



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
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### Summary

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1989) remains the foundation of subsequent national reform efforts to achieve educational excellence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities.

PM&C recognises that education is the most important catalyst in working towards overcoming disadvantage. In order for policies and programmes to deliver desired outcomes, they must not only be built on evidence, but be developed in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities who will benefit from them.

Empirical analysis of Indigenous Primary School Achievement provides one of the few systematic evaluations of high and low achieving schools which could shed light on what works best, in a cost effective way, to lift the achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The fundamentals for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are the same as for non-Indigenous children. The key to improving achievement for all students is high-quality individualised instruction.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their full learning potential, systems and schools need to: have high expectations, provide high-quality, culturally responsive teachers; prioritise the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages; build strong school-community partnerships; and use equity funding to invest in resources that target specific learning needs.

The standard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' success is too often articulated at a level below that expected of other Australians. Future policy success must be framed in terms of realising an individual's potential rather than just reaching a par with average Australian outcomes.

This submission provides information on practical measures and potential areas of investment to improve student outcomes around five key themes: strengthening curriculum; investing in the educator workforce; building parental and community engagement; remote education; and investing in the evidence-base.

### Main submission

The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools focuses on practical measures that work, from Australia and around the world, to improve results for Australia's school students.

This submission draws on analysis by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Indigenous Affairs Group to provide directions for future reforms to improve the access and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in education.

The Australian education system, through teachers, principals and school communities, must support *all* children to achieve their full learning potential. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to reach their full learning potential, systems and schools need to:

- provide high-quality, culturally responsive teachers, who are able to build strong student-teacher relationships, tailor teaching strategies to learning needs and foster a high expectations culture;
- through principals and school leadership teams, foster culturally inclusive learning environments that include real and visible recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and histories;
- ensure teachers are adequately skilled to teach *all* students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, contributing to greater understanding of this country's history and leading to greater reconciliation;
- build strong school-community partnerships, involving those most important to a child's educational success, as well as embed mechanisms for schools to report to community and for community to hold schools accountable for their performance; and
- take into account multiple layers of educational disadvantage that contribute to a student's learning, including a combination of the student's home life, where they go to school and whether they are an English as an Additional Language or Dialect learner.

It is important that interventions to support improved school achievement are subject to rigorous, independent evaluation based on what works for all students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

### Context

The Department of Education and Training (DET) has lead responsibility for education within the Commonwealth. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) has an important supplementary role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in:

- facilitating partnerships across sectors, across jurisdictions and with families, communities and non-government organisations;
- enhancing access to schools and other educational institutions beyond that which would be expected of state and territory governments;
- promoting best practice and innovation; and
- funding complementary activities that support engagement, attainment and completion.

Through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), PM&C supports a wide range of activities to improve school attendance and educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In 2017-2018, the Department will provide approximately \$210 million to funded providers to undertake supplementary activities to accelerate outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in early childhood and schooling, including delivery of the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). PM&C funding represents only 1.6% of annual Commonwealth expenditure on education from early childhood through to tertiary education.

PM&C recognises that all stages across the education life cycle are important to a child's future wellbeing. The following diagram outlines the types of activities PM&C funds across the education sectors to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's future wellbeing.

Every Australian child has the right to access high-quality education in which they are supported to achieve their full learning potential. For too long, generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have failed to gain the full value of the benefits of education. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to fully realise the opportunities of the future, education strategies today should shift from simply addressing a deficit to promoting excellence.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989) outlines 21 goals around an improved system of education to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities. The AEP was developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and adopted by governments in 1989. It remains the foundation of subsequent national reform efforts.

The average Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student goes to a government school in a metropolitan or provincial area, where the majority of peers are non-Indigenous students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Engagement with

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities cannot be localised to a small number of schools. It is important that all schools develop the capacity to engage with their local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community to ensure local cultural context is embedded in classrooms and that all students have the opportunity to learn about the rich and diverse histories and cultures of Australia's First Peoples.

The standard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' success is too often articulated at a level below that expected of other Australians. Future policy success must be framed in terms of realising an individual's potential rather than just reaching a par with average Australian outcomes. The following sections provide information and suggestions on practical frameworks, policies and programmes to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students under the following key themes:

- strengthening curriculum;
- investing in the educator workforce;
- building parental and community engagement;
- remote education; and
- Investing in the evidence-base.

### **Strengthening curriculum**

The *Australian Curriculum* sets consistent national standards to improve learning outcomes for all young Australians. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority provides the opportunity for all students to deepen their knowledge of Australia by engaging with the world's oldest continuous living cultures.

#### *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures*

recognises that the study of history is a significant part of the education of all young Australians, yet primary teachers have been found to devote less than five minutes per week to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and languages, with many not engaged in these activities at all (Luke et al., 2013). The *Australian Curriculum*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be able to see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the *Australian Curriculum*, just like their non-Indigenous peers, in order to fully participate in the curriculum (ACARA, 2017). Schools need to be equipped to ensure that all Australian students engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures, as well as educate students to be truly respectful and value our nation's heritage.

PM&C is undertaking a project in conjunction with the University of Melbourne to develop educational resources to strengthen schools' implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority. This will include supporting schools to better connect with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

#### *Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages*

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, learning their own language is critical to the development of their cultural identity and a sense of belonging. There is also the benefit of bilingualism/multilingualism in expanding academic capacity, particularly for children in the early years of their life (Silburn et al., 2011).

For all Australian students, learning Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages provides a distinctive means of understanding the country in which they live, including the relationship between land, the environment and people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bilingual/multilingual students are an important resource in developing the language awareness of all students in the classroom. The ongoing and necessary reclamation and revitalisation of these languages also contributes to reconciliation.

#### *Quality curriculum resources*

Research literature suggests that the quality of teaching for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be enhanced through curriculum content and resources that build on their cultural needs and strengths (Gillian et al., 2017).

Further research-based development of high quality resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education could be done to support schools' delivery of culturally responsive curricula. Pending results from the evaluation, ACER's innovative research-based production of the *Little J and Big Cuz* program series and educator resources mapped to the *Australian Curriculum* could be a potential model for further development of quality curriculum materials (ACER, 2017).

#### **Investing in the educator workforce**

Deficit assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain an impediment to improvement in some schools. Deficit thinking by principals and teachers leads to lowered expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Research shows that teachers who hold lower expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students tend to rely on lower quality instructional methods, including basic skills instruction and remediation. Too much emphasis can be placed on finding the 'right' program to improve outcomes, rather than in developing whole school approaches to curriculum and assessment based on evidence-based good practice (Luke et al., 2013).

Initial teacher education (ITE) can play a crucial role in challenging deficit thinking by educators through strengthening course content on anti-racist pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching.

Some jurisdictions have developed their own systemic approaches to improve schools' cultural responsiveness. The Western Australian Department of Education's (WA DoE's) *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework* (2015), is an innovative approach which supports staff to reflect on their behaviours, attitudes and practices with a view to progressing from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness to maximise learning outcomes for Aboriginal students.

#### *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce participation*

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students account for five per cent of the school population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers make up less than two per cent of the national teacher workforce (Buckskin, 2016). Achieving parity in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to students would contribute to increased workplace diversity and provide positive role models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The *More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative's Final Evaluation Report* (Buckskin, 2016) has made recommendations for future national actions to build the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce including the benefits of a specific national Strategy.

#### *Assessment of Graduate Teacher Standards*

According to the *Staff in Australia's Schools 2013 Survey*, almost a third of teachers found their pre-service training poorly prepared them to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (McKenzie et al., 2014). AITSL's commissioned review of pre-service teacher education for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has also reported that deficit thinking by graduate teachers often goes unchallenged in ITE (Moreton-Robinson et al., 2012).

Strengthening the quality assurance of ITE is critical to ensuring graduate teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to have a positive impact on the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. AITSL is developing assessment criteria for Graduate Standards 1.4 and 2.4 for providers and panels. Implementation of assessment criteria for the standards would assist in addressing inconsistency in current university assessment practices and improve ITE quality.

#### *Quality teaching in schools*

Quality teaching has been found to be the most significant in-school determinant of student achievement. International evidence on how the world's best-performing schools come out on top suggests that three things matter most:

- getting the right people to become teachers;
- developing them into effective instructors; and
- ensuring the system is available to deliver the best possible instruction for every child (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

Research suggests that school leaders and teachers who foster a culture of high expectations are more effective in improving outcomes and educational performance. This involves building on the strengths of students, celebrating their cultural identity and forging genuine partnerships with families and communities.

The current focus of support for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools is on strategies to address educational underperformance, while strategies for their peers generally aim to extend high performance. The current gaps in the educational achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers are evident on entry into formal schooling and remain the same throughout their schooling experience.

While there has been incremental improvement in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over the last decade, the disparity in educational achievement indicates that it would be an oversight to have confidence that current policy settings are sufficient.

A key priority for schools funding should be investment in evidence-based practices that enable *all* students to progress to higher literacy and numeracy standards. This should include teacher professional development to improve system-wide implementation of effective pedagogies and interventions to improve school achievement.

### **Building parental and community engagement**

Community engagement is a key contributor to the educational attainment and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Osbourne & Guenther, 2013). Schools that work in partnership with communities and families can better support the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with these partnerships enabling a collective commitment to hold high expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

While there has been significant government investment in initiatives to promote strong school-community engagement, the reported experience of many in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continues to be one of marginalisation from schools. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are calling for substantive, informed and sustained engagement between schools and communities characterised by mutual respect, with the aim for shared decision-making and collaborative governance at all levels of schooling (Luke et al., 2013).

A review of available research shows that there are few evaluations of programs designed specifically to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement in education. Existing evaluations mostly report on short-term outcomes. Further investment in high quality program evaluation is needed to assess the impact of engagement programs on sustaining improved educational outcomes (Higgins & Morley, 2014).

#### *School accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/carers*

In the absence of robust accountability measures, the onus is mainly on schools to ensure community collaboration in decision-making about school operations, teaching and learning. Some schools are doing this better than others (Gillian et al., 2017).

WA DoE's *Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework* (2015) provides a potential prototype for the development of benchmarks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to assess the cultural responsiveness of schools. All Western Australian government schools are required to seek continuous improvement and account for their performance, and the framework is another aspect of self-direction to drive improvement in maximising learning outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Benchmarks could be developed that provide parents with more detailed information about the cultural responsiveness of a school against a range of key performance indicators. This information would better enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents to make informed decisions about their child's education.

#### **Remote education**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote areas can experience multiple layers of complex, compounding disadvantage, which affect the quality of their school education. These include current SRS loadings designed to address remoteness, socio-educational disadvantage and low English proficiency. Remote education disadvantage presents a unique set of challenges for educators to take into account to ensure their teaching meets the needs of their students.

8 Due to the limited secondary provision in remote communities, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must relocate to attend secondary school. They often face cultural barriers, experience homesickness and have limited access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support people. Education that works for all students is needed, including alternative models for re-engaging remote-living secondary students.

Research literature reports that families are keen to support their children in boarding, but are uncertain on how best they can do this (Benveniste, 2014; Bosch, 2015). Currently, there is inconsistent support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in transitioning from remote community settings to boarding



schools. Actions to improve two-way learning and collaboration between boarding schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and communities would produce positive outcomes.

### **Investing in the evidence-base**

In order to generate return for school investment, more rigorous research evidence and evaluation is needed to direct investment to practices that are making a difference. Much of current evidence-based research looks at students from non-Indigenous backgrounds, or Indigenous groups from other countries. The Productivity Commission (2016a) found the largest gaps in the national education evidence include policy and program evaluation, as well as building understandings of how to turn evidence-based good practice into schooling practice. Further investment in high-quality research is critical to building a rigorous evidence base to support ongoing improvement to school performance and student outcomes.

The active engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational policy and research is also a critical step. PM&C's evidence and evaluation agenda recognises that Indigenous disadvantage cannot be solved by governments alone and requires the active participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. New measures for research into policy and implementation are being designed in close consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This reflects the Australian Government's commitment to a new way of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in genuine partnership.

#### *What works best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*

The Productivity Commission's (2016b) empirical analysis of Indigenous Primary School Achievement provides one of the few systematic evaluations of high and low achieving schools which could shed light on what works best, in a cost effective way, to lift the achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The PC concluded that the fundamentals for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are the same as for non-Indigenous children. The key to improving achievement for all students is high-quality individualised instruction that assesses each child's learning needs, identifies strategies to meet these and evaluates the effect of those strategies.

The emphasis on the importance of individualised instruction for improving achievement aligned with the PC's finding that unobserved student-level characteristics are the main contributor to variation in student achievement. Teachers need to take these into account to effectively individualise instruction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The PC's review of the research literature suggests that a culture of high expectations in schools and strong student–teacher, and community, relationships are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student achievement. Culturally responsive teaching has been found to engage students, encourage school attendance and increase student outcomes (Millgate & Giles-Browne, 2013).

#### *What Works Clearinghouse*

The establishment of a national education evidence base could make a significant contribution to linking evidence with equitable school funding distribution. Beyond a national education evidence base, the collection, sharing and use of quality curriculum materials and resources is also critical to increasing the overall quality and accountability of school level professional development and curriculum decisions.

The US What Works Clearinghouse and the UK Education Endowment Fund are examples of national resources that provide educators with access to high quality research information to make evidence-based decisions. Future program evaluation and research synthesis of interventions could contribute to a strengthened evidence base for 'what works'.