

Reconciliation Australia  
Submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of the  
National School Reform Agreement – Interim Report

**10 November 2022**



## Executive Summary

Thank you for considering Reconciliation Australia's submission regarding the interim report for the review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).

The review of the NSRA is an important opportunity for the Australian Government to strengthen its commitment to reconciliation within national education policy, and to activate the reconciliation commitments outlined in the Mparntwe Education Declaration; specifically Goal 2:

*"Australian Governments commit to working in collaboration with the education community to support all young Australians to become...active and informed members of the community... who possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians"*<sup>1</sup>.

In alignment with Education sector research<sup>2</sup>, Reconciliation Australia supports the recommendation of the interim report that the next agreement include a stronger focus on teacher and student wellbeing. This must include prioritising actions that create and support an ongoing sense of belonging and inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This will require schools and the broader education system developing, in collaboration with First Nations peoples, culturally responsive pedagogies and a culturally responsive curriculum, along with adequate resourcing to effectively implement these.

Additionally, this submission responds to the Commission's search for:

- "views regarding whether the current education and research evidence base sufficiently incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge"<sup>3</sup> and,
- information request 3.5: 'Embedding the perspectives of priority equity cohorts in national education policy and institutions'.

Reconciliation Australia supports the establishment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Council, as well as the calls outlined in Submission 52 from the Indigenous Education Consultative Body (IECB) Meeting that encourages *"all governments to ensure commensurate and enduring financial support is provided to enable an IECB in every jurisdiction and to continue to grow this partnership in all jurisdictions (including those with an existing IECB)"*<sup>4</sup>.

As articulated in Submission 52, *"Nationally, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Council (NATSIEC), in partnership with IECBs, will provide an invaluable contribution to strengthening national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives, policies and programs"*<sup>5</sup>. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is fundamental to reconciliation in Australia, and NATSIEC and IECBs play an important role in ensuring the knowledges, views and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are centred in national education policies and institutions.

This is reflected in the vision for Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education ('Narragunnawali') program, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is at the centre of Australian education systems, which actively engage the hearts and minds of future generations to contribute to the reconciliation process.

<sup>1</sup> Education Council (2019) *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, pp.6-8, < [https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/education-au/melbdec/ED19-0230%20-%20SCH%20-%20Alice%20Springs%20\(Mparntwe\)%20Education%20Declaration\\_ACC.pdf](https://uploadstorage.blob.core.windows.net/public-assets/education-au/melbdec/ED19-0230%20-%20SCH%20-%20Alice%20Springs%20(Mparntwe)%20Education%20Declaration_ACC.pdf)>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022) *Spotlight: Wellbeing in Australian Schools*, <<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/wellbeing-in-australian-schools>>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission (2022) *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim Report Overview*, p.8, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/school-agreement/interim/school-agreement-interim-overview.pdf>>

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (2022) *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) Submission*, p.2, <[https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/344544/sub052-school-agreement.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/344544/sub052-school-agreement.pdf)>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.5

Since 2015, the Narragunnawali program has been supporting supports teachers, educators and school leaders to champion reconciliation, and schools and early learning services to holistically and actively commit to reconciliation. Through this program Reconciliation Australia advocates for education institutions to actively collaborate with broader reconciliation networks and to respect the aspirations of local communities. An education system that prioritises reconciliation must also be one that understands how this intersects with the wellbeing and outcomes for First Nations students and their communities. The next NSRA must be built on this understanding and include the provision of necessary resources and funding, effective performance measures, and a renewed national policy commitment to having a real, tangible and positive impact on the state of reconciliation.

## About Reconciliation Australia

Reconciliation Australia is an independent, national, not-for-profit organisation promoting reconciliation between the broader Australian community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Our vision is to build an Australia that is reconciled, just, and equitable for all.

In 2016, Reconciliation Australia launched the State of Reconciliation in Australia report (the Report). The Report highlights five inter-related dimensions of reconciliation, and makes recommendations on how we can progress reconciliation. These five dimensions are: race relations; equality and equity; unity; institutional integrity; and, historical acceptance. The five dimensions do not exist in isolation; they are interrelated and Australia can only achieve full reconciliation if we progress in all five dimensions.

The subsequent (2021) iteration of the State of Reconciliation in Australia report emphasised that, as the reconciliation movement reaches a tipping point, *“reconciliation cannot just be about raising awareness and knowledge. The skills and knowledge gained should motivate us to ‘braver’ action... That is, we need to move more of our effort from focusing on the preconditions for reconciliation, to focusing on more substantive change”*.<sup>6</sup>

In the education context, it has similarly been evidenced that, while schools and early learning services have achieved many of the ‘safer’ actions relating to reconciliation, which are still important and should not be dismissed, *“it is perhaps time to... shift the focus to braver actions, like engaging the broader Australian community in educational initiatives and, in particular, deepening the engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in which... educational institutions are located”*.<sup>7</sup>

Such a focus is central to the continued work of Reconciliation Australia’s Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program, and aligns to the Commission’s request for *“views regarding whether the current education and research evidence base sufficiently incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge”*.

## About Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education

Narragunnawali is a program specifically designed for schools and early learning services that has tools and resources for schools and early learning services to contribute to the reconciliation movement.

*Narragunnawali* (pronounced narra-gunna-wally) is a word from the language of the Ngunnawal people, Traditional Owners of the land on which Reconciliation Australia’s Canberra office is located, meaning alive, wellbeing, coming together and peace. The word *narragunnawali* is used as the program title with the permission of the United Ngunnawal Elders Council.

---

<sup>6</sup> Reconciliation Australia (2021) *2021 State of Reconciliation in Australia Report: Moving from Safe to Brave*, p. 4, <[https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/State-of-Reconciliation-2021-Full-Report\\_web.pdf](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/State-of-Reconciliation-2021-Full-Report_web.pdf)>

<sup>7</sup> Biddle, N. (2021) *Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education Paper#15 – The State of Reconciliation in Education, from safe to brave*, p.16, <[https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/7/Narragunnawali\\_evaluation\\_and\\_monitoring\\_-\\_Paper\\_15\\_-\\_The\\_State\\_of\\_Reconciliation\\_in\\_Education\\_-\\_For\\_web.pdf](https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/7/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_15_-_The_State_of_Reconciliation_in_Education_-_For_web.pdf)>

Reconciliation Australia designed and developed the Narragunnawali program – in partnership BHP Billiton Sustainable communities (2013 – 2017) and the BHP Foundation (2017 – 2022) – to support school leaders, teachers, educators and educational communities across Australia to actively participate in reconciliation.

The development of the Narragunnawali program saw the launch of a powerful online platform in 2017, providing teachers, educators, school leaders, students and parents – and indeed anyone interested in reconciliation in education – with free access to resources to support and deepen engagement with reconciliation in their educational communities. Through the Narragunnawali platform, schools and early learning services across the Government, Catholic and Independent sectors, can develop a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), and teachers and educators can access professional learning and curriculum resources to support the implementation of reconciliation initiatives. Also launched in 2017, the biennial Narragunnawali Awards recognises and celebrates Australian schools and early learning services that are implementing outstanding reconciliation initiatives.

Since 2015, the program has established a broad community of users representing ~10,000 schools and early learning services and ~120,000 individual school leaders, educators, students and community members.

It was recognised that more localised engagement and support was required to assist schools and early learning services to engage in reconciliation in relevant and responsive ways. In this context, the Narragunnawali Regional Engagement Program was launched in 2020 with partnerships developed between Reconciliation Australia and 6 state-based reconciliation organisations. This partnership includes resourcing to support dedicated positions within each organisation to drive education initiatives, the delivery of localised workshops and the establishing of Education Reconciliation Industry Network Groups (RINGS), supporting a coordinated approach to reconciliation and education in each jurisdiction.

The vision for Narragunnawali is underpinned by four program goals and program outcomes, which articulate the impact the program seeks to have on reconciliation in and through education:

<b>Vision</b>	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination is at the centre of Australian education systems, which actively engage the hearts and minds of future generations to contribute to the reconciliation process.	
<b>Goals</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Goal 1. Teachers, educators and school leaders champion reconciliation	<b>1.1</b> Teachers, educators and school leaders individually and collectively understand and address their professional development needs to confidently and competently embed reconciliation in pedagogy and practice
	<b>1.2</b> Teachers and educators confidently and competently support students and children to engage in reconciliation learning and action
Goal 2. Schools and early learning services are holistically and actively committed to reconciliation	<b>2.1</b> School and early learning service communities meet and exceed the requirements of national professional standards and curriculum frameworks relating to reconciliation
	<b>2.2</b> Schools and early learning services are key drivers of reconciliation in their communities
Goal 3. Education institutions actively collaborate with local communities and broader reconciliation networks	<b>3.1</b> Schools, early learning services and other education institutions actively respect the aspirations of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
	<b>3.2</b> National education system actors engage in strategic sector partnerships that drive coordinated action and reform towards reconciliation, with the aspirations and perspectives of First Nations peoples at the forefront
Goal 4. Education sector has optimal measures, resources and policy commitments to drive effective reconciliation practice	<b>4.1</b> There is a strong evidence base and widespread support for the place, significance and practice of reconciliation in education
	<b>4.2</b> There are financial and non-financial resources within the sector to ensure effective education policy implementation



## Response to the Review of the National School Reform Agreement Interim Report

This submission responds to the Commission's search for "views regarding whether the current education and research evidence base sufficiently incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural and community perspectives and Aboriginal knowledge"<sup>8</sup>.

This submission may also shed important light on draft findings 1.2 Persistent gaps in education outcomes for some student cohorts point to systemic problems; and, 3.5 There are a range of educational barriers experienced by students from priority equity cohorts; as well as recommendations 4.1 Governments should incorporate wellbeing in the next intergovernmental agreement; 7.1 The performance reporting framework of the next agreement; and 7.2 Review of the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia.

Education sector research has asserted the imperative for sector stakeholders to "co-design stronger metrics and data collection/reporting processes to capture and assess good practice pertaining to 'Cultural Responsiveness,' 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education' and related foci such as 'Reconciliation in Education'"<sup>9</sup>. While the latest (2022) data is not due to be released until the end of November, examples of Education-specific insights from the Indigenous respondent cohort in the 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer (ARB)<sup>10</sup> include:

- There is majority agreement that educational institutions need to do more in areas of health (66% agreement), employment (66% agreement), justice (69% agreement) and education itself (55%) agreement to help close the gap.
- There is majority agreement that all other institutions, including Government departments (60% agreement), private sector businesses (51% agreement), community sector organisations (50% agreement), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations (54% agreement) similarly need to do more in areas of education to help close the gap.
- There is majority (91%) agreement on the importance of Indigenous histories and cultures as compulsory part of the school curriculum.

While these example findings honour the Commission's search for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community perspectives, it is of simultaneous value to highlight that majority (83%) agreement on the importance of teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is echoed – and has indeed increased over time – among general community ARB respondents too.

Correspondingly, as articulated within *The importance of reconciliation in education* literature review, commissioned as part of the Australian National University Centre for Social Research and Method's external evaluation of Reconciliation Australia's Narragunnawali program, "*The potential positive effects of reconciliation are numerous and diverse. They include greater social interaction, reduced stress, improved productivity in the workplace and more positive views about the society in which a person lives...[T]here is majority, but not complete, support among the Australian population for promoting the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for Australia as a whole. However, only a minority of Australians (around a quarter) know what they can do in practice to advance reconciliation. This demonstrates a very important role for the education system in giving young Australians the skills and insights to make a direct and informed contribution to the reconciliation process, while also encouraging teachers and educators to critically engage in their own ongoing learning, 'un-learning' and 're-learning' with regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.*"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission (2022) *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim Report Overview*, p.8, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/school-agreement/interim/school-agreement-interim-overview.pdf>>

<sup>9</sup> Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022) *Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce: Final report for the Indigenous cultural competency project*, p.6, <[https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl\\_indigenous-cultural-competency\\_final-report.pdf](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report.pdf)>

<sup>10</sup> Reconciliation Australia (2020) *Australian Reconciliation Barometer*, <[https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Australian\\_Reconciliation\\_Barometer\\_2020\\_Full-Report\\_web.pdf](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Australian_Reconciliation_Barometer_2020_Full-Report_web.pdf)>

<sup>11</sup> Biddle, N. & Priest, P. (2019) *The Importance of Reconciliation in Education*, p.1-2 <<https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/5/CSRM-WP-RECONCILIATION-1-2019.pdf>>

The Evaluation has similarly highlighted the positive impacts of the Narragunnawali program and Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) development process for Australian schools and early learning services. The number of schools and early learning services engaged with Narragunnawali has continued to increase since the program's inception and, indeed, those schools and services that are actively engaged maintain the reconciliation activities that they are already doing, and increase the activities through time<sup>12</sup>. This programmatic growth, maturation and impact is worth noting since the Productivity Commission's 2016 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* report, which described Narragunnawali as a *"promising program that supports schools and early learning services nationally to develop environments that foster knowledge and pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures"*.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, those engaged with Narragunnawali feel that it has *"increased [their] confidence in addressing reconciliation and driving meaningful change within their schools and early learning services. Engaging with Narragunnawali provides a formalised means of delivering students, staff and families with regular opportunities to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Engagement with Narragunnawali also encouraged the forging of new relationships between schools and services, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities"*<sup>14</sup>.

Such findings are backed by wider Education sector research, such as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce project, the final report of which communicated that the Narragunnawali RAP development process *"provides a practical framework for schools and early learning services to genuinely engage in processes of reconciliation. Even where RAPs were not explicitly referenced, many of the proposed solutions put forward in the submissions can also clearly be mapped to one or more RAP actions. Submissions claimed that developing a RAP provided 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. It was identified that, as a framework for action and accountability, a RAP is useful starting point and continuing reference, reflection and guidance point if embedded alongside other culturally safe processes, frameworks and policies."*<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the IECB Meeting submission (Submission 52) in response to the review of the NRSA reiterates that *"Shared decision making, genuine engagement and partnerships need to occur at multiple levels in an educational context, for example, in South Australia there is a focus on all schools having a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) as a minimum requirement. This should be enacted in all jurisdictions"*.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the well-evidenced importance and impact of Reconciliation Action Plans, time and funding (or resource availability) have consistently been reported among the primary perceived barriers to Narragunnawali program uptake and to continued engagement with school or early learning service-based reconciliation activities.<sup>17</sup> This finding aligns with draft review finding 5.3, and should be recognised in the context of draft recommendation 5.1. A further barrier is presented by some of the real limits within the current Closing the Gap target and agenda, such as the fact that these place all

<sup>12</sup> Biddle, N. (2017). *Narragunnawali Research Report 8 – First phase evaluation summary report*, <[https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/3/Narragunnawali-Research-Report-08-First-phase-evaluation-summary-Report\\_December2017\\_0.pdf](https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2019/3/Narragunnawali-Research-Report-08-First-phase-evaluation-summary-Report_December2017_0.pdf)>

<sup>13</sup> Productivity Commission (2016) *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016*, p.25, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016/report-documents/oid-2016-overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage-key-indicators-2016-overview.pdf>>

<sup>14</sup> Biddle, N., Ellen, L., Mortreux, C. & Waite, C. (2019) *Narragunnawali Research Report 11 – Hearing from schools and early learning services*, p.23, <[https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali\\_Research\\_Report\\_11\\_-\\_Hearing\\_from\\_Schools\\_and\\_Early\\_Learning\\_Services\\_-\\_August\\_2019.pdf](https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf)>

<sup>15</sup> Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2022) *Building a culturally responsive Australian teaching workforce: Final report for the Indigenous cultural competency project*, p.16, <[https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl\\_indigenous-cultural-competency\\_final-report.pdf](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/comms/cultural-competency/aitsl_indigenous-cultural-competency_final-report.pdf)>

<sup>16</sup> Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (2022) *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) Submission*, p.9, <[https://www.pc.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/344544/sub052-school-agreement.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/344544/sub052-school-agreement.pdf)>

<sup>17</sup> Biddle, N., Ellen, L., Mortreux, C. & Waite, C. (2019) *Narragunnawali Research Report 11 – Hearing from schools and early learning services*, <[https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali\\_Research\\_Report\\_11\\_-\\_Hearing\\_from\\_Schools\\_and\\_Early\\_Learning\\_Services\\_-\\_August\\_2019.pdf](https://csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2020/5/Narragunnawali_Research_Report_11_-_Hearing_from_Schools_and_Early_Learning_Services_-_August_2019.pdf)>

the focus on the characteristics of Indigenous Australians, with no targets related to the attitudes, awareness or actions to be demonstrated among non-Indigenous peoples, including recognition of, or respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, languages or cultures<sup>18</sup>.

All this considered, and aligned to the focus on equity, well-being, cultural responsiveness and good measurement, Reconciliation Australia would like to urge the Australian Government to integrate a focus on reconciliation as part of the response to draft findings 1.2 and 3.5, draft recommendations 4.1, 7.1, 7.2, and wider improvements to the National School Reform Agreement. We recommend:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander right to self-determination is respected, and First Nations people and perspectives are included in all areas of education policy and program development.
- An embedded focus on reconciliation at the individual teacher, whole-school institution, and Education sector/system levels alike.
- Government and Education sector advocacy of the development and implementation of Reconciliation Action Plans and activities, including resource (e.g. budgetary and dedicated teacher relief time) commitments to support teachers to administer and advance these activities.
- Cross-sector communication and collaboration in monitoring, evaluation and learning about good or best practice reconciliation-in-education programs and activities.

Australia's education system has a critical role to play in the nation's reconciliation journey, and the National School Reform review is an opportunity to strengthen a sector-wide commitment to reconciliation. Reconciliation in education requires engagement, commitment and action at the individual (teachers and principals), institutional (school), sectorial (Catholic, Government and Independent) and systemic (national policy) levels – it requires collective and coordinated efforts across the sector, to truly catalyse systemic change.

Reconciliation Australia would welcome a discussion with the Productivity Commission regarding the issues raised in this submission and next steps.

Thank you once again for considering this submission.

---

<sup>18</sup> Biddle, N. (2021) Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education Paper#16 – Engaging in the broader policy discussion, <[https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/12/Narragunnawali\\_evaluation\\_and\\_monitoring\\_-\\_Paper\\_16\\_-\\_The\\_broader\\_policy\\_discussion\\_-\\_For\\_web\\_0.pdf](https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/12/Narragunnawali_evaluation_and_monitoring_-_Paper_16_-_The_broader_policy_discussion_-_For_web_0.pdf)>