

Submission to First Nations Education Policy Consultation

About Reconciliation Australia

Reconciliation Australia is the national organisation promoting reconciliation between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We believe a reconciled Australia is one where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people participate equally and equitably in all areas of life, and the distinctive individual and collective rights and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are universally recognised and respected. That is, we have closed the gaps in life outcomes, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are self-determining. To do so, we are dedicated to building relationships, respect and trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians.

Our vision of reconciliation is based and measured on five dimensions; historical acceptance; race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity and unity. These dimensions are interdependent, meaning sustained progress towards reconciliation can only occur when advancements are made in every dimension. Reconciliation Australia's work covers four program areas that delivers services, resources, and advice to support reconciliation action within Australian businesses, schools and early learning services, community groups, and government organisations.

Reconciliation Australia recognises the education system as a powerful tool for healing, justice and systemic change. Engaging in reconciliation allows educational communities to weave the *five dimensions of reconciliation* together in positive and practical ways, harnessing the powerful role that learning, unlearning and relearning can play in Australia's reconciliation journey.

Reconciliation is the pathway to a more informed, united and resilient Australia, and our educational institutions play the leading role in getting us there.

Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali Program

Narragunnawali (pronounced narra-gunna-wally) is a word from the language of the Ngunnawal people that means alive, wellbeing, coming together and peace. The word *narragunnawali* is used as the program title with the permission of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council.



The Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education Program has tools and resources for schools and early learning services to take action towards reconciliation between non-First Nations Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Via a free-to-access online platform, the program provides professional learning and curriculum resources to Australian educators as well as a tailored Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) development process for schools and early learning services across the country that is aligned to national frameworks and professional standards, and that scaffolds a sustainable, holistic approach to driving reconciliation through building relationships, respect and opportunities in the classroom, around school/service and with the community alike.

The Narragunnawali program's vision is for First Nations peoples' self-determination to be at the centre of education systems, which actively engage the hearts and minds of future generations to contribute to the reconciliation movement. The vision is underpinned by four strategic goals, which articulate the impact the program seeks to have on reconciliation in and through education:

1. Teachers, educators and school leaders champion reconciliation
2. Schools and early learning services are holistically and actively committed to reconciliation
3. Education institutions actively collaborate with local communities and broader reconciliation networks
4. Education sector has optimal measures, resources and policy commitments to drive effective reconciliation practice

Response to Discussion Paper

In responding to Area One of the First Nations Education Policy Discussion Paper Focus: *Embedding culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices*, we will firstly discuss the anti-racism approaches and frameworks needed to ensure the proposed policy and programs are operating within systems and structures that support their goals.

We believe a critical scaffold for the First Nations Education Policy is the implementation of the National Anti-Racism Framework. Departmental level implementation of the Framework is required to actively address the historically racist systems, structures, and concepts as they exist in the education sector.¹ Complementing the Framework is a role for evidence-based, well-embedded reconciliation programs such as Narragunnawali to support a First Nations Education policy by facilitating anti-racist and culturally responsive learning environments. It is only when systems and structures are improved that programs within learning environments can achieve their greatest impact.

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission (Nov 2024) The National Anti-Racism Framework: A roadmap to eliminating racism in Australia Report.

Reconciliation Australia's following responses stem from strongly acquired expertise in developing, implementing and evaluating Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program, and our ongoing collaborative and advisory role across all levels of the education sector.

Our recent consultations with key education sector stakeholders (*2025 National Reconciliation in Education Forum*) showed that stakeholders hold the fundamental view that transforming education systems in ways that genuinely support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination requires strong departmental leadership, equitable resourcing, and clear system-level accountability.²

Supporting anti-racism approaches in systems and structures

Prioritising actions that create and support an ongoing sense of belonging and inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education systems is critical. As a primary concern, there is an urgent need for improved action to address interpersonal, institutional and systemic racism experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth.³

The most recent *Call it out Racism Register* report highlights the importance of countering school-based racism, with results indicating that young people aged under 19 years were most likely to have experienced racism in a school/educational setting than other domains.⁴ The latest Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2024 results also demonstrate that experiences of racism are high amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young adults (18-24 years), with 63% having experienced racial prejudice in the past 6 months.⁵

Reconciliation Action Plans (RAPs)

The Narragunnawali program responds to known evidence about the importance of anti-racism and reconciliation in education, in its connection to providing young people with culturally responsive learning experiences, and improved health and wellbeing outcomes across the lifespan.⁶

Over 50% of all schools and early learning services in Australia have registered to develop a Narragunnawali Reconciliation Action Plan (RAPs) on the Narragunnawali online platform, with a user base of over 220,000 individual school leaders, educators, students, parents, carers and community

² Reconciliation Australia (2025) National Reconciliation in Education Forum: Bridging Now to Next: Summary Report (report in preparation)

³ Priest, N. C., Paradies, Y. C., Gunthorpe, W., Cairney, S. J., & Sayers, S. M. (2011). Racism as a determinant of social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal Australian youth. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 194(10), 546–550. Accessed at <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2011/194/10/racism-determinant-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-aboriginal-australian-youth>

⁴ Allison, F., Cunneen, C., Whyman, A., Lewis, B. and Selcuk, A. (2025) 'Everywhere I go no matter where, if it's around non-Indigenous people I feel a hate vibe. It feels like I'm being watched'. *The Call It Out Racism Register 2024-2025*, Sydney: Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney. Available at: [Jumbunna-Call-It-Out-Annual-Report-2024-2025.pdf](#)

⁵ Reconciliation Australia (2024) Australian Reconciliation Barometer: Racism and First Nations Peoples [2024 Australian Reconciliation Barometer: Racism and First Nations Peoples - Reconciliation Australia](#)

⁶ Biddle N and Priest N (2019), The importance of Reconciliation in Education, ANU Centre for Social Policy Research, [The importance of reconciliation in education | POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research](#)

members. RAPs in schools and early learning services, have been evidenced as important tools for improving the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, by involving all students - and indeed all members of educational communities - in taking shared responsibility for acting against racism, and towards reconciliation.⁷

Reconciliation Australia's consultations with key education sector stakeholders (*2025 National Reconciliation in Education Forum*) revealed a sense of urgency for the education sector to take action to address racism that is systemic, linguistic, and pedagogical - where First Nations cultural and familial learning systems have been largely devalued in western education.⁸

'Take Action against Racism' and 'Cultural Responsiveness for Staff' are two key Actions within the [Narragunnawali RAP framework](#) which works to provide a whole-school approach to building strong community relationships and an increased awareness and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, histories and cultures. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) reported on the value of RAPs in its Culturally Responsive Australian Teaching Workforce report (2022), noting that, "As a framework for action and accountability, a RAP is a useful starting point and continuing reference, reflection and guidance point if embedded alongside other culturally safe processes, frameworks and policies."⁹

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) also demonstrates how RAPs in learning communities can positively impact on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Study findings highlight how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attend a school with a RAP were more likely to report that their school understood their needs and was good for them, and they were less likely to report that they did not want to go to school.¹⁰ This is a significant finding where school attendance is a recognised predictor of educational engagement, achievement and completion of Year 12 schooling.¹¹

Embedded as part of RAP commitments, dedicated anti-racism strategies can be particularly impactful, working to counter racism by building school/service-wide awareness of racism, its impacts and how to respond effectively. In this way, RAPs in learning environments can effectively support AITSL's position

⁷ Biddle N, Ellen L, Mortreux C & Waite C (2019), Hearing from schools and early learning services' ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Accessed at https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf

⁸ Reconciliation Australia (2025) National Reconciliation in Education Forum: Bridging Now to Next: Summary Report (report in preparation)

⁹ The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Building a culturally responsive Australian Teaching Workforce, pg 21 [aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report_.pdf](#)

¹⁰ ANU Centre for Social research & Methods, Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education – Paper#18 – Capturing the impact of Narragunnawali (2022) https://polis.cass.anu.edu.au/files/docs/2025/10/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_18_-_Capturing_the_impact_of_Narragunnawali_-_For_web.pdf

¹¹ Life Course Centre (2022) Closing the (policy) gap and attendance cliff of First Nations students <https://lifecoursecentre.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/LCC-factsheet-AttendanceCliff.pdf>

that *whole of institution* approaches to anti-racism are required that don't exclusively rely on teacher professional learning as the strategy.¹²

Tumut Community Preschool – Narragunnawali Awards 2021 Joint Winner

– provides a powerful example of how RAPs can drive a whole of school approach to culturally responsive pedagogies and anti-racism practice, working to create a safe, engaging and empowering learning environment for Aboriginal children and families (see Case Study¹³ below):

CASE STUDY: TUMUT COMMUNITY PRESCHOOL

Joint winner of the Narragunnawali Awards 2021 in the early learning category, Tumut Community Preschool is an example of an education institution that has driven strong engagement and impact through its reconciliation commitments, centred on anti-racism and culturally responsive pedagogies and practice.

The Preschool has demonstrated its commitment to targeting anti-racism and fostering social justice through dedicated support for staff cultural competency development and self-reflection training, and through fostering respectfully embedded learning experiences about anti-discrimination for the children. As a result, this Preschool has developed a culture with zero tolerance to racism.

"I went to school here in Tumut but there was no Aboriginal cultural content in my education. I went to school with Aboriginal people, but their culture was ignored. So personally, I've learnt and grown. The Narragunnawali program has had a huge impact.

Reconciliation and Indigenous perspectives have been embedded within our philosophy, in the way we work and how children are educated. We are known for this and this is what we are very proud of. The reconciliation program has also significantly increased the attendance of First Nations children at the preschool, with enrolments of local Aboriginal children lifting to 16-20% of all enrolments." Tess Herring, Tumut Community Preschool Services Manager

Reconciliation Australia ((2023) Narragunnawali Reconciliation in Education: Impact Statement, accessed at https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Narragunnawali-Impact-Statement_Sept-2023.pdf

National Anti-Racism Framework

The Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework is Australia's whole-of-society roadmap to address and eliminate racism across law, justice, education, health, education, media, and the arts.¹⁴ The Framework specifically calls for the Australian Government and education providers to implement systems-wide, and structural anti-racism actions through implementation of the following three key recommendations:

¹² The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Building a culturally responsive Australian Teaching Workforce pg 21, [aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report_.pdf](#)

¹³ Awards 2021 - Early Learning Category Joint Winner - Tumut Community Preschool, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5wvZ5XLolQ>

¹⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission (2024) The National Anti-Racism Framework: Full Report https://humanrights.gov.au/_data/assets/file/0021/47334/NARF_Full_Report_FINAL_DIGITAL_ACCESSIBLE.pdf

29. Australian governments and education providers (early childhood to tertiary) co-design and incorporate into curricula nationally consistent anti-racism resources and educational materials for staff and students that focus on recognising and rejecting racism:

- a. in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and practitioners, including material about the historical and ongoing impacts of settler colonisation. This should be supplemented by local, place-based materials*
- b. in partnership with non-Indigenous antiracism experts from negatively racialised communities, including material about Australia's migration histories, contemporary forms of racism, and ongoing impacts of discriminatory policies.*

30. Australian governments and education providers (early childhood to tertiary) implement curriculum reform:

- a. in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and practitioners to embed First Nations knowledges, scholarship, and texts across all disciplines*
- b. on the advice of other negatively racialised organisations and practitioners to better integrate knowledges, scholarship, and texts authored by non-Indigenous negatively racialised people.*

31. Australian governments and education providers (early childhood to tertiary) codesign with community experts, a nationally consistent, effective, comprehensive, and culturally safe mechanism for students, staff, families, and communities to safely and without fear of repercussions, report experiences of racism across educational settings and improve accountability, support, and redress services.

The Framework's recommendations for the education sector outlines widespread systems level change through inclusion of anti-racism materials into school curricula, development of culturally safe racism reporting mechanisms for school communities, and curricula reform to embed First Nations knowledges undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and teachers. Implementation of these changes, alongside embedding RAPs into learning environments to support *whole of institution* approaches to anti-racism, would support the development and implementation of the First Nations Education Policy.

Embedding culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices

Professional Learning for non-Indigenous educators

Culturally responsive curriculum development and delivery can only come from culturally responsive teachers, middle leaders and principals, who themselves must engage in ongoing professional learning and critical self-reflection. Sectoral consultation indicates that non-Indigenous educators continue to lack confidence in meeting professional standards (such as AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers 1.4 and 2.4) relating to First Nations Education and reconciliation-in-education,

and in identifying and accessing quality professional learning about anti-racist and culturally responsive teaching practices.¹⁵

Reconciliation Australia views cultural responsiveness development for teaching staff as most effective when it is not a standalone imperative but, rather, part of a systematic, whole-of-school approach to reconciliation in education. As highlighted above, developing and implementing a Reconciliation Action Plan is one recognised strategy for contributing to a culturally safe and responsive environment.¹⁶

Anti-racism and culturally responsive teaching/learning are core components of reconciliation in education and there is an important interrelationship between reconciliation and First Nations Education. The former does not replace the latter but can and does play an important role in shaping the learning environments, ethos and experiences that make space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in and through education. There is a recognised role for both Government and sector bodies in advocating for evidence-based programs and resources connecting [these] resources to teachers “when and where they need” through clear communication channels and funding investments.¹⁷

First Nations Educators

Reconciliation Australia strongly supports the development of the First Nations Teacher Strategy to improve the attraction and retention of the First Nations educator workforce, but the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) and need for improved recognition, remuneration and career pathways in these roles must be addressed.

AIEOs assist First Nations students in their education, support cultural awareness and foster relationships between the school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. They are vital in creating culturally safe and responsive learning environments in Australian schools and providing cultural context to education. There is clear evidence that AIEOs can improve components of success for First Nations students and promote a First Nations pedagogy with Australian schools¹⁸, yet while the work undertaken by AIEOs in Australian schools is complex, skilled and multi-faceted, it continues to be devalued and misunderstood in education systems.¹⁹

¹⁵ The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2022) *Building a culturally responsive Australian Teaching Workforce* [aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report .pdf](https://aitsl.org.au/indigenous-cultural-competency-final-report.pdf)

¹⁶ Krakouer, J. (2015), Literature review relating to the current context and discourse on Indigenous cultural awareness in the teaching space: Critical pedagogies and improving Indigenous learning outcomes through cultural responsiveness, Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed on https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=indigenous_education

¹⁷ The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2022) *Building a culturally responsive Australian Teaching Workforce* [aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report .pdf](https://aitsl.org.au/indigenous-cultural-competency-final-report.pdf)

¹⁸ Peacock H, Prehn J (2021). The importance of Aboriginal Education Workers for decolonising and promoting culture in primary schools: an analysis of the longitudinal study of Indigenous children (LSIC). *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 50,196–202. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2019.13>

¹⁹ Price A, Jackson-Barrett E, Gower G and Herrington J (2017) *Understanding the Complex Work of Aboriginal Education Workers in Schools*, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* Volume 48 Number1 pp. 93–105 doi 10.1017/jie.2017.34

AIEO's can be the lowest remunerated employees within a school and increased cultural and capacity burden is often placed on them to support or lead work on anti-racism that should be driven by school leadership and requires whole of school support. Over reliance on AIEO's within school settings can reduce their capacity to responsively meet the needs of First Nations students²⁰, and this must be addressed by school leadership reducing burdens on First Nations staff, and by strengthening whole of school approaches and capability of non-Indigenous staff.

Both Government and the education sector have a responsibility to communicate the valuable and vital place of First Nations educators in the life of school and early learning service communities, and in providing policy and funding commitments that support training, recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in both formal and informal educator roles.

Recommendations

Development of culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices through the First Nations Education Policy will be strengthened by critical structural and sector approaches to anti-racism through implementation of the National Anti-Racism Framework and use of RAPs.

First Nations people and perspectives must be centred in the development and implementation of Education policy and the connections between First Nations education and evidence-based reconciliation programs must be actively resourced and advocated for by Government and the sector alike. While culturally responsive learning for non-Indigenous educators is a key foundation to change, increased support and recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers is vital as they hold pivotal roles in fostering learning environments that are free of racism and are culturally safe for First Nations students.

Recommendation 1: The Department of Education advocates for, and resources, reconciliation and RAP development programs such as Narragunnawali, within schools and early learning services. The mandatory RAP action of Inclusive Policies²¹ provides a practical mechanism to implement the First Nations Education Policy throughout the daily practices of schools and early learning services.

Recommendation 2: The Department of Education commits to enacting Recommendations 29, 30, 31 in the National Anti-Racism Framework as priority to underpin the development of the First Nations Education Policy. RAPs in education departments and individual schools are impactful tools to support implementation of the Framework's recommended anti-racism actions at sector and community levels.

²⁰ Peacock, H., & Prehn, J. (2021). The importance of Aboriginal education workers for decolonising and promoting culture in primary schools: an analysis of the longitudinal study of Indigenous children (LSIC). *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 50(1), 196–202. <https://doi.org/10.1017/JIE.2019.13>

²¹ Narragunnawali RAP Actions <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/rap/actions/23/inclusive-policies>

Recommendation 3: The Australian government commits to the National Anti-Racism Framework to eliminate racism in Australia; (2) and establishes a National Anti-Racism Taskforce to oversee and advise on its implementation.

Recommendation 4: The Department of Education supports the expansion of programs that facilitate career pathways and equitable recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers (AIEOs).

Recommendation 5: All education policy, accountability and success measures align with, and actively promote, the principles outlined in the UNDRIP. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is respected and upheld, in all areas of education policy and program development.