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NSW organisation raising Aboriginal preschool attendance an awards finalist

A New South Wales organisation working to get Aboriginal children into early childhood centres throughout the state is a finalist in the 2014 HESTA Early Childhood Education and Care Awards.

NGROO Education Incorporated is among five finalists in the Excellence in Building Inclusion Award category.

NGROO has been recognised for its success in dramatically lifting Aboriginal children's attendance at early childhood education and care centres around the state.

NGROO's Research and Development Manager, Deb Mann, said the realisation that many Aboriginal children and families did not access, attend or achieve in early education, prompted NGROO's early work to improve the inclusiveness of services.

An initial pilot, trialled in a preschool in Sydney's west, demonstrated that developing relationships and authentic partnerships with local Aboriginal people significantly improved enrolments.

"The change started by listening to the local Aboriginal community and then removing the barriers they identified. The Centre went from just nine Aboriginal enrolments to 45 — and those numbers are being sustained," Ms Mann said.

"Among the barriers identified by families were prohibitive fees, the lack of Aboriginal staff or connection with the local Aboriginal community, the centre's location and limited transport options.

"Slowly and collectively, we worked to change that by building relationships between the centre staff, the families and the local Aboriginal community.

The pilot was expanded into a model that sees Aboriginal Elders, families and mentors working with individual centres to develop relationships so they meet the needs of local families.

"Now, a total of 18 NSW centres are using our 'Walking Together' model with local mentors employed to overcome similar challenges. A further 60 centres are connected to the program and accessing training and support. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments are growing steadily in all of these centres.

"Families and staff also report feeling more confident that changes to their programs reflect local community values, ways of being and belonging, cultural knowledge, teaching and learning styles.

"Most important is the feedback from the families whose children are now heading off to school, who say their children are entering school feeling strong, proud of their identity and ready for ongoing learning."

Ms Mann and the other interstate finalists will be flown to Melbourne to attend an awards dinner, where the winners will be announced during the Early Childhood Australia National Conference on Saturday 6 September 2014.

A \$30,000 prize pool will be shared among the winners, generously provided by long-term HESTA awards supporter ME Bank.

The Excellence in Building Inclusion, and Advancing Pedagogy and Practice Award winners will each receive \$10,000 to further implement their program or initiative. The winner of the Outstanding Young Graduate Award will receive a \$10,000 development grant.

HESTA is the super fund for health and community services, with more than 785,000 members and \$28 billion in assets. More people in health and community services choose HESTA for their super.

Visit hestaawards.com.au for tickets for the awards dinner or to learn more about the awards.

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