

APPLICABLE TO	All Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Maitland Newcastle
DOCUMENT OWNER	Head of Teaching and Learning Services
APPROVAL DATE	2017
APPROVED BY	CSO Leadership Team
SCHOOL ACTIONS	System Policy- Schools are to ensure their practices are consistent with this policy. Schools are to develop specific procedures aligned to this policy.
LAST REVIEW DATE/S	October 2021
NEXT REVIEW DATE	2024
RELATED DOCUMENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Education Policy CSO 2013 • K-12 Assessment Policy CSO 2019 • Gifted Education K-12 Policy CSO 2021 • Learning Support Policy CSO 2017 • Learning Framework CSO 2016 • MN Catholic Schools Learning Framework 2017 • Programming K-12 Policy CSO 2019 • Reporting Policy K-12 2017 • Sustainability Policy CSO 2018 • Vision Statement for Catholic Schools CSO 2016 • Wellbeing and Pastoral Care Policy CSO 2017

Purpose

The Early Learning Procedure aims to support and inform the Early Learning Policy. It reflects a system-wide commitment to Early Learning and respects the rights, capabilities and needs of the Early Learner to achieve success and build the successful foundations to flourish in their learning and wellbeing.

Scope

This procedure applies to all primary schools and system personnel in the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

Step by Step

The following information sets out how stakeholders develop and implement agreed Early Learning philosophy and pedagogy. School procedures should reflect the four Key Elements of Data, Play, Environments and Transitions as below.

Catholic Schools Office

The Catholic Schools Office is responsible for providing support and guidance in the development and implementation of this policy including professional Early Learning opportunities and resources.

Relevant system personnel within a Catholic school context are responsible for:

- overseeing the implementation of this policy including advice, support, resourcing and budgetary considerations
- supporting schools within their own context to implement the Key Elements of Early Learning
- coordinating the collection of relevant data for system and school use from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and other data sources, to inform practice and decision making
- disseminating information and research
- facilitating professional learning opportunities, particularly in the areas of Data, Play, Environments and Transitions.

Schools

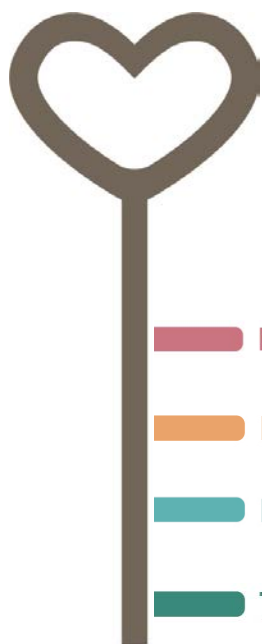
School leaders within a Catholic school context are responsible for:

- overseeing the implementation of this policy including advice, support, resourcing and budgetary considerations
- implementing the Key Elements of Early Learning by ensuring Data, Play, Environments and Transitions are an integral part of pedagogy and practice
- planning for and embedding a sustainable approach to Early Learning within the school's philosophy of learning
- using data and evidence based research to inform practice
- enabling a curriculum that meets and furthers individual student rights, needs and capabilities
- supporting well-planned and articulated educational and transition programs utilising a variety of approaches and best practice appropriate to the Early Learner
- providing students with access to supportive social, pastoral and educational environments to realise their holistic wellbeing
- communicating, consulting and collaborating with parents and the diocesan community to develop shared understanding about Early Learning.

Teachers of Early Learners within a Catholic school context are responsible for:

- implementing the Key Elements of Early Learning by ensuring Data, Play, Environments and Transitions are an integral part of pedagogy and practice
- using data and evidence based research to inform practice

- implementing a curriculum that meets and furthers individual student rights, needs and capabilities
- supporting well-planned and articulated educational and transition programs utilising a variety of approaches and best practice appropriate to the Early Learner
- meeting the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers including NESA requirements
- actively engaging in professional learning opportunities to educate themselves about contemporary understandings of the rights, needs and capabilities of Early Learners.



Key Elements

Under Guiding Principles of the Early Learning Policy, four Key Elements are identified. The Early Learning Policy commits to evidence-based research in relation to the following Key Elements of Early Learning:

DATA

Data that informs and builds rich learning opportunities and capacity to know the Early Learner

PLAY

The importance of play as a pedagogy and the importance of self-determined play

ENVIRONMENTS

Indoor and outdoor environments that invite, enable and enrich learning and support environmental sustainability

TRANSITIONS

Transitions from home and prior to school settings to school and transitions across the early years of school.

DATA

Data that informs and builds rich learning opportunities and capacity to know the Early Learner

Understanding of the rights, capabilities and needs of the Early Learner and the importance of providing appropriate learning opportunities is embedded in the diocesan [Learning Framework](#). A high priority is given to the school-wide analysis and discussion of systematically collected data ([NSIT 2012, p.8](#)).

Relevant data from a range of sources is used to inform professional judgements. This includes, but is not limited to:

1. Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)

The AEDC is the data and evidence-based research used to inform practice in Early Learning. It is a national measure of children's development as they enter their first year of full-time schooling. Data for the AEDC is collected every three years, starting from 2009. It operates as a population-based measure, providing evidence to guide planning and service provision to ensure children are supported through their early years, school years and beyond. The AEDC assesses against five domains: stating that positive

learning is correlated with having higher levels of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge.

Census information gathered under the five domains includes:

- **physical health and wellbeing** – whether a child is healthy, independent, ready for school each day;
- **social competence** – looks at how a child plays and gets along with others;
- **emotional maturity** – whether a child is able to concentrate, help others, share, is self-confident;
- **language and cognitive skills** – whether a child is interested in reading and writing, can count and recognise numbers and shapes;
- **communication skills and general knowledge** – whether a child can tell a story, communicate with adults and children, articulate themselves.

Census data is collected and maintained at a national level in order to help communities, governments and policy-makers pinpoint the types of services, resources and support needed to improve the health, wellbeing and learning of Australian children.

School principals receive an AEDC School Profile which provides information about the number of children attending the school who are considered to be developmentally vulnerable and those performing well, compared with all other children across Australia. The data provides significant information for school planning. Schools are encouraged to access and analyse the [Community Profile](#) for their area.

The AEDC has now introduced a new measure of early childhood development to complement its current suite of indicators. The Multiple Strength Indicator (MSI) is a strength based measure that provides information on children's developmental strengths as they commence full-time school. By highlighting what is going well for children, the measure enables communities, schools and policy makers to seek a solution driven approach that builds on children's existing capabilities to give them the best start in life.

Challenges remain for some schools in relation to awareness and analysis of the AEDC, uncertainty about how it fits with school improvement and best practice, or uncertainty about how to address challenges faced by children and families. A range of resources are available to schools to guide how to use the data and support a deepening understanding of the children and families in their schools and communities. Examples of how others have used the AEDC can provide a starting place for schools to engage with the data.

2. Transition to School Data

The NSW Transition to School Statement, first introduced in September 2014 records a child's strengths, interests and preferred ways of learning. Its aims are to improve communication between prior to school services, families, the child and schools about children's transition and provide greater assistance for schools to prepare for children entering Kindergarten and thus, to plan appropriate learning and

teaching programs. Furthermore, completed statements provide opportunity for schools to make meaningful connections with children and families, as they transition into a new learning environment.

The Transition to School Statement is appropriate for all children transitioning to school. For children with disabilities and/or additional needs it can be used in conjunction with further support documentation. Refer to the handbook entitled *Guidelines for the Enrolment and Transition of Students with Disabilities and/or Additional Needs*.

3. Best Start (As of 2019, only administered in Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan Schools)

Best Start Kindergarten assessment is a mandatory, one-on-one assessment for Catholic schools in Maitland-Newcastle Diocese and in schools across NSW. The purpose of the Best Start Assessment process is to provide information for Kindergarten teachers to:

- build on each student's current knowledge and experiences in literacy and numeracy
- develop quality teaching and learning programs that support students in achieving Early Stage 1 syllabus outcomes

Assessing the learning of Kindergarten students takes many forms and is essential to the planning and delivery of quality teaching and learning programs for all students. (Administration Guide. NSW DET, p5).

The Best Start assessment must be completed by the end of Week 5, Term One.

PLAY

The importance of play as a pedagogy and the importance of self-determined play

In *The importance of play: A report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*, Dr David Whitebread states that 'play' is sometimes contrasted with 'work' and characterised as a type of activity which is essentially unimportant, trivial and lacking in any serious purpose. As such, it is seen as something that children do because they are immature, and as something they will grow out of as they become adults. However, this view is mistaken. Play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. The value of play is increasingly recognised by researchers and within the policy arena, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being (2012).

Recommendations of *The importance of play* include the need to:

- 1. promote awareness and change attitudes regarding children's play**
- 2. encourage improved provisions of time and space for children's play**
- 3. support arrangements enabling children to experience risk and develop resilience and self-reliance through play**
- 4. establish funding agencies that promote play and play research.**

In a school context, both play as a pedagogy and self-determined play are crucially important to the Early Learner. Play as a pedagogy is the play which accesses the curriculum for the child. Self-determined

play is the play the child engages in during recess or lunch; time where the child is able to make choices and decisions about how, where and what to play.

Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine. Play engages higher order thinking skills. When children play with other children they create social groups, test out ideas, challenge each other's thinking and build new understandings. Play can expand children's thinking and enhance their desire to know and to learn. Play can therefore promote positive dispositions toward learning (EYLF, 2009).

The importance of play as a pedagogy

Play is fundamental to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and is identified in the Australian Curriculum as of equal importance as other pedagogies. Play as a pedagogy accesses the curriculum for students in the early years of school.

Teachers are encouraged to make professional judgements about how to deliver the curriculum in appropriate, contextualised and cross-disciplinary ways. Teachers are able to choose how best to introduce concepts and processes and how to progressively deepen understanding to maximise the engagements and learning of every student (ACARA, 2011 p.19).

Research literature does not propose one way of implementing learning through play.

In practice, teachers are encouraged to:

- **adopt play as a pedagogy to access to curriculum outcomes and content**
- **develop play opportunities which enable the learner to explore, discover and construct knowledge in a collaborative context**
- **provide literacy and numeracy opportunities in all play experiences**
- **develop flexible and meaningful environments which enable interaction with curriculum**
- **provide opportunities for children to engage with loose parts and natural materials**
- **enable outdoor learning**
- **explore the integrated nature of learning**
- **observe, document and collect evidence of children's progress towards learning outcomes**
- **develop play as a context for involvement and deep thinking**
- **engage in play reflection with the children**
- **explore the imaginative, constructive and investigative, exploratory, physical and sensory nature of play as a crucial part of a rich curriculum.**

Children do not magically become different kinds of learners as they move from prior to school settings into the first years of school, so there are principles of teaching, learning and provision that apply to educators in both sectors (ECA/ACARA, 2012).

The importance of self-determined play

Self-determined play is a right of the child and an important part of the child's learning and experiences at school. Self-determined play is accessible to the child during recess and lunch breaks on the school playground. This places significant relevance on the school playground to be an engaging outdoor space which provides opportunity and accessibility for different constructs of play.

ENVIRONMENTS

Environments that invite, enable and enrich learning and support sustainability

The relationship between the environment and pedagogy is intertwined and reciprocal. The environment is the location, building and grounds (built and natural) from which a school operates including all fixed structures, furniture, furnishings as well as equipment, materials and resources. It includes **indoor and outdoor spaces** for children as well as common areas for staff, families and children.

Pedagogy influences the environment and the environment influences pedagogy. This calls for making decisions in collaboration with the Early Learner with purposeful intention....reflecting, rethinking, recycling and re-imaging.

The environment is one of the eight pedagogical practices promoting children's learning and is contained within *Belonging, Being and Becoming, The Early Years Framework for Australia* (EYLF) and one of the seven quality areas in the *National Quality Standards* (NQS). The environment is often referred to as the "third teacher" as environment works with and within the relationships of the child and educator. However, the environment is not nor can it be a replication of somewhere or something else. It is part of a time in a particular school context and in relationship with the people in the space. It does not exist in isolation. It is also part of the culture of the school and it reflects community values. Such understandings require a commitment to Early Learning philosophy, theory, pedagogy and best practice.

A focus for educators is to engage with their students to set up environments which provide access to curriculum. This is a major goal in relation to the indoor space of the classroom. It means reimagining the traditional learning environment of the classroom as well as the outdoor environment.

The EYLF defines active learning environments as one in which children are encouraged to explore and interact with the environment to make (or construct) meaning and knowledge through their experiences, social interactions and negotiations with others. In an active learning environment, educators play a crucial role of encouraging children to discover meanings and make connections among ideas and between concepts, processes and representations. This requires educators to be engaged with children's emotion and thinking (2009).

Indoor and outdoor environments that support learning need to be:

- **natural and flexible spaces, committed to environmental sustainability**
- **responsive to the rights, capabilities and needs of the Early Learner**

- **welcoming spaces which invite children to engage, explore and respond**
- **beautiful spaces which connect to heart, mind and spirit**
- **accessible and intentional**
- **opportunities for shared and collaborative thinking**
- **representative of the setting and the people who occupy the space. They are part of a time and place which connects to children, families, educators and community.**

The resources and materials used in environments enhance learning when they are used purposefully. Careful and informed decision making is required to provide resources and materials which enhance learning and which reflect what is familiar to the people occupying the space. This contributes to the notion of the environment as a living space for learning. Resources and materials also introduce novelty to provoke interest. Interest and engagement lead to more complex and abstract thinking and learning and thus, successful outcomes for children.

When considering resources and materials, Simon Nicholson's Theory of Loose Parts influences decision making. Loose parts have infinite play possibilities due to their total lack of structure and script. In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it (Nicholson, 1972). In play, loose parts are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials such as stones, stumps, sand, gravel, fabric, twigs, wood, pallets, balls, buckets, baskets, crates, boxes, logs, stones, flowers, rope, tyres, balls, shells and seedpods.

Loose Parts should:

- have no defined use, with educators supporting the child's decisions to change the shape or use of them
- be accessible physically and stored where they can be reached by the child
- be regularly replenished, changed and added to.

Outdoor learning spaces are a feature of Australian learning environments (EYLF, 2009). They offer a vast array of possibilities not available indoors. Such environments invite the learner to engage in elements from nature and have opportunities for play, open-ended interactions, literacy, numeracy, exploration, self-regulation, risk-taking and physical and emotional wellbeing. The importance of the outdoor environment in a school context is becoming more recognised and relevant in educational circles. Effective environments give the child multiple ways to practise and refine skills and understanding across all aspects of learning.

Contemporary educators recognise the critical importance of addressing sustainability with children and families. Offering direct experiences with natural elements can contribute to positive sustainability values, but critical reflection by educators about how they engage with children in outdoor environments is likely to result in more meaningful learning opportunities about sustainability.

There are increasing concerns about the disconnection between children and nature. There are also concerns about risk adverse approaches to play, sedentary technology experiences and lack of time for unstructured outdoor play and their likely negative consequences for children's long term health and well-being (Moore, Cooper-Marcus, 2008). The environment impacts children's emotional well-being, as well as their physical comfort. The look and feel of a learning environment can speak volumes to a child and can serve to make them feel welcome and valued. These feelings can facilitate learning and working cooperatively.

Considerations when re-imaging indoor spaces:

- Set up invitation spaces such as invitation to read, invitation to draw, invitation to write, invitation to count, invitation to construct, invitation to inquire, explore and discover, invitation to imagine, invitation to tinker.
- How is the child's work displayed and does the child have a voice about what is displayed?
- Does the child have agency in decisions about the classroom space?
- Is there a need to declutter?
- Is the classroom overcrowded with colour?
- Are items intentionally and meaningfully placed?
- Are resources accessible to the child?
- Does the classroom bring joy to those occupying the space?
- Is there sufficient ventilation and light?
- Has purposeful thought gone into the furnishings?

Considerations when re-imaging outdoor spaces:

- How are the perspectives of children, educators and families considered when making decisions about the outdoor space, materials and how children use the environment?
- Is connection to nature and natural resources an important feature of the outdoor space?
- Is sustainability a feature of the space?
- Are there resources and materials that can be reused or recycled?
- What are the *real* safety issues and risks and what are the *perceived* ones?
- Is risk *benefit* a part of the conversation?
- Is there opportunity for the child to self-regulate?
- Are outdoor spaces designed for learning opportunities, not just activity?
- Is there opportunity for physical play, imaginative play, construction, gathering spaces?
- Is there room for flow of play?
- Is there opportunity for multi age engagement?
- Are quality loose parts available?

The environment is never finished. Educators continually collaborate with children, families and colleagues to create and change it. Educators reflect upon their pedagogical approaches, examining

how best to engage children, extend their thinking, access curriculum and ensure that children are active participants in their learning.

TRANSITIONS

Transitions from home and prior to school settings to school and transitions across the early years of school

Transitions are a process of continuity and change as children move into and through one state of being and belonging to another. The transition to school is one of the most important transitions a child will make. As well as the child, the family undergoes the process of transition and this places great responsibility on the school to engage in best practice to ensure successful transitions. Transitions across the early years of school are also crucially important to the child, family and educator. Often movement across the early years of school are overlooked as another period of continuity and change, thus a time of transition.

Transitions from home and prior to school settings to school

The process of transition occurs over time, beginning when the child starts school and extending to the point where the child and family feel a sense of belonging at school and when educators recognise this sense of belonging. Starting school is widely recognised as one of the most significant transitions individuals make and is certainly one of the earliest. Dockett and Perry (2014) state the transition to school is characterised by:

- **Opportunities** – including those for all involved to support change and continuity; to build relationships; extend understandings through interactions and to recognise starting school as a significant event in the lives of children and families
- **Aspirations** – as all look forward to positive engagement with school and positive outcomes, both social and educational; professional partnerships are formed and communities need to provide support and resources which promote positive engagement with school
- **Expectations** – as all enact high expectations for all participants in the transition; multiple participants are recognised and respected for their role in contributing to children’s education; and children meet challenges with the support of friends and responsive adults
- **Entitlements** – as high quality services are provided for all children and families; families and communities are confident that access and equity are promoted in schools; respect is demonstrated for existing competencies, cultural heritage and histories; and personal and professional regard is afforded to those involved in the transition to school.

Children’s transition to school has implications for their learning and development – both at the time of transition and into the future (Sayers et al., 2012). Relationships are at the core of positive transition to school experiences. This holds for all involved in transition.

Positive transitions are context dependent. Just as any child has the potential to experience a positive transition, almost any child is at risk of making a poor or less successful transition if their individual characteristics are incompatible with the features of the environment they encounter (Peters, 2010, p. 2). High expectations for all children and families, coupled with recognition of the strengths and knowledge they bring, are cornerstones of effective transition to school approaches, regardless of the backgrounds of those involved (Dockett, 2014; Perry, 2014).

Moving away from a surpassed readiness model

Notions of readiness and transition are often conflated and much discussion about transition still focuses on the child's skills as they start school (Dockett & Perry, 2013a; Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005). This is in contrast to current research that emphasises the importance of child, family, community and school characteristics in promoting positive transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2009, 2013). The concept of the child being ready for school has been surpassed by the understanding that schools need to be ready for the child. This understanding requires schools to carefully evaluate current transition practices and processes so as to make them reflect best practice.

Recommended best practice for successful transitions

1. Visits to school for child and family to make meaningful connections

The main purpose of visits to school is to support the building of relationships and meaningful connections. In addition, visits support the child and family to explore the school environment, meet educators, gather information and develop an understanding of school culture. The number of visits needs to be thoughtfully determined. Too many visits removes children from their current learning environment and the process becomes one of preparation rather than connection. A carefully balanced number of transition experiences which emphasise quality over quantity are vitally important.

It is essential that parents/carers are included in transitions. Research indicates that parents' aspirations for their children are an important driver for their children's educational success and children's experiences at school can depend on family perceptions of and relationships with the school community. It is not just the child transitioning to school, it is the family.

2. Reconsider readiness checklists

Children arrive at school with knowledge and experiences from life experiences within the context of family and community. Traditional concepts of readiness have placed emphasis on a child's skills, however skill based assessments of children's functioning have been shown to be poor predictors of subsequent school adjustment and achievement (Pianta & La Paro, 2013).

Often the child's first experience of school is performing skill related tasks such as identifying colour, shapes, alphabet and numerals. These tasks or checklists are usually administered by the Principal,

Kindergarten teacher or assistant who the child has just met. These checklists are often completed many months before a child begins school making any information gathered outdated. Skill related checklists do not align with the image of the child as a competent, capable individual. Research suggests we need to change the traditional child maturation and development focus of school readiness checklists.

The checklists need to be thoughtfully reconsidered and possibly eliminated from the important process of transition.

3. Play as a transition practice

Embedding play as a transition practice supports the child becoming familiar with a new environment through a lens which is familiar and appropriate for the Early Learner. Play as a part of transition not only supports the child but also has positive outcomes for families and educators.

Parents/caregivers may engage in play with their child and can also be provided with opportunities to observe their child in play. Using play as a transition practice enables teachers to engage with the child and make *meaningful* observations of the child's capabilities and needs. Observations can be made about the child's literacy and numeracy, socially interactions, communication skills, problem solving, self-regulation and emotional needs. Play as a transition practice provides more authentic and relevant information about the child compared to a readiness checklist and at the same time supports the child to make connections with others and the environment.

4. Transfer of information via the NSW Transition to School Statement

The NSW Transition to School Statement is a practical tool designed to enable information sharing between families, prior to school services and schools. The statement makes it easier for a child's prior to school learning and development to be communicated to the child's school. In the statement, early childhood educators summarise the child's strengths, interests and learning in line with the outcomes of the EYLF. In addition, there is opportunity for the child and family to provide information.

5. Reciprocal visits and collegial conversations between schools and prior to school services

Building relationships between educators involved in transition is a key factor in promoting continuity and a sense of belonging for all involved (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, & Carr, 2012). When educators collaborate, transitions can be regarded as opportunities to forge partnerships (Bennett, 2013) and to create potential meeting places (Moss, 2013) where educators can engage in reflection, analysis and critique, develop joint understandings and share their expertise. Where transition creates a meeting place, there is potential for many perspectives and interactions to be regarded as valuable. The sharing of information between prior to school services and school affects the quality of the transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014).

While cross sector communication by educators is recognised as one method of best practice to support positive transitions to school, communication between educators in schools is also extremely important for the child transitioning across the early years of school.

The sharing of information about children's capabilities and needs as they transfer between the early years of school, the importance of pedagogical continuity, best practice in relation to facilitating curriculum as well as the development of professional relationships assist the transitioning child. Transition across the early years is an important time that affords both opportunities and challenges as the child assumes new roles and identities.

6. The traditional orientation day is only one part of transition

The purpose of the traditional orientation day is usually to provide the child, but mostly the family with information about the school community. While this remains important, orientation is only one part of the transition process and is not an isolated day.

7. Individual school practice to support successful transitions

Practices such as buddy programmes, social stories, welcome letters etc. are specific to the culture of the school as well as to the needs and capabilities of the children transitioning to school. They serve as helpful and practical methods used in transitions. Other appropriate practices can be found in [Continuity of Learning: a resource to support effective transition to school and school age care | Department of Education and Training - Document library, Australian Government](#)