then we can say, ‘well we think you might need to re-engage with CDS.’” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)

“All stakeholders have a role to play. If they can be a part of the conversation from the beginning – if there’s any concerns from a 2 year old, 3 yr old, 4 yr old screening, all helps start that early intervention, and that is key for any success. And I feel like we have to have to educate our parents that whatever the child needs to make them successful in life, let’s just do it.” (Preschool teacher, Belconnen Schools Network)



8. Discussion and implications

The Improved Transitions to Schools Project highlighted a range of processes employed to transition the youngest students to school. These vary from setting to setting, but always strive to have the child and their family at the centre. COVID-19 has presented challenges to these processes, but schools have responded by shaping these to best suit their setting and context.

Overall, the consultations indicated:

- The main transition points for schools, are usually into preschool, or from preschool to kindergarten. COVID aside, transition processes were roughly similar across schools.
- That COVID has largely impacted school transition processes in terms of constraining transition visits for preschool students attending kindergarten, shifting family information sessions online, and considerably impacting family engagement opportunities.
- That when a child transitions from an ECEC to preschool or kindergarten, there is inconsistent communication from one to the other, indicating relationship connections between schools and ECECs could be improved to enhance transitions for children and their families.
- That impacts associated with COVID lockdowns have been observed in children attending preschools and kindergarten, including in developmental, psycho-social, and other ways, with teachers often feeling underprepared and under pressure to provide adequate information to assist children to receive an assessment for support.

Broadly, the interviews sought to explore what teachers need to know to be better prepared to support their incoming cohort of students; and when this information is required. Given the allocation of teachers may not be finalised until one week out from school starting, it is important that the school leaders and/or executive teachers have access to the information required to best support incoming students. This can be readily on hand for classroom teachers once they are allocated a class.

In terms of information requirements, schools unanimously agreed the most valuable types of information are those providing an indication of a child's social and emotional capacity, more than a sense of academic ability. Behavioural information is also seen as key – whether a child has the ability to self regulate, and their capacity for expressing their needs.

The timing of receipt of information is also an important factor, with schools keen to have information as early as possible, such as in Term 2 so follow-up with families can occur in Term 3.

The consultations highlighted that the impacts of COVID have left growing numbers of young students with behavioural, independence and resilience issues, as witnessed by teachers and school leaders, and cohorts of families feeling disconnected from their child's school. Schools were emphatic that the effects of this period will be felt over years to come, highlighting the strong need for appropriate resourcing of schools in the early primary years.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Before interview:

Explain the aim and objectives of the Project:

- Who is Village, what is it trying to achieve, why does it care about transitions from ECEC to preschool and then to kindy? Who is ARACY, why are they doing the research?
- The purpose of the Improved Transitions to School project is to support improved transitions for all children and their families to formal education. This will be achieved by identifying a transition statement and process – starting with transitions from ECECs to formal schooling (Kindy) – and supporting its implementation in ‘early adopter’ schools in Belconnen.
- To ensure teachers and schools have the information they need, when they need it, about the incoming cohort to support positive transition experiences for students and their families.
- To ensure ECECs have systems and practice in place to support transition into formal education > ECEC > preschool or Kindy
- Mention ‘Transition Statements’ as documentation that will travel with the child/family.

Explain purpose of the interview:

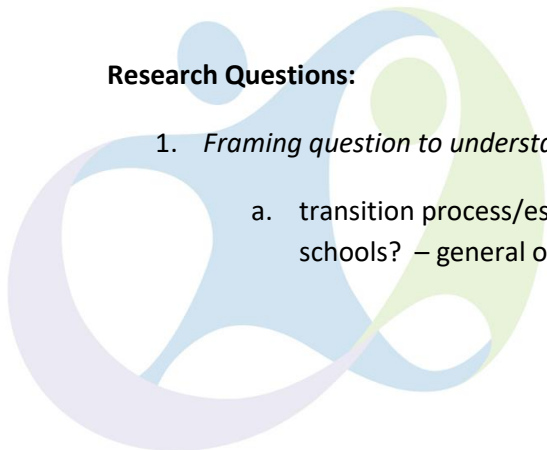
- Through our interviews with schools, we want to determine what teachers need to know to be better prepared to support their incoming cohort of students; and when this information is required.
- These findings will be used to feed into the development of a transition process, including the development of a Transition Statement.

Housekeeping:

- Duration of interview 30-45 mins
- We want to hear what you think. You are the experts. No right or wrong.
- Recording for reporting purposes (however individuals won’t be identified etc).

Research Questions:

1. *Framing question to understanding personal experience, current practice.*
 - a. transition process/es from ECEC and/or preschool to Kindy, in this school, previous schools? – general observations?



- b. Information flow from ECEC to preschool to kindy – general observations?
 - c. In your opinion, what works best, doesn't work?
2. *Current transition practices/approach; cultural aspect of transitions (relationships etc); interacting with the system.*
- a. What does a successful/smooth/effective transition to school look like? What does the concept of a 'smooth transition' actually mean?
 - b. What does it look like for a child and their family?
 - c. What does it look like for the school or teacher?
 - d. Explore the relationship between a school, preschool and ECEC – how important? How best strengthened? Who's role?
3. *Needs/requirements for smooth transitions to occur (not information, but resources, actions like open days)*
- a. What is needed (e.g., actions, resources by ECECs) for smooth transitions to occur?
 - b. What are the needs of children/families for smooth transitions?
4. *Information requirements for teachers/schools:*
- a. What piece/s of information assist teachers, schools in planning a successful transition for each student and their family to school?
 - b. Most valued/helpful? Least important?
 - c. What is the best timing for receipt of this information? Why?
5. *Implementing Transition Statement (TS)*
- a. Would you see any benefit or value in a Transition Statement? Why? Why not?
 - b. What might a TS look like?
 - c. What would it take for a TS to be valued/adopted by both families and teachers/schools?
 - d. What is a realistic way that teachers/schools can be engaged in this process to make transitions more successful?
6. *Inclusive Transition Statements (TS)*
- a. How can we ensure that every child is included in a TS? How can ECECs & preschools best share their knowledge of a child's story?

- b. What about children not engaged in ECEC? How do other services/supports have a role, e.g., supported playgroup, MACH nurses, family services and health professionals?
- c. Child's voice: is it important to include child's voice in the TS? How could child voice be used to inform transitioning? What's the most powerful way you've seen the child's voice captured for this type of thing?

Closing interview:

Any further comments?

Thank you, this is what is going to happen with what you have told us etc.

