



Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

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VAEAI's Submission to Closing the Gap Strategy refresh

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Do you have any general comments?

VAEAI welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the next Closing the Gap agenda. We consider that we are at a particularly critical time in reconciliation in contemporary Australia with growing calls at a national level for Indigenous parliamentary representation, development of a Treaty with the Commonwealth Government, and the establishment of Treaty processes occurring within particular jurisdictions, including the state of Victoria.

The success of the next national Closing the Gap Strategy, and indeed, any future policy, strategy, program or initiative, will only occur with the genuine input of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Community involvement in education is fundamental to ensure self-determination, allowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to identify and prioritise what is best for their children and their community.

VAEAI's structure is community-driven, that is we are a statewide organisation, with a regional structure of 32 Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups which provide advice to all levels of government, education and training service providers across all sectors of education, and advocate on the issues pertaining to Koorie education that affect our communities. For more information, visit the VAEAI website: <http://www.vaeai.org.au/who-we-are/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=13>.

What does Closing the Gap mean to you?

VAEAI considers that 'Closing the Gap' is by definition, inadequate: this term suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders should and can achieve only what the average is for the general population. This is deficit language and encourages a public mindset that Indigenous Australians can only ever be in a position of trying to catch up with everyone else. VAEAI considers,

too, that the language of Closing the Gap has contributed to its failure to meet expected targets. Deficit language translates to low expectations in practice.

VAEAI requests that the new strategy be named using an aspirational, community nominated and endorsed title, to demonstrate respect, self-determination and partnership. The starting point of the strength of Victoria's *Marrung* Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 is that '*Marrung*' was nominated and endorsed by Victoria's Koorie community, for its symbolic meaning: Marrung (pron: MA-roong), the Wemba Wemba word for the Murray Cypress pine tree, representing branches of education and knowledge¹. VAEAI proposes that each state and territory Indigenous Education Consultative Body be asked and supported to consult with its communities and submit community endorsed suggestions for the name of the new strategy. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will want to see a new name that is aspirational and strengths-based, and invokes a meaning of each learner aiming to achieve their potential in their own right - and not by always having to be compared with other people. The use of positive language is crucial for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations, and stakeholders to firmly believe in and actively support the new strategy.

VAEAI acknowledges the intentions behind the development and maintenance of the Closing the Gap agenda. However, we firmly believe that this agenda can only be strengthened through the recognition and practice of self-determination of Australia's First Peoples across all education sectors. In recognising that 'self-determination' is subjective in interpretation, VAEAI considers it imperative that Commonwealth, state, and territory governments conduct open consultation sessions to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to identify priorities and strategies that will support self-determination in all sectors, including education. A new national strategy without self-determination at its heart and in its practice is an impotent strategy, and is destined for little success.

The Victorian Government is enacting the Victorian Premier's commitment to self-determination and that self-determination can only occur where Aboriginal people have a place at the decision-making table. On 31 January 2018, members from the Victorian Koorie community, Aboriginal organisations and government, gathered to have their say on the future of Closing the Gap and Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework. VAEAI, as Victoria's peak Koorie education advocacy

¹

http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf

organisation, participated in this meeting. The meeting identified the following aspects of what self-determination looks like:

- Community-set and delivered targets
- Community-led, place-based decision-making across policy and program funding, design, delivery and accountability
- Self-determination as a target, as well as an approach
- Treaty²

How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and businesses work more effectively together?

- **What is needed to change the relationship between government and community?**
- **To help close the gap, what is needed to support Indigenous community leadership and decision-making?**

VAEAI considers that there needs to be full and equal partnerships between all levels of government, and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations within each government jurisdiction, to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are offered full opportunity to take leadership and make decisions that affect them. This is self-determination in action.

We acknowledge the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's commitment to "work in genuine partnership with Indigenous leaders, organisations, and communities, to identify the priorities that will inform how governments can better design and deliver programs and services, to close the gap."³ However, the term 'genuine' must be defined. VAEAI considers that a genuine partnership is one that recognises and enacts the self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, enabling communities to lead, determine targets and priorities, and to make crucial decisions on matters that affect community. VAEAI argues that governments at all levels must let go of some control, and change the way in which business is conducted by government departments, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and their communities to be supported, not blocked, in this process by administrative and service systems and their funding arrangements.

² Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet summary paper.

³ Prime Minister & Cabinet, *Closing the Gap: The Next Phase: Public Discussion Paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017), 3.

Since 1990, a formal partnership has been in place between VAEAI and the Victorian Government, through the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). This partnership was reaffirmed in Year 2001 with the launch of *Yalca: A Partnership in Education and Training for the New Millennium*, which acknowledged that local Koorie communities, through Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs), are best able to determine local education and training needs⁴.

In Victoria in July 2016, *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026* was launched. The Victorian Government, through the Department of Education and Training, worked with the Victorian Koorie community to develop this plan. Marrung is the Victorian Government's ten-year plan to improve the educational outcomes and experiences of Koorie Victorians across the early childhood, schools, and training and higher education sectors. The principle of self-determination underpins Marrung, and Koorie community input and direction is central to achieving improved outcomes for Koorie learners. Through Marrung, VAEAI's partnership with DET has been strengthened at local, regional and state levels. Each DET Region of Victoria is implementing its own Marrung Regional Implementation Plan, which was developed with direct input from the local Koorie community stakeholders.

Building and strengthening partnerships at all levels between Koorie communities through the LAECGs, DET's regions and local areas, and service providers is essential for Marrung's success. Marrung's governance is dependent on Victoria's Koorie communities and stakeholders coming together at local, regional and statewide forums, to discuss education and training needs, issues and priorities for their communities, and feeding into DET's education planning and delivery processes at all levels. Continuing unsolicited feedback to VAEAI is that Marrung's governance structures are unique in Australia and set the benchmark for elsewhere:

⁴ http://www.vaeai.org.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Yalca.pdf

Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026
Governance Structure



Read *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan* here:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/aboriginal/Pages/marrung.aspx>

VAEAI therefore recommends this model for consideration for the new national agenda. Education policies, strategies, programs and services will only succeed with Aboriginal community buy-in and engagement.

VAEAI has witnessed first-hand the successes that arise when Aboriginal communities are given the opportunity to have input to priorities and decisions that affect them. In recent years there has been a great increase in Victoria of Koorie students completing Year 12, from two Koorie students in 1984, to 573 Koorie students that completed their Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), or Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools qualification in Victorian government schools in 2017. The increase in number of these graduates has led to a rise in regional Koorie Year 12 graduation celebrations within local Koorie communities, to recognise and celebrate the achievements and successes of these graduates within community, and provide successful role modelling for younger students to encourage success in the generations coming up.

How could the Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?

- **What has worked well under Closing the Gap?**
- **What has not worked well?**

School attendance – not a singular issue

VAEAI considers that PM&C has had too great a focus on student attendance, and too often from the singular perspective of aggregate attendance statistics.

While we acknowledge that it is fundamentally obvious that a student must attend school consistently in order to learn and therefore achieve positive outcomes, we consider that there should be a greater focus in strategy on student and parent engagement, across all education and training sectors.

Consistent school attendance arises from a combination of positive factors being in place, particularly: a student feeling welcome and safe at school, their parents/carers feeling listened to and able to freely raise questions and issues, their culture and community being honoured and respected, non-racist fair treatment alongside other students and their families in a school, and so on. Positive experience at school encourages enthusiasm, regular attendance, and engagement. Negative experiences within a school culture discourages enthusiasm, attendance and engagement.

Therefore, VAEAI strongly supports parents and families as the first - and the enduring - educators of their children and encourages parent and family engagement in their children's learning as early as possible, from early childhood onwards. It is accepted in early childhood policy in Australia that research has shown unequivocally that parent engagement within the first five years of a child's life is crucial for developing cognitive, social, and emotional skills, which in turn enhances the child's readiness for school, and thus leads to better social and economic outcomes throughout the life journey.⁵

⁵ Sheridan et al, "Parent Engagement and School Readiness: Effects of the Getting Ready Intervention on Preschool Children's Social-Emotional Competencies", *Early Education Development* 21, no. 1 (2010), 1-3.

For many years, VAEAI has provided, and continues to provide, direct input to the development and strengthening of the In Home Support and Home Based Learning programs, which run in Victoria to support Aboriginal families in their parenting capacity in order to improve the health, development, learning, and wellbeing of their children.⁶ In Victoria, DET has a dedicated Koorie Education Workforce deployed across its 4 regions, whose role is to provide engagement support to Koorie students within Victorian government schools, including the important transition from early years settings into primary school. Where relationships are well established between Koorie families and their local Workforce member, individual attendance and engagement strategies can be developed and employed, designed for the circumstances for the student and family.

Overall, VAEAI would like to see:

- the next national agenda move away from the perceived Closing the Gap fixation to get students to school, to pursuing an inclusive engagement approach that sees supports that wraparound the student and their family to remove any practical barriers to regular attendance, and to ensure the student wants to go to school, wants to engage and learn, and wants to succeed
- measurement of selected agreed engagement indicators along the educational pathway and that these are considered of complementary importance to attendance statistics, and
- school attendance data analysed and reported in an enquiring, in-depth way that acknowledges that aggregate Aboriginal student cohort attendance statistics for a school can be skewed significantly by just one or a few students who do not attend regularly – too often the aggregate statistics reported publicly are summarised to suggest that attendance is poor for most Aboriginal students in a school, which adds unhelpfully to negative perceptions about Aboriginal students, and does not account for the success stories in the Aboriginal student cohort.

Curriculum

Within the school system, VAEAI has long advocated for the mandatory inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in all curriculum areas, as an essential strategy to enhance the inclusion and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, which in turn will improve attendance and learning outcomes. VAEAI considers that the teaching of Aboriginal and

⁶ Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc., “In-Home Support”. <http://www.vaeai.org.au/support/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=87> (accessed April 19, 2018).

Torres Strait Islander perspectives across all curriculum areas will indeed accelerate efforts to eradicate racism from education settings. National and international research has overwhelmingly shown the detrimental impacts of racism and discrimination on the life outcomes and pathway of individuals.⁷ While acknowledging that there is work taking place in Victoria to address racism and discrimination in the schooling system, it is an unfortunate reality that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are still more likely to experience racism up to 25 per cent more than non-Indigenous people.⁸

What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

- **Should governments focus on indicators such as prosperity, wellbeing or other areas?**
- **What do you think are the most important issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, families and communities? Why?**

Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated in the Closing the Gap framework? How?

As discussed above, VAEI considers that the first principle for the new national framework, its agenda and strategies must be self-determination, and when applied to this current process of framework development, then self-determination will ensure that inclusivity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture awareness, and the attributes desired by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, is embedded in the new framework, and translated into its strategies and then its

⁷ Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, "Racism and Discrimination". <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/indigenous/Health-Performance-Framework-2014/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-performance-framework-2014-report/racism-and.html> (accessed April 19, 2018); Dudgeon et al, "The social, cultural and historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians", in *Working together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health and wellbeing principles and practice* (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Canberra, 2010), 25-42.

⁸ National Indigenous Television (NITV), "10 times Indigenous Australians have experienced 'everyday' racism", *SBS News*, March 2, 2017. <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/nitv-news/article/2017/02/27/10-times-indigenous-australians-have-experienced-everyday-racism> (accessed April 19, 2018).

measurements of progress and success. Without self-determination, the new framework cannot incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture with integrity.

VAEAI has strongly advocated for many years for the mandatory incorporation of Aboriginal histories, cultures and perspectives in teaching and learning settings, to improve student engagement and therefore, attendance. VAEAI has always observed that for Koorie students, being able to learn about Koorie cultures and languages and share this with non-Koorie students affirms their identity, affirms the place and importance of their community, and provides a holistic approach to their education, and so develops within them a great sense of pride and they feel a great sense of acceptance and self-worth. In 2017, VAEAI successfully advocated for the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives to be mandated into the Arts curriculum, making this the sixth key learning area of the Victorian Curriculum where it is mandatory for Aboriginal perspectives to be taught.

To support the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum, VAEAI considers that a minimum number of hours of Koorie cultural awareness, understanding and safety training must be a mandatory requirement for all educators and staff, across all education and training sectors, in every state and territory. This would be best implemented in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), which would strengthen the standards 1.4 and 2.4 of Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. VAEAI's Representative Council approved checklists in 2014 of the aspects of content that the Victorian Koorie Community wishes to see in modules within ITE courses within Victoria – these are attached. VAEAI would like to see the new national framework include ITE.

VAEAI and its LAECGs are very pleased to have a key role in the Marrung initiative being rolled out to ensure that Cultural Understanding and Safety Training (CUST) modules are progressively delivered to school staff across Victorian government schools (and also offered to members of school councils). We see this initiative as fundamental and ground-breaking and hope to see the modules eventually delivered to all schools in Victoria, including independent and Catholic schools.

What do you think are the key targets or commitments that should be measured in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda?

- **What resources, including data or information, are needed to help communities and develop and drive local action?**

The refreshed Closing the Gap agenda must be developed in full and genuine consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. VAEAI considers it imperative that the Australian, state, and territory governments engage closely with the peak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations so that they have direct input into this agenda, within their relevant sectors. Given that four of the current targets are directly related to education, we strongly advocate for close engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs), to develop the targets relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The IECBs comprise of community-based statewide organisations and key individuals that hold primary advocacy and advisory arrangements with their respective state/territory government in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training. The role of IECBs is to represent the views of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on education and training matters at all levels of government, so that these can be strategically addressed. The IECBs currently have a consultative arrangement with the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, and meet with the Secretary and senior government officials periodically, to discuss issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training. The IECBs are therefore very well placed to engage both key government figures and local communities in driving actions and solutions to improve Indigenous education matters.