



## Case study

# Responsive environments

The *Supporting successful transitions: School decision-making tool* highlights responsive environments as a key action area for consideration in children's transition to school. The careful planning of a rich and dynamic environment plays a significant part in the interplay between all five action areas. It is also highlighted in the *School decision-making tool* that a range and balance of early years pedagogical approaches are used to plan and teach a broad range of learners. When this is done children's transition will encompass a continuum of learning.

Every school in Queensland has unique physical features, in addition to a diverse range of interactions between children, families, staff and the wider community occurring every day. The responsive environments constructed by all stakeholders have an impact on the quality of education and care.

'More than any other element of transition, relationships between and among children, families and educators are the basis for continuity between home, prior-to-school, school and school age care settings.' (Dockett & Perry, 2007)

These relationships are enhanced by responsive environments that are safe, supported, connected and inclusive. The department's Learning and wellbeing framework describes a responsive learning environment as an exciting, stimulating and welcoming place for children and families.

When teachers and school communities respond to the challenge of creating responsive environments, the motivation and engagement in learning by every child and their teachers will make the hard work worthwhile.

Planning for continuity of learning means that responsive environments are flexible and change with the growing needs and competencies of the children. Choosing the appropriate pedagogical approach for young children also impacts on the teacher's decision-making in terms of the environment. Being flexible, promoting children's independence and ensuring a wide range of materials can be used in many different ways, supports effective teaching and learning across the curriculum. Using familiar resources and pedagogies from previous settings can also support children's feelings of confidence and success.

The responsive environments action area of the *Supporting successful transitions: School decision-making tool* (page 11 - 12) has two key focuses – processes and procedures; and physical, temporal and social, which support school reflection. For each focus area, there is a description of a range of behaviours across three decision-making levels (school-centred, consultative and collaborative) to assist schools in reflecting on their current level of collaborative decision-making in the responsive environments action area.

Action area	Focus	School-centred	Consultative	Collaborative
Responsive environment	Processes and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transition and orientation processes and procedures are organised around administrative requirements.</li> <li>Processes and procedures commence in Term 4.</li> <li>Information explains what school routines and expectations are emphasised and how they are implemented.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transition and orientation processes and procedures provide opportunities for children to be together in groups.</li> <li>Some information is provided through ECEC services during the year.</li> <li>Information includes understanding why transition processes and strategies are prioritised.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Transition and orientation processes and procedures address family, child, ECEC services and school needs.</li> <li>The school approaches transition as an integrated process throughout the year.</li> <li>Information includes 'What do you think?' – capturing family perspectives.</li> </ul>

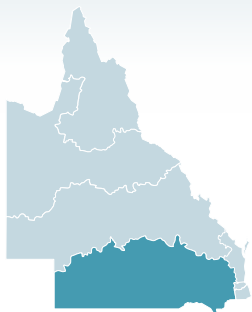


Action area	Focus	School-centred	Consultative	Collaborative
Responsive environment	Physical, temporal and social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation is characterised by discrete classroom visits.</li> <li>• Routines are uniform across year levels.</li> <li>• There is little differentiation in timetables.</li> <li>• Playground space is used during breaks.</li> <li>• Classroom environments are disconnected from ECEC learning environments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation includes invitations to a variety of school events.</li> <li>• Routines are adjusted for the first week of school.</li> <li>• Timetables are adjusted for the first week of school.</li> <li>• Some use is made of playgrounds throughout the day.</li> <li>• Classroom environments include some spaces similar to ECEC services.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation includes information about school-based resourcing (tips, clips, advice) on school website.</li> <li>• Routines are established in response to learning needs.</li> <li>• Timetables are adjusted to respond to children's learning preferences and change over time.</li> <li>• Playgrounds are recognised and used as learning spaces.</li> <li>• Classroom environments reflect key aspects of ECEC services and are adapted over time.</li> </ul>





# Darling Downs South West Region

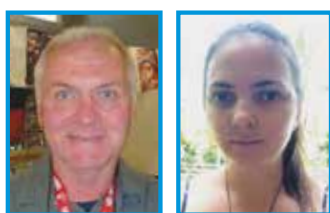


42,038  
students

Local government areas within the region include:  
Balonne, Blackall-Tambo, Cherbourg, Goondiwindi, Gympie, Lockyer Valley,  
Maranoa, Merweh, Paroo, Quilpie, Somerset, South Burnett, Southern Downs,  
Toowoomba and Western Downs.

Darling Downs South West Region covers approximately 480,000 km<sup>2</sup>, which equates to almost 1.5 times the area of Victoria.

## Cherbourg State School



Stuart Fuller and Amber Hughes  
Principal and pre-Prep Teacher  
Cherbourg State School

### Focus: Responsive environments – Physical, temporal and social

We are intensely proud of the innovative, inclusive and holistic approach to schooling that we shape and lead at Cherbourg State School, in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of Cherbourg. Co-located within the school grounds is our pre-Prep service which has 25 three- to five-year-old children enrolled at the service. An early years leadership circle was established in 2015 to bring together the various stakeholders including, schools, early childhood services and community services to support sustained, collaborative and shared decision-making for children in our community.

#### Actions

We believe children have the right to learn in a safe, secure and nurturing environment in which their families' cultures, histories, languages and traditions are respected. Our children experience many opportunities to develop relationships as they engage in shared experiences, routines and spaces throughout the school and community. Additionally, children are provided with opportunities to strengthen their sense of belonging through cultural meetings with Elders and familiar routines, such as library visits, breakfast club and excursions to community places including the Ration Shed Museum and community events.

This year has seen our pre-Prep outdoor environment updated and extended, providing children the opportunity to engage in a rich physical environment that supports and extends learning; is responsive to the needs and ideas of children and provides opportunities for a balance of indoor and outdoor experiences.

During the development of the outdoor environment, the service collaborated with children, families, staff, local Elders and members of the community to gather their voices and ideas on the new environment. Local trees, shrubs, bush tucker plants and native plants of Australia were chosen for some of the gardens, to provide shelter and food for native wildlife and to provide children with the opportunity to engage with traditional foods. Children have been able to take ownership throughout the whole process from choosing the plants and providing their continual daily care.

Further strengthening our transition strategies, is the whole-of-community approach to support children in their early years. Through the collaborative efforts of the early years leadership circle, a range of opportunities have been provided for families, community members and early years professionals to support children's learning and development. The Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a) has been implemented in various settings, providing a consistent and familiar context across the services.

#### Learnings informing next steps

##### Building connections

Moving forward, we will be further utilising the new playground to strengthen and support stronger connections and relationships across our school and our community. Additionally, we are interested in moving further beyond our school gates, working with community members and knowledgeable staff to scope spaces for pre-Prep children to engage in 'bush kindy' experiences.

##### A community of practice

Coming together with other community and early years stakeholders has provided valuable opportunities to support the children of our community. As we move forward, critically reflecting on our current transition partners, we examine who may be missing, who may like to be involved and how we can further support parent engagement, to ensure all voices are equally valued, respected and heard in our 0–8 years transition story.

# Goodstart Early Learning Childcare Centre, Harristown



Liz Brooker

Director

Goodstart Early Learning Childcare Centre, Harristown

## Focus: Responsive environments – Physical, temporal, social and procedural

Liz and the team of experienced and highly-qualified educators are committed to creating a positive impact in the lives of children and families in their community through rich and meaningful learning experiences and respectful, genuine relationships.

### Actions

A priority for our service has been creating a positive and inviting environment that welcomes children of every age. We believe that welcoming, engaging and safe spaces need to be available not only for children, but also for families and educators.

Cultural diversity is respected and represented in the foyer of the service, including the display of multicultural flags and publications. The reception and waiting area includes a couch, snacks and positive messages about support available for families. As director, I ensure that I am available to parents in the areas of the service that they visit.

In the children's playrooms, spaces have been created where families are invited to sit with children during the day. Adult- and child-initiated experiences, that vary based on the interests and backgrounds of individual children, are designed collaboratively by staff, children and families.

A consistent staff roster is planned to allow the same educators to be accessible at the same time of day so trusting relationships are built and a sense of belonging is fostered in children and families. The team are committed to being open, available, interested, sincere, empathetic and flexible when families approach them. Feedback is actively sought in a variety of ways and recorded in our foyer along with the actions taken. It is positive to see families waiting to speak with educators and administration staff because parents know their knowledge and questions are valued.

At our service, positive relationships are built from enrolment. Enrolment meetings have ample time scheduled for each family and interpreters are booked for families from non-English speaking backgrounds. The intentions and aspirations of families for their child are enquired about and respected, with staff responding to this information by incorporating these ideas into planning and practices.

The staff visit playgroups to build familiarity and trust with families who haven't engaged with an early childhood service before and invite them to bring a friend along to visit our centre.

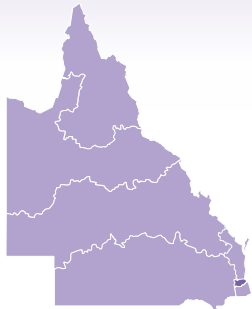
The importance of sibling relations is recognised and flexible support is provided during transition to the service. This allows children to develop confidence that this is a safe place for them.

### Learnings informing next steps

This team has learned that the journey is continuous. We are committed to continuing to build partnerships that support children's wellbeing and learning through:

- building on our current partnerships with visitors to the centre (for example, Early Childhood Development Programs, therapists and non-government organisations) by becoming a community space for families
- encouraging participation of families in the learning environment, looking at new ways of engaging in feedback and planning with families
- engaging in network meetings with schools
- prioritising transition events in the year prior to children starting school
- partnering with schools to create transition statements that support children and families.

# Metropolitan Region



**27.5%**  
of state school  
enrolments

**146,689**  
students

**256**  
state schools

**887**  
ECEC Services

The Metropolitan Region has seen an increase in state school enrolments, with an additional 4000 students in 2016.

## Petrie Terrace State School



**Tanya Abell**  
Principal  
*Petrie Terrace State School*

### Focus: Responsive environments – Physical

Petrie Terrace State School is a small inner-city primary school located in Paddington, near the Brisbane CBD. At Petrie Terrace State School we adopt an inclusive, student-centered philosophy of learning which we believe is best practice for primary-age students. In this environment, our students seek to be mindful and respectful of themselves as unique and valued individuals, while being constantly aware of, and sensitive to, the mutual needs of others and the world around them. We have an exceptionally strong sense of community and this is reflected in our programs.

### Actions

At Petrie Terrace State School we believe that the environment is the third teacher, learning from the Reggio Emilia approach to early year's education. We have also conducted research into Richard Louv's notion of nature deficit disorder, which highlights that direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy physical and emotional childhood development. Armed with this research and a strong early education philosophy, our Prep teachers, in partnership with families, devised a physical environment that embraced nature play pedagogy.

Through the generous support of our P&C, our nature play came into being mid-2015. Parents and community members volunteered their time to establish a nature play space that was sensitive to the existing natural environment. Parents researched and selected plants to provide a range of sensory experiences. A Liquid Amber tree was chosen as an integral component to showcase the seasonal changes throughout the year.

Further reading on nature pedagogy emphasised the importance of having an anchor point such as a large tree stump or log, as well as objects that can be moved. Open ended materials provide children with the opportunity to engage in play that connects them to their environment. During our research we

learnt that play is in the child, not the toy, and we are not to interrupt the play but observe, watch and listen.

We have seen the children's play become more imaginative and focused. Their ideas are now developing over a number of days or weeks, morphing and changing over time. We have also seen a decrease in the number of injuries in this playground as children are able to manage their own risk more effectively.

### Learnings informing next steps

We are continuing to educate the community about nature pedagogy, including the fact that just because it is made of natural materials does not mean that it is nature play. The impact of this play on children's connection with nature, and their care of the environment, will be carried with them throughout their schooling.

We will continue to find ways to embrace nature pedagogy in age appropriate ways, modifying and adapting the area to fully respond to the needs of our children. We will examine how to increase risk-taking and resilience, with the inclusion of props to stimulate higher order thinking and problem solving around issues in the natural environment.

# C&K Paddington Community Kindergarten



Vicki Hall and Simone Sullivan  
Director and Teacher  
C&K Paddington Community Kindergarten

## Focus: Responsive environments – Physical, social and procedural

C&K Paddington Community Kindergarten is located in Paddington, an inner-city suburb of Brisbane. Our kindergarten is housed in two beautiful heritage listed Queenslander style buildings surrounded by beautiful natural playscape, and is one of the oldest kindergartens in Brisbane.

At C&K Paddington Community Kindergarten, we have a focus on being educationally and socially responsive to changing community needs over the past 100 years. C&K at its core has a deep desire to include the voice of all children and adults in its decision-making and educational provision.

We provide a comprehensive early childhood program for three- to five-year-olds in the local community, and beyond, as families travel to the city for work. The majority of children at the centre are English speaking; a diverse group of children learning English as a second language have joined us, enriching all of our lives as we share our many cultures.

## Actions

Families are encouraged to participate in their child's learning. We believe that it is not until families and teachers share insights about children across contexts that we begin to really know them. The activities families participate in provide opportunities to build genuine partnerships with teachers. Their contributions reflect the cultural background and the experiences of their children, family and community, and encourage the whole community to embrace ethnic celebrations and special events, reinforcing the idea that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

Our approach to introducing the children to kindergarten is multifaceted with a number of visits, discussions with parents and curriculum evenings. Parents paint a Japanese tea cup as a special transition gift for their child. Our focus is on connecting

children, their families and staff so that children feel safe, secure and welcome in their new environment.

The daily program includes a range of learning experiences that provide many opportunities for children to continue to develop social skills. Child agency is promoted through children making choices and decisions about the equipment or materials they will use, or how they might approach a problem. Daily routines are designed to develop confidence and a sense of responsibility in the learning environment.

## Learnings informing next steps

Active involvement in sharing resources and information with local school networks allows us to offer programs, such as the Mind up program, ensuring continuity of curriculum content and pedagogy. During the kindergarten year the children and families are also encouraged to visit and become involved in their local school as this provides a platform for parents and teachers to develop partnerships, paving the way for the following year.

*'Children learn most readily and easily in a laboratory-type environment where they can experiment, enjoy and find things out for themselves.'* Loris Malaguzzi

Working collaboratively with children, their families and staff in a beautiful environment that is, well planned and organised, yet flexible enough to cater for everyone, means our kindy can remain responsive for at least the next 100 years.

## More information

For contact details for your region's Transition Officers, and Partnerships and Innovation Officers visit <https://oneportal.deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/forschools/Pages/Transitiontoschoolsupportcontacts.aspx>

For more information and resources on Supporting successful transitions visit [www.qld.gov.au/transitiontoschool](http://www.qld.gov.au/transitiontoschool)

## References

Data from this case study has been sourced from Regional Operational Plans.

Dockett, S. & Perry, B. (2007). *Transitions to School Perceptions, Expectation, Experiences*. Sydney, UNSW Press.