Singing songs in First Nations languages, learning to tackle racism and blogging about the use of Indigenous practices in the classroom are among the host of reconciliation actions to be celebrated as part of the inaugural Narragunnawali Awards for schools and early learning services. Reconciliation Australia, in partnership with BHP Billiton, this year launched a biennial national awards program to celebrate reconciliation excellence in the education sector. The awards build on Reconciliation Australia’s work, through its Narragunnawali education program, to help schools and early learning services foster a higher level of knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts will decide the winners of two awards: one for an outstanding school and one for an outstanding early learning service. This year’s finalists for the school award are Middle Park Primary School (Melbourne), Queanbeyan Public School (Queanbeyan) and St Virgil’s College (Hobart).
The early learning service award finalists are Balnarring Pre-School (Mornington Peninsula), Explore and Develop Penrith South (Western Sydney) and Uranquinty Preschool (Wagga Wagga). The achievements of the finalists include involving the broader community in reconciliation, leading on reconciliation in regional settings, and ensuring that non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share leadership on reconciliation initiatives.

Applicants were asked to submit their ‘reconciliation story’ and evidence the nomination had been endorsed by the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. In its application, Middle Park Primary School underscored the three-week immersion program it held for all students, with the help of Aunty Carolyn Briggs of the Boon Wurrung people. Anne Spackman, a member of the school’s Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group, says the school and the wider community are on a journey together to build a strong and long-lasting relationship with the Boonwurrung people, and “the land we live and learn on.”

“During the immersion program all students learnt basic Boon Wurrung words,” Spackman says.

“Continuing from this we have had Boon Wurrung signs made and put around our school. For example our boys toilet door now has a sign on it reading ‘yan yan’ (boy), and our LOTE room door has a sign on it reading ‘wurrung’ (language).”

Uranquinty Preschool was one of the finalists to incorporate initiatives relating to race relations into its work on reconciliation. Director Louise Grigg said that changes to student understanding and behaviour were evidence of the success of the early learning service’s anti-racism efforts.

“[We are] building an awareness of racism and implementing strategies that will deal with racism when it occurs,” Grigg says.

“The impact is that the children are beginning to recognise when people are treated unfairly.”

Sharon Davis says she was most impressed by the applicants that demonstrated a willingness to work on race relations.

“Putting an end to racism is less about cultural awareness and more about becoming racially literate,” she says.

Davis, a member of the judging panel, says it is important for both students and educators to learn about putting anti-racism into practice.

“Starting to talk about racism and anti-racism at a young age is really important,” she says.

“And it’s also important for teachers to make sure they’re racially literate at school.”

To be eligible to apply for the awards, schools and early learning services must have commenced or completed a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The Narragunnawali program supports schools and early learning services to develop their own RAPs, which help build strong relationships, respect and opportunities in classrooms and communities.
The Narragunnawali program also consists of a platform that offers a wide range of free resources that help teachers and educators bring reconciliation into the classroom. More than 1500 schools and early learning services – equivalent to eight per cent of schools and early learning services nationwide – are current users of the platform. Ms Davis said the Narragunnawali program provides “a really fantastic framework” that supports schools to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and implement reconciliation initiatives.

Members of the judging panel will conduct a site visit at each of the finalist schools and early learning services in October. The site visits will involve consultations with members of the executive and the RAP Working Group, members of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and other stakeholders.

The major prize for each award-winner will be a fully funded event, where the community will be invited to celebrate the achievements of the winning school and early learning service. The event will be planned in collaboration with the award-winners and could include an award presentation ceremony, performances, catering and creative workshops.

Davis says she looks forward to recognising the accomplishments of the winners and is eager to see the competition grow in years to come.

“It sets a good precedent for the awards to come because this is the first year, and I think as the word gets out there hopefully the ball keeps rolling and it gets bigger and better,” she says.

The 2017 Narragunnawali Award winners will be announced in October, after this edition of Reconciliation News has gone to press.

Visit reconciliation.org.au for more details.

JUDGING CRITERIA

Applicants are assessed on the level of integrity, intensity and innovation they apply to the following criteria:

**Relationships** — the nominated school or early learning service has strengthened relationships between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the classroom, around the school or early learning service and with the community to achieve exceptional outcomes towards advancing reconciliation.

**Respect** — the nominated school or early learning service has fostered a high level of respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and contributions in the classroom, around the school or early learning service and with the community to achieve exceptional outcomes towards advancing reconciliation.

**Opportunities** — the nominated school or early learning service has effectively established or extended opportunities for staff, students, children, families and community members to achieve exceptional outcomes towards advancing reconciliation in the classroom, around the school or early learning service, and with the community.