AURORA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Sydney Office:
Suite A, Level 3
10 James Steet
Waterloo NSW 2015

aurorafoundation.com.au

Aurora Education Foundation
Submission to the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Review 2026

About the Aurora Education Foundation

The Aurora Education Foundation (Aurora) is an Indigenous organisation that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to realise their education and employment potential. Through interconnected programs that span high school through to postgraduate study, Aurora supports students to achieve their goals and redefine what is possible in Indigenous education and employment.

Preliminary remarks on the Productivity Commission's Closing the Gap Review

Aurora welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's call for submissions in relation to its Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026.

Aurora is supportive of the role of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the Agreement) in establishing a shared policy framework across state and federal governments, institutions and local communities. Aurora recognises the ongoing need for national policy infrastructure to maintain clear lines of accountability and shared goals between decision-makers, advocacy groups, funding bodies, service delivery organisations and community representatives.

As a national organisation, Aurora also recognises the value of a national approach to improving service delivery outcomes. Place-based, community-led solutions are important mechanisms for effective service delivery, but also they need to be part of national policy architecture to reach their potential. Too often, effective practice is isolated to local examples with small cohorts and short-term funding. A national approach remains crucial to evaluate examples of effective practice, share learnings, and scale where appropriate.

Drawing on Aurora's experience and learnings, this submission makes recommendations for how the Agreement can be strengthened to achieve its objectives.

A consistent thread to this submission is that the Agreement should do more to leverage the full range of Indigenous capacity. While the role of the community-controlled sector remains vital, the Agreement should do more to value, enable and scale the work of other Indigenous organisations and entities drawing on the breadth of expertise, capabilities and relationships needed to achieve its objectives. Relatedly, this submission emphasises that the Agreement should do more to prioritise Indigenous-led innovation in addressing the intractable status of Indigenous socioeconomic inequity.

This submission is structured according to recommendations. Associated questions from the Productivity Commission's call for submission are identified in callout boxes.
Recommendations are supported by examples drawn from Aurora's experience.

Recommendation 1. The Agreement should do more to leverage Indigenous capacity beyond the community-controlled sector

Recommendation 1 addresses questions 1, 2 and 3 on page 10 of the PC's call for submissions

The Agreement's governance arrangements are heavily favoured towards the community-controlled sector. While it is critical that this sector is appropriately represented in the Agreement, there are an increasing number of Indigenous organisations and entities working towards the Agreement's objectives that do not fall under this banner, including Aurora.

Aurora auspices the First Nations Executive Network. This Sydney-based network is made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in corporate-facing leadership positions, including leaders of Indigenous organisations, who work towards system-level outcomes for Indigenous people. This network was established in direct response to the absence of structured networks in support of these efforts.

The realisation of the Agreement's objectives requires transformation at all levels of society. To achieve this, the Agreement must reach beyond the community-controlled sector and leverage emerging Indigenous capacity across a range of different Indigenous organisations and entities, the corporate sector, public and private leadership, and other domains.

Recommendation 2. The Agreement should do more to enable innovative Indigenous-led responses to intractable challenges

Indigenous-led innovation is necessary to achieve the kind of systemic change and transformation required to shift the entrenched status of Indigenous socioeconomic inequity. In simple terms, more of the same is unlikely to produce different results. To achieve this, the Agreement should do more to value, enable and scale Indigenous-led innovation and lift it beyond isolated examples of good practice.

In line with recommendation 1, Indigenous organisations like Aurora are well-placed to develop innovative responses to addressing the Agreement's objectives. Aurora has led several innovations which are highly relevant to the Agreement, including the following:

- Aurora's RISE Project[1] is the largest experimental Indigenous education evaluation in Australia, building causal evidence about the impact of Aurora's High School Program on outcomes that matter to Indigenous students and families.
- Aurora is negotiating a first-of-its-kind data sharing agreement with the NSW Department of Education which will provide Aurora with access to unit-record student data for Aurora students where consent has been provided by the student of their parent/carer.
- Aurora negotiated a first-of-its-kind Indigenous data governance clause in a NIAA funding agreement, enshrining protections for Indigenous data sovereignty.

Each of these examples represents an innovation which has the potential to drive forward the realisation of the Priority Reforms and the SEOs under the Agreement. However, the Agreement lacks enabling structures or mechanisms for Aurora to share these innovations

[1] https://aurorafoundation.com.au/our-work/rise/

with other Indigenous organisations or government agencies working towards similar objectives, or to be scaled through system-wide reform.

Recommendation 3. The role of Indigenous organisations in relation to Priority Reform 3 should be recognised and appropriately resourced

Recommendation 3 addresses question 2 on page 13 of the PC's call for

Priority Reform 3 places the onus on governments to transform their own practices. Aurora's experience suggests that governments are unlikely to do so without sustained external pressure.

The NSW Department of Education data sharing agreement and the NIAA clause referred to above are both examples of PR3 in action. However, both were instigated and driven by Aurora. In both cases, the transformation of government practice took several years to achieve and posed significant demands on Aurora's resources, including staff resources and legal counsel.

Aurora has encountered several further structural barriers to the realisation of PR3. First, there are significant information asymmetries at play when Indigenous organisations try to negotiate to transform government practices. In simple terms, we cannot negotiate to transform government practices that we lack knowledge of. Second, Indigenous aspirations under PR3 often require governments to divest power or share information. This often appears, at least in the first instance, contrary to government interests and is unlikely to occur without clear policy prescriptions and executive-level commitment. Third, frequent turnover of government staff involved in these negotiations and with subject matter knowledge presents a genuine challenge to the realisation of PR3.

If PR3 is to be achieved, the Agreement must do more to recognise and address structural factors that inhibit progress and appropriately resource the role of Indigenous organisations.

Recommendation 4. Indigenous organisations need access to government administrative data under Priority Reform 4 to progress outcomes under the Agreement

Recommendation 4 addresses questions 1 and 2 on page 14 and question 2 on page 17 of the PC's call for submissions

Indigenous organisations tasked with driving progress towards SEOs require access to unit-record administrative data relating to these outcomes. Without this information, Indigenous organisations are working in the dark. Aurora's data sharing agreement with the NSW Department of Education[2] provides an example of shared access to data which gives effect to this recommendation.

The proposed data sharing agreement is grounded in the principle of consent. Where consent is provided, the department will provide Aurora with access to unit-record student data for students enrolled in Aurora's high school program, including school attendance records and NAPLAN results. This data will be shared via a third-party platform hosted by the Australian Data Archive. Data collected by Aurora, such as survey data and program delivery data, will

[2] This agreement is currently in draft form and has not been executed by the parties.

be linked with student data on this platform. Governance of this data sharing process is jointly overseen by Aurora's board and an independent Indigenous data governance committee.

This data sharing agreement will enhance Aurora's capacity to address SEOs by enabling staff to better support students at risk and provide timely support. In conjunction with the experimental design of RISE, data sharing will also enable Aurora to evaluate the *causal effects* of the high school program in addressing SEOs, such as school completion.

It is recognised that accessing unit-record student data imposes significant demands on Indigenous organisations in relation to technical capacity, data management infrastructure and legal support and carries significant organisational risks. In these circumstances, Indigenous organisations require support from governments to prepare themselves to receive unit-record data.

Recommendation 5. The Agreement should identify, measure and evaluate pathways between SEOs

The SEOs represent endpoint or summative outcomes. These outcomes have an important role in promoting transparency and accountability and focusing policy efforts on key goals. Alongside these outcomes, the Agreement should also recognise the pathways between these outcomes.

Recommendation 5 addresses question 3 on page 18 of the PC's call for submissions

Aurora's program suite is designed to support Indigenous students as they transition through different stages of high school, and if they choose, onto higher education and postgraduate study. Aurora's program delivery experience and evaluation suggest that Indigenous students require a range of different forms of support to successfully navigate these pathways. This support is accessed from educational institutions, Indigenous organisations, community and family. These pathways and the support required to navigate them are unique to the experience of Indigenous students.

The Agreement will be strengthened in several ways through better identification, measurement and evaluation of these pathways. This approach better reflects the reality of the work that Indigenous organisations do in supporting Indigenous people along pathways between the SEOs and places value on their knowledge and expertise. This approach also recognises that Indigenous peoples have different perceptions of a valued life that are inadequately represented by current SEOs.

This approach will also strengthen the Agreement from an evaluation perspective. The current focus on endpoints narrows attention to whether policies and program were effective in achieving an outcome. The answer to this question in isolation has limited policy value. The more relevant policy question is 'how' or 'why' an outcome was achieved. This question draws attention to mechanisms and processes that occur along the pathways between endpoint outcomes. This deeper focus can support explanatory theories which can be adapted tested in different contexts in support of effective policy action.

The RISE evaluation is investigating the complex relationship between Aurora's program activities, formative outcomes as they are defined by Indigenous students and families, and summative outcomes, such as school completion. This evaluation is ultimately aimed at generating theory on how Indigenous high school students are most effectively supported along education pathways to achieve their self-defined goals.

Contact information

Aurora appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and welcomes further discussion of any aspect of this submission. For enquiries, please contact Leila Smith

Leila Smith

CEO, Aurora Education Foundation