



# Strengthening outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

## Review of the National School Reform Agreement

The Productivity Commission's review of the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) looks at ways governments can work together to provide a high quality and equitable education for all students. The report includes a focus on improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who are one of four 'priority equity cohorts' named in the NSRA.



As part of the review, the Commission engaged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, considered the contemporary policy environment, including the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and highlighted ways in which governments can work collaboratively with the community to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

## What we heard from participants to this review

Participants to this review noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students faced systemic barriers, which prevent them from reaching their potential at school. In consultations and through submissions to the review, participants observed that:

- Schools are not always culturally safe spaces, preventing students from being engaged with their learning, and parents from sharing information about issues at home.
- Curriculum and assessment is a 'western space' that does not reflect aspects of learning valued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which include connections to Country, family, spirit, or ancestors.
- Teachers and school leaders can have a poor understanding of Indigenous knowledges, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and how to include and empower their students.
- A deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students hinders their ability to succeed.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote areas face a lack of local schooling options. This means children are not always able to live and be educated on their own Country, which can contribute to feeling isolated, affect their wellbeing and reduce opportunities to acquire cultural and familial knowledges.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers play an important role within their schools, building cultural awareness and supporting cultural safety for students and fellow educators. Some participants commented that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers can face discriminatory attitudes. These attitudes, along with workloads, can contribute to poor wellbeing and cause teachers to exit from teaching, which can have flow-on effects for students.
- Barriers faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reflect broader issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lack of a voice and representation in education policy and broader social narratives.



***... labelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families as disadvantaged continues to play into a culture of deficit discourse and low expectations that stymie Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to thrive in their education ... [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students] are not inherently disadvantaged by being Indigenous.***

*(Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting, sub. 52, p. 3)*

# What do we propose for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

The review makes recommendations on ways that governments can collaborate to improve outcomes for all students. Several of the recommended actions relate specifically to improving the educational experiences of, and outcomes for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

## Improving academic outcomes



The Commission recommends governments include actions in the next school reform agreement to address the barriers preventing many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from reaching their potential.

The Commission recommends parties to the next school reform agreement:

- Commit to actions to lift outcomes and sub-outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (R 4.3)
- Develop outcomes, reform activities, and transparency and accountability arrangements in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (R 4.3)
- Set out actions that commit to embedding cultural safety requirements across education systems, and the identification and elimination of racism, consistent with commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (R 4.3)
- Implement reforms to address the various barriers to accessing high quality education that students from priority equity cohorts face (R 4.4). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, practices that will help address these barriers include:
  - adopting culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see their identities, cultures, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges reflected in what and how they are learning
  - supporting parents and carers to actively engage with their child's education (F 4.7)
- Commit parties to publicly reporting on each outcome of the NSRA for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (R 9.2)

## Supporting student wellbeing



Poor wellbeing directly affects students' capacity to learn and can particularly impact students who experience challenges to engagement and inclusion at school (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students).

The Commission proposes parties to the next school reform agreement:

- Elevate student wellbeing as an outcome of the next agreement, along with greater transparency about wellbeing outcomes (R 5.1)
- Enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to data to inform their decision-making about their wellbeing (Chapter 5)

## Equipping teachers and leaders to create a culturally inclusive environment



Teachers and school leaders demonstrating greater knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and how to include and empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, would lead to improved student outcomes.

The Commission recommends parties to the next school reform agreement:

- Commit to meeting cultural safety requirements across education systems (R 4.3)
- Participate in the development of the new national First Nations Teachers' Strategy, which, among other things, should include specific measures to identify and remove racism in the education system (R 7.2). The First Nations Teachers' Strategy provides an opportunity to improve the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.



**To find out more about our recommendations or read the full report visit:**

**[pc.gov.au/schools-review](https://www.pc.gov.au/schools-review)**