



9 November 2015

**Submission to the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs**

*Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Students*

Reconciliation Australia is the national organisation promoting reconciliation between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our vision is to build an Australia that is reconciled, just, and equitable for all. To do so, we are dedicated to building relationships, respect and trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. We believe a reconciled Australia is one where:

- There are strong two-way relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and rights are a proud part of our everyday life;
- Our national wellbeing is enhanced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strength and prosperity;
- The collective rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised and respected.

We believe that stronger relationships, built on shared knowledge and respect, are central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people controlling their life choices and fully participating in the economic and social opportunities enjoyed by the wider community. We aspire to enable all Australians to contribute to reconciliation and to breakdown stereotypes and discrimination.

Reconciliation Australia believes education has a transformative effect on individuals and societies and is a key driver of social change. As such, education is fundamental to Australia's reconciliation process. The education system plays a crucial role in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and ensuring all Australian students learn about and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

In this submission, Reconciliation Australia addresses two terms of reference:

- Access to, participation in and outcome of pre-schooling;
- Best practice models, both domestically and internationally.

In addressing these two terms of reference, we discuss the importance of access to culturally appropriate early childhood learning, the necessity of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and educators, and the importance of holistic approaches which incorporate self-determination. Four best practices case studies are used throughout this submission to emphasis programs which we believe encompasses these practices. In addition to these two terms of reference, Reconciliation Australia argues for the importance of implementing reconciliation activities across the education system. By educating current and future generations of Australians about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, we will be able to continue Australia's progress towards a reconciled nation.

1. Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood organisations are funded to provide culturally appropriate early childhood education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Where there are no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services, mainstream services are supported to meaningfully include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as part of their service provision.

Recommendation 2:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015 is implemented in close collaboration and through meaningful working partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and educators throughout Australia.

Recommendation 3:

The UNDRIP is used as the basis of education policies throughout Australia, to ensure that the Australian education system supports the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendation 4:

Approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are holistic, encompass high-expectation relationships, and are developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Recommendation 5:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are maintained and strengthened as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum.

Recommendation 6:

Schools are supported, through State and Federal education departments, to support teachers to confidently teach mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and address professional standards.

2. Access to, participation in, and outcomes of pre-schooling

There is clear evidence that the early years of a child's life critically influence and predict outcomes later in life. Consequently, when children face lower education, health, and wellbeing outcomes early in life, their later education, and adult health, housing and employment outcomes are negatively impacted.¹ Unfortunately, early childhood inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children in Australia have been well documented, and these early discrepancies set in motion the beginning of significant lifelong inequalities.² To address this, culturally appropriate early childhood education centres for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are essential, as is collaborative implementation of the recently released National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy.

2.1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must have access to culturally appropriate early childhood learning centres

Achieving the Closing the Gap target to ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to early childhood education will go a long way to helping address many other disadvantages later in life. Access to early childhood education is very important—but it is equally important to ensure that when early childhood education is accessed, it is culturally appropriate, respectful, and welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Participation in culturally inclusive, high quality early childhood education programs and care can assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to get the best start in life.

Early childhood education in Australia is guided by the National Quality Framework, which encourages early childhood education organisations to create an environment that reflects the lives of children using the service, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The Framework also encourages developing knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, inclusive of Traditional Owners of the land and local Elders.³

Reconciliation Australia strongly supports funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education service providers as a priority. Where no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education services providers are available, Reconciliation Australia believes it is important to incorporate knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories throughout the mainstream early childhood education system. It is important to ensure that all young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attend an early childhood provider that builds upon their rich cultural, linguistic and conceptual skills.⁴ In order to do this, early childhood education centres must develop culturally appropriate and high quality early childhood learning experiences, as well as systems that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

¹ SNAICC (No Year) Factsheet 1 Early Childhood Education and Care: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's needs. Available from: <http://www.snaicc.org.au/uploads/rsfil/03273.pdf>

² Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (2014) Review of early childhood parenting, education and health intervention programs for Indigenous children and families in Australia. Australian Government; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Australian Institute of Family Studies: Canberra.

³ Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. National Quality Framework. Available from: <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework>

⁴ Ibid.

Recommendation 1:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood organisations are funded to provide culturally appropriate early childhood education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Where there are no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services, mainstream services are supported to meaningfully include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as part of their service provision.

2.2. Implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy in early childhood education

Reconciliation Australia commends the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (the Strategy).⁵ The iterative process of the Strategy development, including learning from evaluations of previous education plans, reflects evidence-based policy making. Reconciliation Australia supports the underlying Strategy principles and the Strategy vision:

that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity and Australia's First Nations peoples.

Covering all stages of the education system, including early childhood education, the Strategy has identified the transition of children from early childhood education to school as a priority for national collaboration between education ministers. Additionally, specific measures are to be considered to enhance the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education.

Reconciliation Australia believes the emphasis the Strategy places on localised approaches and cultural recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will help achieve these goals of early childhood education success and student transitions. Reconciliation Australia suggests implementation of the Strategy could also significantly contribute to achieving these early childhood education goals. In order to do so, the Strategy must be implemented in close collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and educators. There must be meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities must be valued and respected, and the Strategy must continue to embrace long-term planning and evidence-based policy making.

Recommendation 2:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015 is implemented in close collaboration and through meaningful working partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and educators throughout Australia.

⁵ Education Council (2015) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015. Available from: <http://www.scseec.edu.au/EC-Reports-and-Publications.aspx>

Best practice example: Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care

The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) is the national peak body in Australia promoting the needs, rights, aspirations and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. They believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's cultural identity must be respected in accordance with ancestral ways, family and cultural traditions and community values.

Based in Melbourne, SNAICC has a small team of dedicated staff and is governed by a National Executive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. SNAICC's members comprise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander childcare and child protection services throughout Australia. SNAICC consistently show the importance of incorporating culture and identity into early childhood services in order to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and ensure they receive the best possible start in life.

SNAICC's membership base comprises of child-care agencies, pre-schools, early education providers, education support providers and services for young people at risk, among others. SNAICC work to develop community-controlled, self-determined solutions that empower services, communities and families to create early childhood education services that are effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. By working with a range of organisations, including childcare and early education providers, SNAICC are driving the work that ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities are represented, supported, and welcome in early childhood education.

3. Best practice models, both domestically and internationally

Best practice modelling can offer valuable insight into practices and programs which work well and deliver exceptional results. Within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) offers the basis on which to develop best practice educational policies. Australian-based research continues to show that the best education models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are ones which are holistic, strengths-based, culturally inclusive, and are developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

3.1. The UNDRIP offers the international best practice model for building suitable education solutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Reconciliation Australia is strongly supportive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples right to self-determination across all areas of life, including in education. The UNDRIP Article 14 states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning...

States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

In light of Australia's commitment to the UNDRIP, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to, and control of, their education is crucial. Where possible, teaching in language can be a key tool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to feel their histories and cultures are valued and respected. In turn, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' level of comfort in education institutions, and subsequent educational achievements, are likely to increase.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be allowed to practice self-determination throughout the education system. We have discussed in this submission four case studies which highlight the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. These case studies also show the success that can be achieved when self-determination is supported.

Recommendation 3:

The UNDRIP is used as the basis of education policies throughout Australia, to ensure that the Australian education system supports the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

3.2. *Holistic approaches and high-expectation relationships are supported throughout all schools*

Research and best practice models show that improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires a holistic approach across many areas of education. The main factors influencing completion rates and lower education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are access, attendance and achievement.⁶ Therefore, best practices models that improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must include:

- School culture and leadership that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families, that has high expectations for both staff and students, a responsive learning environment, and involvement of the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in planning and providing education;
- School-wide strategies to maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes, including broad curriculum provision, quality career education, and school attendance programs;
- Student focussed strategies to meet the needs of students at risk of early leaving or low achievement, including mentoring, school engagement programs and welfare support.⁷

Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational attainment rates therefore requires work across a number of school areas simultaneously. Ensuring improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires school engagement with local communities, leaders, Elders and families, to build strong

⁶ Helme, S., and Lamb, S. (2011) Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students. *Resource sheet no. 6* for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Australian Government; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; Australian Institute of Family Studies: Canberra.

⁷ Ibid.

relationships and trust. Additionally, focussing on empowerment, working from strengths, and building high-expectation relationships is essential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' success.

Reconciliation Australia acknowledges that improved attendance is critical for improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, not only must students be encouraged to attend school, but they must be supported with content, inclusion, and an environment that is culturally safe and appropriate when they are at school. Schools should be supported to incorporate the above approaches to improve educational attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Both the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience and the Stronger Smarter Institute provide best practice examples that are based on strong evidence of what works in improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Recommendation 4:

Approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are holistic, encompass high-expectation relationships, and are developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

Best practice example: Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)

AIME provide an innovative mentoring experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to provide pathways and support to help their progress through high school and university. AIME provides the largest education support network for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout Australia.

AIME's success is measured through independent economic evaluations, and shows that in 2013 when compared to non-AIME students, AIME-supported students:

- progressed from Year 9 to Year 12 at 76% to compared 41.4%
- progressed from Year 11 to Year 12 at 89.7% compared to 71.3%
- progressed from Year 12 to university at 26.8% compared to 10%

The overwhelming success of the AIME program means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can maintain their school engagement, thereby achieving improved educational outcomes. Additionally, AIME students are protected from leaving school early and not achieving their full educational potential by being supported to celebrate and see their culture as a strength, and not a weakness.

Best practice example: Stronger Smarter Institute

The Stronger Smarter Institute partners with schools across Australia, in order to help develop high-expectation education environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. A positive sense of cultural identity and positive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership are crucial to the Institute's success.

The Institute works with teachers to unlock their belief and confidence to teach all students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, in safe, respectful, and challenging ways.

The Institute conducts ongoing monitoring of their programmatic success, and shows the impact of their high-expectations programs extends beyond the boundaries of the classrooms, and out into the wider school and community environments.

4. Creating learning environments that foster higher levels of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

Reconciliation Australia believes that creating learning environments that foster higher levels of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures throughout the Australian education system is likely to assist in developing better educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families.

We believe there are principles that must be supported, respected, and encouraged to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities have more positive interactions with the education system from early childhood education and care through to senior secondary and beyond. If this is achieved, educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are likely to improve. These principles highlight the importance of reconciliation and valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and include:

- Maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the Australian Curriculum, at least as a cross curriculum priority;
- Strengthening early learning educators' understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content within the Early Years Learning Framework;
- Encouraging early learning settings to exceed the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Standards with regard to respect for local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and engagement;
- Supporting teachers to address proficiency in Australian Professional Standards for Teachers 1.4 and 2.4, which contain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-centred subject matter.

Currently, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe the education systems do not prepare their children well for life after school.⁸ Forty-five per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people disagree that the education system prepares their children well for employment, and 14 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have felt

⁸ Polity Research & Consulting (2014) Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2014: Q43. Available from <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/resources/>

racially discriminated against by a school teacher and/or principal in the last 12 months. These figures show that it still remains crucially important to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities are welcome throughout the education system in Australia, regardless of the model of educational services.

4.1. Maintaining and strengthening the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the Australian Curriculum

Reconciliation Australia believes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures should remain in the Australian Curriculum, at least in the form of a cross-curriculum priority, embedded across all learning areas. The Australian education system should be a key driver that increases exposure to, and knowledge of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Only 39 per cent of all Australians currently report having a high level of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, and only 30 per cent report they have a high level of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.⁹ However, 80 per cent of Australians agree it is important to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders cultures.¹⁰ Improving knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures will benefit all Australian students, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous.

Meaningful incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the curriculum is beneficial to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Connection to culture and language has significant positive effects on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth who speak a traditional language are less likely to have consumed alcohol at risky levels or to have used illicit substances in the past 12 months.¹² By being empowered to celebrate their histories and cultures, and through seeing others do the same, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will have greatly improved wellbeing.

Additionally, maintaining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a cross-curriculum priority ensures non-Indigenous students will have greater understanding, respect, and ultimately a shared pride in Australia's First Peoples. This is crucial in celebrating the uniqueness of Australia and creating a reconciled nation. Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures will build greater awareness and empathy critical for reconciliation. Reconciliation Australia's Workplace RAP Barometer shows that a deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures creates greater trust, and improves attitudes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non-Indigenous Australians.¹³

⁹ Polity Research & Consulting (2014) Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2014: Q26 . Available from <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/resources/>

¹⁰ Polity Research & Consulting (2014) Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2014: Q27. Available from <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/resources/>.

¹¹ Biddle, N. and Swee, H. (2012) The Relationship between Wellbeing and Indigenous Land, Language and Culture in Australia. *Australian Geographer*. 43 (3).

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing: a focus on children and youth. Available from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4725.0main+features1Apr%202011>

¹³ Reconciliation Australia (2015) RAP Impact Report 2014. Available from: <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/RAP-IMPACT-REPORT-Final-4.pdf>

It is important to note that the cross-curriculum priority is not a specific learning area in the Australian Curriculum.¹⁴ The cross-curriculum priorities are intended as a 'lens' through which teachers can examine learning area content. For example in Science, teachers may choose to explore the solar system by discussing not only the nature of orbits, but by incorporating the use of the night sky in the navigation systems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.¹⁵ Adding these additional perspectives to the classroom environment enhances learning opportunities for students, develops critical thinking skills, and provides multiple perspectives to the world. While Reconciliation Australia is happy that after the recent review of the Australian Curriculum, the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures has remained, we would like to see it strengthened.

Recommendation 5:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are maintained and strengthened as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum.

4.2. Supporting all teachers to confidently address the Professional Standards focus areas 1.4 and 2.4

Including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum provides a framework for teachers to create positive classroom learning experiences. Additionally, the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching (the Standards) are important in improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The Standards comprise seven interconnected, interdependent, and overlapping standards, outlining what teachers should know and be able to do.

The Standards focus area 1.4 (Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) and focus area 2.4 (Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians) emphasise the necessity of creating supportive schooling environments. Reconciliation Australia believes it is crucial that there is a continued emphasis on strategies and skills to create successful learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These focus areas extend from pre-service teacher education (as provided by universities offering initial teacher education degrees) into in-service teacher education (provided by, among others, state and territory government, Catholic and Independent education sectors).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are significantly under-represented in schools, comprising only around 1 per cent of the teaching community, compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who comprise 5 per cent of the total school student population.¹⁶ Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers is a key factor in fostering student engagement and improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students. The More Aboriginal and Torres

¹⁴ ACARA (2013) Learning Areas/Subjects. Available from: http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/learning_areas/learning_areas.html

¹⁵ For further discussion on the use of cross-curriculum priorities as 'lenses', please see <https://theconversation.com/what-if-we-had-asked-teachers-to-do-the-curriculum-review-33027>

¹⁶ MATSITI, Frequently asked questions. Available from: <http://matsiti.edu.au/about/faq/>

Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI), as well as the prototype Respect, Relationships and Reconciliation project, address the area of initial teacher education and should be supported and continued into the future.¹⁷

With regard to in-service teacher education, there are multiple ways in which teacher support can occur, including:

- Schools can commit to having resources available for teachers to draw upon, which specifically focus on cultural awareness and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- School communities, including principals and parents associations, can work to ensure the school is a culturally safe and appropriate place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Removing some of the direct onus for this from teachers will both ensure the school connects with the broader community, and may allow teachers to focus on tasks that can only be completed by them, such as classroom teaching;
- Schools can commit to offering culturally appropriate teaching courses as part of ongoing professional development for teachers.

Recommendation 6:

Schools are supported, through State and Federal education departments, to support teachers to confidently teach mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and address professional standards.

Best practice example: Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Schools and Early Learning (Narragunnawali)

Reconciliation Australia's *Narragunnawali* program is designed to support the 21,000+ early learning services, primary and secondary schools in Australia to develop environments that foster a higher level of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions. *Narragunnawali* provides:

- an online tool to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP);
- nationally appropriate curriculum resources;
- opportunities for professional learning.

¹⁷ Respect, Relationships, Reconciliation (2015) Prototype RRR Unit Outline. Available from: <http://rrr.edu.au/>