

This submission is a formal response from the Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) Project team to the interim report (11/08/2025) into *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce* from the Productivity Commission.

The Culturally Nourishing Schooling Project (CNS) is a team of researchers and educators working with schools, school leaders, teachers, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators, Cultural Mentors, Elders and other Community members, as well as children and young people, to investigate what culturally responsive education focused on improving outcomes looks like across diverse schools and communities. The project is a philanthropic-funded partnership between universities, schools, and communities. We have been working with schools in NSW since 2021, and in 2025, we entered the second phase of the project, expanding to South Australia and Victoria.

Our university-based team has long standing experience working with, and gathering research-based evidence of how, school-community based partnerships effectively influence educational outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Our collective experience provides us with a strong foundation upon which to make evidence-based claims about the absolute importance of informed policy decision-making, particularly when focused on decreasing the schooling factors that impact children growing up in communities of poverty and cultural diversity. Hence, despite 40 years of Federal and State Government policies and funding aimed at improving the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, there is unequivocal evidence to indicate that such aspirational targets are not being met.¹ Furthermore, systematic review of Australian schooling shows that there has been no unified and sustained vision for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education². Additionally, educational and policy reforms have been implemented with short-term objectives often tied to funding cycles, but have not demonstrated sustained changes in student outcomes.³

Evidence shows that to positively influence equitable and quality schooling experiences, policies need to focus on supporting school leaders, teachers, as well as communities and families, to work towards localised and relational schooling practices. Maintaining the professionalism of teachers and educators is critical when recommending measures to provide all children with a quality education.

Overwhelmingly, improving student outcomes should be aligned with evidence-based practices that have been established as culturally responsive. Such practices prioritise the importance of learning, situated in place and space, and operationalised in ways that are culturally appropriate for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

This submission addresses Section 1 of the Interim Report: *The best resources to improve school student outcomes*. Drawing on the stated needs and drafted recommendations in the report, we present research-informed evidence about the potential impact of these recommendations on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student outcomes to propose suggestions for alternative reform direction.

Needs and Considerations

The August 11, 2025, interim report from the Productivity Commission⁴ recommends that five broad inquiries should be conducted to guide reforms related to the Australian Government's priority areas aimed at building a skilled and adaptable workforce. The first reform priority is to focus on improving the Australian education system to boost student outcomes in schools. Two key recommendations are suggested to help achieve this goal: (1) a national platform for lesson planning materials and (2) a national approach to educational technology (edtech).

A vast body of research⁵ highlights that a uniformed approach to Australian schooling does not, and has not, provided evidence of equitability measures, nor does such an approach adequately address the changing learning needs of students to “realising their full potential through education”.⁶

Concerns about teachers' current workloads are linked to undesirable outcomes that fall short of expected targets. Research shows that the cumulative and interactive stressors beyond pedagogical practice, such as inadequate pay and recognition, school culture, and professional regulation demands, are significant factors impacting current teacher workloads and contributing to the broader workforce shortages.⁷

It would be prudent to review the body of rigorous peer-reviewed, high-quality research evidence that highlights insights from teachers and/or students about what factors are seen to student outcomes; factors such as curriculum rigidity, testing regimes, resourcing gaps, ongoing professional learning, and relationally responsive pedagogies.⁸

Research shows that a lack of readily available or accessible resources is not a major factor in improving student outcomes⁹. The failure of resource banks to change learning experiences for students is demonstrated by a recent commissioned research project from *Australians Together*¹, which revealed that even though teachers have unlimited access to a range of curriculum-aligned and culturally appropriate resources, there is limited uptake and use in classrooms.¹⁰

Considerations for schooling reform should focus on reforming systemic issues through collaboration, trust, and professional engagement with educational stakeholders to challenge “the damaging myth that what happens in classrooms is just an ‘implementation issue,’”¹¹.

We believe that ensuring the cultural appropriateness and alignment with relevant guidelines of a centralised bank of lesson plans would be difficult. Racial biases and/or potential harms may be unintentionally perpetuated to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, young people and communities. A substantial body of research indicates that greater consideration for the ways teachers engage with students and curriculum is essential for schooling reform recommendations relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Such considerations are essential to ensure that critical thinking and agency in teaching practices are supported.

¹ Findings from the drafted final report (25.08.2025) suggest that key reform strategies ought to focus on prioritising relationality within school structures, invest in culturally safe practices and spaces, proactively deal with discrimination by prioritising equitability, and commit to whole-of-school professional learning to impact the schooling experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Ongoing professional learning has been identified as the most effective way to elicit transformative educational experiences for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, which in turn can lead to improved school outcomes.

Research concerning ongoing professional learning has clearly identified that greater consideration is needed regarding the potential impact of any schooling reform recommendations on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and teacher practices involving students and curriculum content.

Evidence of reforming Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student outcomes

In response to Information Request 1.1¹², we suggest that more critical consultation of the body of research-based evidence relating to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander learners and communities should occur in order to determine whether a national platform of resources and the development of edtech software would achieve the intended objective of improving school student outcomes. In the case of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education, an undeniable body of evidence-based research demonstrates *what does and doesn't work* to improve the schooling.¹³ Despite recent commentary¹⁴ claiming a lack of knowledge about cultural responsiveness in education, a review of publicly-accessible research clearly identifies the significant factors that positively impact the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, including:

- Prioritising relationality with students and communities to understand the context in which schooling is delivered.
- Supporting deep and ongoing professional development for education workers in schools, teachers and school leaders to better understand the contextual learning and cultural needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students;
- Curating learning content to ensure it is situated in/on/with Country (place and space), and thus relevant to local contexts and students; and
- Sustaining strategic direction and investment of school resources to prioritise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education.

When teachers are supported via targeted professional learning to develop agility in their pedagogical practice, there are measurable improvements in schooling outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.¹⁵ The primary goal of such professional learning respects teachers' agency to make professional decisions that align with their students' learning priorities, as opposed to suggesting the use of centralised resources that are disconnected from students' lifeworlds.¹⁶

We strongly advise that schooling reform recommendations should reflect the research-based evidence which demonstrates that ongoing professional learning is most powerful resource to impact change of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander school student outcomes¹⁷.

Research grounded in four years of findings from the CNS project demonstrates that improvements to learning outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, communities, and schools, across a range of diverse contexts, are achievable when ongoing and strategic professional development is implemented as part of whole-of-school reform. The published peer-reviewed research to date illuminates the transformative power of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Elders/Educators/Community members working alongside non-Indigenous teachers and school executives using the plethora of educational resources already in circulation.¹⁸ Whole-of-

school professional learning which fosters a deeper understanding of culturally appropriate ways to adapt curriculum, pedagogy, and other resources will support improvements to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. Any solutions planned must recognise and support teachers' expertise in pedagogy and curriculum and provide "wrap-around supports"¹⁹ that equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to adopt and utilise culturally appropriate learning and teaching materials.

The CNS team appreciates the opportunity to provide this feedback and are available for further consultation should this be helpful to the Productivity Commission.

Kind Regards,

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Please note: the opinions expressed in this response are our own.

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