



Dear Minister Grace and Director General De'Ath,

I write on behalf of our Guugu Yimithirr people of the Guugu Yimithirr Alliance in Hope Vale. We engage as a people to find solutions to our problems, and we amplify our voices on issues that affect us so that those who hold the power can resolve them as only they can.

The decision to allow local councils to offer kindergarten service, who neither have the scale nor the expertise to do so has resulted poorly in Hope Vale and we write as concerned community members that want the best for our children and their education.

Our children have a much greater chance of education success if the local primary school delivers kindergarten, which they have shown they can successfully do. We have lobbied the department for years for the school to provide kindergarten but it has not progressed.

We implore you to resolve this decade-old problem, which is having a devastating impact on our children's early learning.

Abysmal kindergarten outcomes for attending and non-attending students alike

The main function of kindergarten is to prepare children to be school-ready. Reece Toomey, Principal at our local school, says that none of the 23 children who attended the Hope Vale Kindergarten in 2022 started Prep in 2023 school ready. We have copies of the children's testing showing their lack of pre-literacy language, numeracy and socialisation skills.

The school normally uses the Prep year to consolidate students' skills and literacy and numeracy levels on par with mainstream Queensland children. Instead, the school spent the 2023 Prep year doing the kindergarten's job of getting the students emotionally, socially, academically and materially school-ready. Despite the teachers' exceptional effort, only four of the 23 children will be at grade level by the end of this year.

Poor kindergarten attendance

Both the 2022 and 2023 kindergarten cohorts had chronically poor attendance throughout the year, with a daily average of 8 attendees out of the 22 enrolments. Kindergarten is voluntary, but other kindergartens in Queensland work hard to get higher Indigenous participation. Parents want their children to attend a well-run kindergarten where they are welcome and their children enjoy the experience and want to attend. Parents in Hope Vale are discouraged from sending their children.

No referrals or support for children with complex needs

Several children in the 2022 and 2023 kindergarten cohorts have complex needs that required additional support. They did not receive department-funded support to assist with their disabilities.

These children also missed out on the specialised teaching support they are entitled to, which would have aided their development and improved their crucial learning skills for transitioning to school.

The school principal pointed out that our kindergarten children need access to education experts who are only in the school to ensure they receive a quality program.

Below standard rating of kindergarten by the education department

The Queensland Government acknowledges the value of kindergarten and is now making it free for all Queensland children. But free does not mean equal. The greatest concentration of poor-performing kindergartens in Queensland are those with the highest number of Indigenous children in them.

The education department regulates kindergartens, and last reviewed our kindergarten in 2015. This audit noted that the kindergarten did not meet the national quality standard in four key criteria with the status being 'working towards'. However, nobody has followed up to check whether these criteria have been improved. It is only because of our lobbying there is now a review scheduled for 2024. But this is too little, too late for the approximately two hundred children who have gone through the kindergarten.

The benefits of our kindergarten being delivered by the local school

We are a learning community that cares about the education of our children. We try to fix problems and we need the government to do the same.

Our Hope Vale school is reviewed every four years. The 2023 review commended the school on the quality of its education program, its professional development of the teaching team, the high performance of its Indigenous staff, and the strong engagement of the local community (as evidenced by our participation in the review).

Advantages of the Hope Vale school delivering kindergarten:

- Professional supervision of the kindergarten as just another classroom in the school. This will ensure that children get the same high level of support and focus.
- Support with complex needs for all children through the schools' coordinated special needs and wellbeing program.
- Kindergarten teacher joins the professional school team in a collegial dialogue and participates in a range of professional development.
- School-family engagement officers work with families every day to address attendance and other school readiness issues.

Advantages for the community:

- Kindergarten becomes another year and receives all of the support in program planning, monitoring and improvement that is received by every other year.
- Access to a community-designed education program that includes learning their local language alongside English.
- More specialist staff interacting with kindergarten children daily, ensuring greater support.
- Existing staff can become state government employees.
- The local council can draw revenue from buildings and facilities.

The outcome is that all kindergarten children would be school-ready at the start of prep.

Evidence the school can achieve these results

In 2020/21, two teachers at the school enrolled their children into the local kindergarten. They asked the kindergarten staff if they could come across and teach the children literacy and numeracy at the kindergarten for 20 minutes a day.

This had been a request of the school for many years but were only sometimes given permission depending on the whim of the kindergarten teacher and whether they liked the school's pedagogy.

The result of the help the teachers provided in 2020/21 was that the entire kindergarten cohort started Prep literacy and numeracy school ready. Throughout Prep, the students remained at or above the mainstream level. The results of this testing are available and can be provided. This student cohort has since maintained their achievement consistent with their year level in future years. This should be the norm.

The community support this decision

Over the past six years, we have formally engaged with parents who have children under five years of age.

Throughout 2021 to 2023, we undertook student testing and workshops. This co-designed project enabled us to establish a playschool for three-year-old children, which engages mothers and toddlers and focuses on literacy, oral language, music and song, and learning through play. The program includes nutrition, home routines, managing behaviour, and personal health. It is well attended, and the wellbeing of mothers and toddlers is well supported by other agency participation.

We conducted two parent surveys in terms 1 and 3, 2023, focusing on what school-ready means and what is required in kindergarten. The first survey had 92 respondents and the second had 40.

A key finding in both was the emphatic confirmation that the majority of parents want their children to be ready to start school and be:

- **ready to learn:** say and read their letters and numbers
- **prepped for routines:** be able to listen and follow instructions
- **socially skilled:** know how to engage and play with other children
- **culturally proud:** know their people, cultures and traditions.

Our efforts to address the issue

In 2017, a group of our local leaders and educators visited best practice providers in early childhood. We saw firsthand what quality in an early childhood program looks like and what standard we wanted for our community.

We then reached an agreement with the previous Hope Vale Mayor, Greg McLean, and the current CEO, Stephen Linnane, which guaranteed their support for the school delivering kindergarten. However, following the council elections, this decision has not been actioned by the new council or school leadership.

Currently, the council will not even engage with us on this issue. Multiple email and phone requests to meet the mayor and CEO have gone unanswered. Copies of these emails as well as the dates and times of the phone calls can be provided on request.

We wrote to Shirlee Gallo, the Regional Director of Far North Queensland, and met twice. She advised us that Brisbane makes decisions about the kindergarten providers and that the council would have to agree to relinquish the licence for the school to assume the provision

of kindergarten. It is difficult to accept that a department would allow a contractor to do as they please indefinitely year after year, including the provision of a substandard service.

Tania Porter, the department's Deputy Director General, Early Childhood, visited our community and met with us on the 5 October 2023. It was good to receive the department's new Workforce Strategy, but this will take years to have any impact on our situation, and our children should not have to wait that long to put kindergarten in the hands of educators.

There is an unacceptable inertia to establish the improvements required to make kindergarten work in our community. In 2024, we insist that our children get the same standard of kindergarten that is on offer to all other Queensland kindergarten children.

We are seeking an urgent meeting with Minister Grace and Director General De'Ath as soon as possible to talk about the Hope Vale school being able to provide kindergarten in Hope Vale in January 2024.

Please contact me to coordinate a meeting at agyp@gmail.com or phone 0740427200. Alternatively, Amanda Fyfe at Pama Futures 0409881229 and afyfe@pamafutures.org.au.

Yours sincerely

Peter Gibson
On behalf of Alliance of Guugu Yimithirr People (AGYP)