

IECM Submission to the Expert Panel of the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Introduction

This submission is provided on behalf of all Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) members. It reflects our longstanding views on the importance of working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to support our children to thrive in their education.

We were pleased to meet with the Expert Panel (Expert Panel) of the Review to inform a better and fairer education system (the Review) on 15 June 2023. This submission re-affirms and builds on those discussions, highlighting the importance of high-expectations, strengths-based, culturally responsive approaches, which are developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, communities, and education organisations (such as Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies; IECBs). It also builds on our submissions to the Productivity Commission's (PC) Review of the National School Reform Agreement^{1,2} (NSRA), and to the Northern Territory's Secondary Education Review³.

We reaffirm the contemporary applicability of the 1989 AEP⁴ (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy), developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, through the self-determining National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC). Many of the outlined 21 long term goals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are still relevant and yet to be achieved today.

Disappointingly, too often the labelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families as disadvantaged plays into a culture of deficit discourse and low expectations that stymie Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to thrive in their education. Our students are not the problem – the system is failing them. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities face a range of complex and compounding circumstances that impact their educational engagement and outcomes, they are not inherently disadvantaged by being Indigenous.

Similarly, a focus on negative statistics or the gap to outcomes of our peers, diminishes the positive progress and hides stories of success. This can perpetuate the perception of disadvantage and feed the culture of deficit discourse. More must be done to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success in education, and we should also do better to collectively celebrate successes and highlight areas of positive practice.

We commend the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students knowing their culture, language, and identity. The power of being able to walk strong in two worlds. The benefit of students who speak Language coming to school with multilingual skills and that these need to be built on as a strength rather than seen as a deficit. However, because these strengths don't fit into the box of western educational assessment, current practices and approaches result in isolating these students.

¹ IECM, 2022, *Initial submission (Sub 52)*, https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/344544/sub052-school-agreement.pdf

² IECM, 2022, *Supplementary submission (Sub DR125)*, https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/349206/subdr125-school-agreement.pdf

³ IECM, 2023, <https://haveyoursay.nt.gov.au/86304/widgets/414273/documents/266292>

⁴ <https://www.education.gov.au/indigenous-education/resources/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-education-policy-1989>

While we welcome the opportunity to present our perspectives, we lament the need after many years to continually repeat many of these themes. Notwithstanding this, we acknowledge positive engagement with recent processes. We thank the Productivity Commission for their engagement and reflection of our concerns in their NSRA Review. We are also optimistic that our voices have been heard by the Expert Panel. We would like to commend Dyonne Anderson for her contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and representation on the Expert Panel. We hope the hearing of our concerns through these independent processes translates to tangible change in our engagement with governments and that the next NSRA will realise the opportunity to work in partnership and drive the improvement required to achieve our shared aspirations.

Opportunity to embed partnership as an underpinning principle.

The Productivity Commission's draft report⁵ on their first three-yearly review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (National Agreement) highlights the importance of the Priority Reforms and found that insufficient progress had been made.

We advocated for stronger engagement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and governments as part of the development of the current NSRA, but this was reflected through a mere consultation clause. One which there has been no reporting of or visibility of its implementation. Thankfully, the Indigenous engagement conversation has matured, and the National Agreement commits all governments to work in partnership through strengthening formal partnerships and shared decision-making arrangements (Priority Reform 1). The next NSRA is a chance to operationalise this in the schooling sector —

- *what could it mean to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, at a local, regional, state, and national level?*
- *how can the schooling sector support growth in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector?*
- *how can mainstream government organisations transform to be more culturally safe and responsive?*
- *how can we increase access to data and information at a local and regional level?*

These questions reflect the Priority Reforms and are challenges that all governments must consider in order to strengthen education systems to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities to achieve the desired outcomes.

Governments must heed the Productivity Commission's stark finding that they have not yet grasped the nature or magnitude of change required to meet the commitments they have made under the National Agreement. We call on governments to enact true partnership in education — engage genuinely, early, and often; build trusting relationships; and invest in these appropriately to maximise potential for impact. These calls reflect our continuous feedback to governments, and while we appreciate commitments to date — such as support for establishing the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Council (NATSIEC) and a new Aboriginal education peak body in the NT — more is still needed to ensure a strong network of IECBs across the country, each underpinned by strong partnership with their respective state governments.

On a more local level, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have not always had positive interactions with education institutions. This is largely driven by past policies that were systemically racist and sought to exclude or extinguish us, which contributed to the intergenerational trauma affecting communities and families today. This taints the potential relationship between families and

⁵ Productivity Commission, 2022, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/closing-the-gap-review/draft>

schools today and there is a responsibility on schools to ensure they are actively creating culturally safe and culturally responsive environments, both in the classroom and in the broader school setting.

The power of relationships, and the impact of individuals respectfully seeking to build connections, instead of stamping their authority or legacy on a school, cannot be underestimated. Communities talk about the experience of a new principal being like a house guest who wants to remodel because they don't like your taste. How many times must a home be remodelled before those living in that home have a say in how they would like to live? Schools should be an extension of, and reflect, the community they serve. This is particularly relevant for remote communities, where there is limited infrastructure and an expectation that schools act as a community hub. This highlights the need for deep connection and strong relationships, and the onus is on the school and their staff to ensure they are creating an environment in which our children can thrive.

[Need for greater funding transparency and accountability.](#)

We concur with a number of the findings in the Consultation Paper regarding funding transparency and accountability. As we have said for many years, 'Aboriginal education funding used to glow in the dark'. This was a key element of the funding transparency and accountability of previous arrangements, such as initiatives under the *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000* (IETA), alongside our direct engagement with both Commonwealth and state governments.

We had tripartite meetings of Commonwealth and state governments, together with IECBs. These Strategic Directions Meetings (SDM) as part of the Supplementary Recurrent Assistance (SRA) program enabled us to collectively assess progress and prioritise action. This jurisdictional engagement enacted the Priority Reforms before they were even a commitment. Unfortunately, in a bid to mainstream this supplementary support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, by government incorporating the funding into general recurrent school funding arrangements at the time, they transferred the funding but not the accountability and partnership arrangements. These must go together. We have seen that more funding alone is insufficient to realise the success in educational outcomes we all aspire to. Accountability should not be seen as a burden or pure compliance, rather as an opportunity to ensure all interested parties can feel assured that everything is being done to enable our children to thrive in their education.

We have heard far too many stories about funding decisions that divert recurrent school funding loadings, and other elements intended to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes, towards unrelated initiatives deemed a bigger priority by uninformed or unengaged principals. Decisions which result in insufficient funding for targeted supports that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to feel safe, valued, and welcome in their own schools.

In schools in South Australia with a higher population of Aboriginal students, there are designated "Nunga Rooms". These rooms are staffed by the Aboriginal Education Workforce and are culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal students. There have been decisions made to utilise Nunga Rooms for other purposes. When questioned, the response is that the school is at capacity and the rooms are needed for other use. No consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families or the community before the decision is made, with no opportunity for discussions or alternatives. This removes the cultural responsiveness, erodes cultural safety, and devalues Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, sending a clear message about the priority of our children's outcomes.

To be clear, we raise this not to vilify Principals, but to draw attention to inadequacies in the current systems and lack of transparency, which enables these types of decisions to occur at the expense of our children's futures.

The Consultation Paper noted that while there have been some improvements in recent years, such as MySchool, the allocation of funds to schools in Australia remains a challenge for the public to understand. This enables Principals to make decisions like those described above and disempowers communities and families from ensuring their schools are appropriately supporting their children. Further, it hinders the ability of organisations like IECBs, to be able to support communities in holding schools and education systems to account. Without accessible data, schools and education systems will be able to continue to rely on platitudes about needs-based funding distribution models, without engaging on what that means locally.

Further, while it is positive that the Commonwealth receives Block Allocation Reports from Approved Authorities responsible for more than one school and that these 'encourage reporting to be disaggregated according to the amounts distributed for base funding, loadings, administrative costs, and centralised expenditure', it is imperative that this moves beyond an encouragement and to a requirement. Priority Reform 4 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap — *Shared access to data and information at a regional level* — commits governments to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to, and the capability to use, locally-relevant data and information. Together with the expectation that efforts to close the gap must move beyond Indigenous-specific responses and see mainstream portfolios take responsibility for outcomes, this provides the impetus for greater access to, and transparency of, how school funding is being used and is supporting equitable student outcomes.

Governments must learn from the lessons of the past.

We lamented earlier on the frustration of feeling as though we are repeating ourselves on the key concepts for improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. This extends to our dismay at the impact of decisions of successive governments that undermine and cripple progress in Indigenous-led initiatives. For too long, the decision-making in governments, school systems and individual schools have been too dependent on individuals. The power of individual's actions to cancel initiatives that were working or met community aspirations has had a devastating impact on our communities, and our children's learning.

We celebrate the strength and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages. This diversity must be respected in implementation approaches. While governments have long spoken of the perils of one-size-fits-all approaches, they have been less circumspect in implementing them. Understanding context is a key element of enacting culturally responsive practice. Together with working in partnership – be that at a level that is with students, families, communities or IECBs – this will enable understanding of the local history, experience, strengths, and challenges that must be considered in adapting responses, not just implementing what worked for another community.

Further, it will be important that there is alignment and connection between local, state, and federal initiatives, to ensure these enact a complementary systemic response. Underpinning this is the importance of holistic, locally driven solutions.

Additionally, funding decisions can be improved to reflect the Priority Reforms. Enacting formal partnerships and establishing shared decision-making mechanisms are one key part of this, but there are other ways too. Many communities aspire for greater say in the implementation of their schooling. While it will depend on each community's specific interests, this doesn't always have to result in the

creation of an independent Aboriginal community-controlled school, or the transfer of an existing school. It can also include models for greater representation in decision-making processes established at the school or creating complementary ones. It can also draw on established practice of co-Principalship, where Indigenous Knowledge and cultural authority is valued equally with Western governance and system requirements. Examples such as ██████ School in ██████.

Further, where governments provide grants to supplement in-school delivery, they should consider who is best placed to lead the grant and the power dynamic created in sub-contracting arrangements. There has been progress in governments recognising that non-Indigenous organisations need to demonstrate and build cultural capability in their delivery. However, the common practice is still to award grants to those organisations to partner with an Indigenous organisation, through a sub-contracting arrangement. This does little to sustainably build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector (in line with Priority Reform 2), as the funding relationship with the ACCO is secondary to the delivery of the grants. This creates a power dynamic between the two organisations, which sends a message that the capacity building of the non-Indigenous organisation is prioritised over the ACCO. Governments could consider flipping these arrangements, by engaging the ACCO or Indigenous organisation with the demonstrated cultural capability, to partner with a relevant non-Indigenous organisation if further capacity development is needed.

Similarly, we reflect on previous programs that were having positive results but were removed or adapted in ways that removed the key elements. For example, the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program, the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI). While the programs in their entirety may not be reinstated, the core elements and concepts can be drawn on and implemented in a contemporary way.

ASSPA opened the school gates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, helped create an environment of cultural safety, and shifted the power imbalance to enable shared decision-making. This is often reflected on favourably by communities and those who were involved. Where it didn't work, it was because of individual's actions, but that was used as an excuse to undermine the power-sharing that was created where schools and principals were effectively partnering with communities through strong and community-led ASSPA committees. As with the SDM experience under SRA at a jurisdiction level, this was a local level example of the Priority Reforms before they were a commitment, but the rug was pulled out from under communities through a unilateral decision of government.

ITAS provided targeted literacy and numeracy tuition support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Given there remain significant challenges in literacy and numeracy outcomes, particularly impacting successful transition from primary to secondary schooling, consideration could be given to providing supplementary tutoring support to assist and complement classroom teacher efforts.

MATSI operationalised governments' policy commitment to supporting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. It provided an opportunity to better understand the factors impacting our mob teaching, to capture the workforce data and associated challenges, and to support a range of targeted initiatives to improve the situation. MATSI also helped recognise and highlight the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in schools, including Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs; in their various titles) and Indigenous Assistant Teachers. Unfortunately, despite an evidence-driven approach with an independent evaluation, the final report and recommendations were never responded to by government. It got caught in the vortex between Education and Indigenous Affairs ministerial

responsibilities. Setting aside the situation which created that, we reaffirm our expectation that education portfolios take lead responsibility for supporting the success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their education. This must be implemented through holistic, integrated, culturally responsive approaches, not simply supplementary programs.

Importance of quality teachers and growing the First Nations workforce.

We welcome the focus of all governments, and the Expert Panel, on the fundamental importance of quality teachers. They are the backbone of our education system and have an incredible opportunity, and immense responsibility, to support the educational success and achievement of all students.

The PC's 2016 research paper into Indigenous Primary School Achievement⁶ found that the fundamentals of quality teaching apply for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike – high-quality individualised instruction. The primary considerations for Indigenous students is the importance of a culture of high-expectations and supporting strong student-teacher (and community) relationships that respect and value culture.

We spoke about the importance of context-driven practice. This is how teachers and schools can understand how they need to adapt to implement culturally responsive practices. Without understanding the context in which your school exists, how can schools begin to engage and best support the families who are a part of that school community. We note the intersection between context-driven practice and cultural capability development. This is an ongoing journey for all teachers and school staff. It is not a linear learning journey, nor one with a clear competency end point. Teachers must continually self reflect to improve their practice and ensure they are adapting to their current context. The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership has done some positive work with the creation of the cultural responsiveness toolkit, but there is more to be done to continue this work and to ensure it is embedded in professional development practices around the country.

We note specific focus and commitment on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching workforce through the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan's commitment to a First Nations Teacher Strategy. While it acknowledges successful initiatives such as MATSITI, we implore governments to heed the lessons from these experiences as the progress built has been crippled by inaction.

The MATSITI Final Report noted a range of complex and extensive factors impacting the growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching workforce, these include:

- aspirational and learning achievement factors, support and career counselling prior to considering a teaching career and meeting university entrance requirements;
- universities' approaches to attracting and retaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students and adults in initial teacher education programs;
- education employers' approaches to attracting and retaining qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into teaching and leadership positions in schools;
- individual circumstances that contribute to or hinder study and career pathways into teaching;
- the effectiveness of incentives, support, scholarships, and other programs.

⁶ Productivity Commission, 2016, *Indigenous Primary School Achievement*, <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/indigenous-primary-school-achievement/indigenous-primary-school-achievement.pdf>

We look forward to working with governments on the development of a First Nations Teacher Strategy and stress the importance of this action.

Endorsement

For too long, governments have thought they know what is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Similarly, there have been too many assumptions about the perceived lack of value for education from communities. It can be difficult to truly value something which, through the bigotry of low expectations, has been reduced so far that it provides no practical purpose in the stark reality of remote community experiences. It is critical that governments heed the calls from community for greater access, for more effective transition and enabling supports, and for stronger connections to local culture and community through culturally inclusive curriculum, culturally responsive practice, and the employment of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

This submission reflects our views and lived experiences as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with an extensive and valued background and history in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education throughout Australia. We look forward to the release of the review's findings and to practical and meaningful change in the delivery of the next NSRA.

Professor Peter Buckskin PSM, FACE

Ms Geraldine Atkinson

Mr Lionel Bamblett

Mr Leigh Ridgeway

Associate Professor Clair Andersen

Ms Isabelle Adams

Mr Leon Epong

Ms Christine Thyer

Background

This submission is provided on behalf of all Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) members. The IECM is a forum established by the Australian Government Department of Education, bringing together representatives from state and territory Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs), or nominated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education stakeholders for those jurisdictions where IECBs no longer exist. The views contained herein reflect members' long-held views and positions on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs)

IECBs (sometimes also referred to as Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups/AECGs) have a long and continued engagement with the education sector. As a collective national group, the IECBs have unparalleled experience in working to address the wide range of complex challenges and issues affecting successful education and training outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For more than 40 years, IECBs have shared their expertise through advocating on local, state, and national education and training committees as well as, undertaking major education projects to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes.