



# National Schools Reform Agreement Expert Panel Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (the Review) and supports the Expert Panel's consideration of issues affecting First Nations students.

The NIAA highlights six main priorities in the development and negotiations of the next National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA):

Flexibility	Funding Transparency and Accountability	Partnership
Flexibility to support alternative education approaches for First Nations students. For example, place-based options for remote and regional schools and recognition of Year 12 equivalent attainment alternatives for students.	Clear accountability for funding with mechanisms to measure expenditure and outcomes.  Transparency on First Nations student loadings and how funds are used to support First Nations students.	Genuine partnership with First Nations peoples through mandated funding support and engagement mechanisms with First Nations education peak bodies.  Involvement of First Nations people and peak bodies in decision-making, including monitoring and evaluation of outcomes with a view to supporting the continuous improvement of First Nations student outcomes.
Equity	Cultural Safety	Teaching and Curriculum
Continue and expand support for priority equity cohorts, including students in out-of-home care and students in the youth justice systems.  Recognise the additional barriers to access and participation experienced by First Nations students in remote areas.	Include supports for the provision of culturally appropriate, evidence based and user-informed wrap around services for First Nations students to support educational engagement and attainment.  Ensure accountability at all levels of schools and education departments for addressing racism and creating culturally safe schools.	Invest in quality teaching through teacher training that equips teachers with skills and confidence to work with and support First Nations students and their families.  Support the full delivery of First Nations teachers strategies under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan.  Recognise that connection to language and culture can lead to improved educational outcomes for First Nations students.



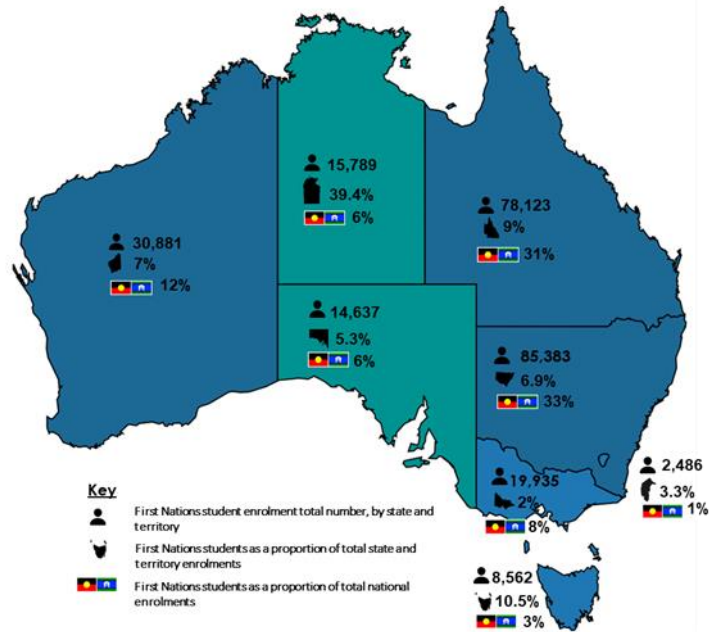
## Context:

The NIAA recognises the Australian Government Department of Education has national responsibility for education policy and schools funding. The NIAA has a key role to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are heard, recognised and empowered. We work in genuine partnership to enable the self-determination and aspirations of First Nations communities.<sup>1</sup>

Under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, all governments and the Coalition of the Peaks agree to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to share in decision making on the development and implementation of policy and programs.<sup>2</sup>

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap includes targets and priority reforms that require ongoing commitment from governments to ensure that outcomes are achieved, including a target that First Nations students achieve their full learning potential (Target 5).

The next NSRA is a critical opportunity to align resourcing and reform to ensure Closing the Gap targets are realised.



1 First Nations Student Enrolments. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), Schools

## Flexibility:

As agreed by Education Ministers in the *2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (the Mparntwe Education Declaration), education systems in Australia must promote excellence and equity.<sup>3</sup> Across all areas of the Expert Panel's review, achieving both excellence and equity through NSRA reforms requires careful construction of national and bilateral agreements in ways that ensure both accountability for equitable outcomes while creating flexible, place-based and culturally appropriate pathways and alternative approaches for achieving those outcomes.

Person-centred approaches, culturally responsive pedagogies and curriculum, a sense of belonging, high expectations and relevant support will enable First Nations students to achieve successful educational outcomes. Educational aspirations, pathways and attainment will look very different for diverse children and communities, with many First Nations communities increasingly expressing interest in alternative education opportunities ranging from on Country and 'two way' learning, through to greater access to digital learning options for remote students, such as the regional university centres.<sup>4</sup>

To help all students achieve their best, the mainstream education system needs greater **flexibility to support alternative education approaches for First Nations students. For example, place-based options for remote and regional schools and recognition of Year 12 equivalent attainment alternatives for students.**

There are many examples of effective alternative approaches to education currently being funded through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (managed by NIAA).<sup>5</sup> These are often small, community led pilots with short term funding, often through independent schools. In order to enable the education system to better trial, evaluate and incorporate culturally appropriate alternative education approaches which can achieve better outcomes, the NSRA should consider building in the flexibility to support alternative approaches for priority equity cohorts, including First Nations students.

<sup>1</sup> [The Agency | National Indigenous Australians Agency \(niaa.gov.au\)](https://niaa.gov.au)

<sup>2</sup> [National Agreement on Closing the Gap | Closing the Gap](#)

<sup>3</sup> [COAG The Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration](#)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/regional-university-centres>

<sup>5</sup> [Funding | Indigenous Advancement Strategy \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

## Funding transparency, accountability and data:

The next NSRA and its bilateral agreements must have **clear accountability for funding with mechanisms to measure expenditure and outcomes**. This must extend to ensuring that data collection, monitoring and reporting mechanisms delivers **transparency on First Nations student loadings and how funds are used to support First Nations students**.

The Productivity Commission review of the current NSRA identified progress being hindered by a lack of focus on outcomes, as well as significant issues with the NSRA in its minimal visibility, transparency and accountability in bilateral agreements about how priority cohorts are being supported. It also highlighted data and reporting gaps and a lack of transparency, particularly in relation to First Nations students and students living in regional, rural and remote locations.<sup>6</sup>

The Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) has also challenged the Australian Government, States and Territories to increase transparency and accountability for outcomes and expenditure relating to First Nations student loadings in the next NSRA.<sup>7</sup>

Data collected and reported must help tell the full story of student engagement and outcomes in ways that enable schools and communities to jointly monitor progress, measure outcomes and make adjustments along the way. In line with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 4, data collection should be informed by community priorities and consider data sovereignty. The NIAA supports the actions put forward by the Expert Panel in its Consultation Paper that could strengthen transparency and accountability, including that schools should report on how the First Nations loading funds are used to support First Nations students.

Monitoring and measuring progress also requires data and evidence on what is working and what is not. NSRA arrangements should consider how monitoring and evaluation will take place, in partnership with First Nations peoples. This will increase the evidence base for what works for First Nations students, and provide case studies on newer flexible and alternative approaches to learning.

## Partnerships:

Consistent with existing commitments made by all jurisdictions through the National Agreement on Closing the Gap<sup>8</sup>, the NSRA must enshrine **genuine partnership with First Nations peoples through mandated funding support and engagement mechanisms with First Nations education peak bodies**.

The NSRA and its bilateral agreements must reflect, resource and operationalise commitments that build genuine partnerships with First Nations peoples. Where the next NSRA considers National Policy Initiatives that directly relate to First Nations student outcomes, these should be developed with First Nations people and communities, with sufficient flexibility and local partnerships to ensure that they meet specific place-based needs. To support this, the NSRA bilateral agreements should include mechanisms and resourcing to ensure that partnerships with First Nations peoples and their representative organisations are central to efforts to improve educational outcomes at national, state and local levels.

Partnerships must ensure the **involvement of First Nations people and peak bodies in decision-making, including monitoring and evaluation of outcomes with a view to supporting the continuous improvement of First Nations student outcomes**.

Further opportunities to build partnerships with First Nations peoples in monitoring progress and deciding on pathways to strengthen outcomes exist not only with representative bodies, but also at the school level and with families and communities. There are opportunities for relationship building in classrooms, school leadership and curriculum design; opportunities to strengthen relationships between schools and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to ensure health and wellbeing wrap around services; and strong evidence to suggest that parent and community engagement contributes to positive student outcomes.<sup>9</sup> These kinds of partnerships should also be promoted through the NSRA.

<sup>6</sup> [pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement.pdf](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [Review of the NSRA IECM Submission to Productivity Commission 2023](#)

<sup>8</sup> [National Agreement on Closing the Gap | Closing the Gap](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau 2012](#)



In the context of remote education, jurisdictions can consider the important role of community controlled and independent schools in addressing education gaps experienced by First Nations students and explore how government education systems can develop better partnerships with such schools to support strong First Nations student outcomes.

### Priority cohorts and improving student outcomes:

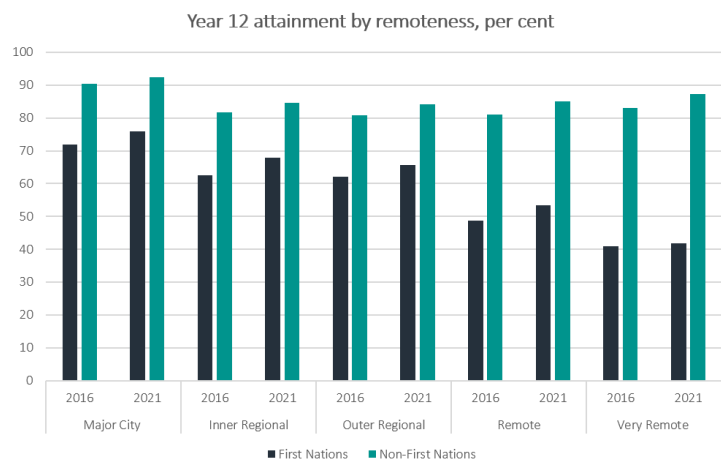
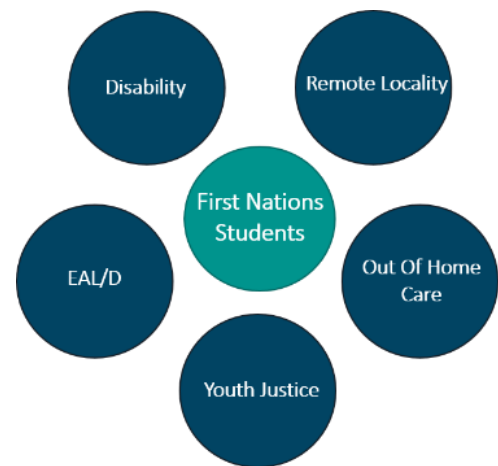
The NIAA supports the Expert Panel's conviction that the delivery of excellent education should be attuned to the needs of students from all backgrounds and agrees that the next NSRA should both **continue and expand support for priority equity cohorts, including students in out-of-home care and students in the youth justice systems.**

The NIAA emphasises the importance of investment in First Nations students as a priority equity cohort, and highlights the intersectionality experienced by First Nations students. They are disproportionately represented in other equity cohorts including regional and remote, disability, out of home care, the youth justice system and students for whom English is an alternative language or dialect (EAL/D).<sup>10</sup>

In particular, the NIAA recommends that the next NSRA **recognise the additional barriers to access and participation experienced by First Nations students in remote areas and address the critical need to improve outcomes.** While the gap in Year 12 completion rates has narrowed overall, it has widened for First Nations students from remote areas.<sup>11</sup> First Nations students make up about half of all remote students and are disproportionately affected by limited access to quality secondary schooling. This can contribute to remote students experiencing difficulty transitioning to, remaining engaged in or completing secondary schooling.<sup>12,13</sup> It is estimated that around 13,000 remote First Nations students and families have no or limited access to secondary schooling.<sup>14</sup> Many remote communities do not have access to local secondary schools or have limited choice about how their children are educated. Students may be forced to choose between not continuing their schooling or studying away from home.

The NSRA and bilateral agreements should explore how the education system can provide greater access to schooling options closer to home. Accessing school closer to home has a range of benefits for First Nations students, including maintaining connections with Country, Culture and family, which positively impact the social and emotional wellbeing, and educational engagement and outcomes of students.<sup>15</sup> Where students must use boarding options, boarding schools must be adequately resourced to provide holistic supports for First Nations students from remote locations.

Parents, carers, families and the broader community have a key role to play in supporting students to realise their educational potential. Evidence shows that flexible, strengths-based strategies that respond to diverse family needs,



2 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), Schools

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Summary Report*, July 2023

<sup>11</sup> Closing the Gap Report 2022.

<sup>12</sup> 2019 Grant Thornton Australia review

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education

<sup>14</sup> Department of Education data

<sup>15</sup> Multiple reviews/research, including 2017 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students



strengthen relationships between school and community and increase the confidence of First Nations families to engage with schools, can help achieve strong student outcomes through reinforcing positive attitudes and norms, supporting advocacy for cultural safety and anti-bullying, and creating a sense of belonging for families that want their children to be happy, safe and strong at school.<sup>16,17</sup>

Investment into alternative learning approaches designed to re-engage highly disengaged young people in education should be supported through solid commitments and funding to adequately resource such approaches over time within the education system. The NSRA and the Expert Panel should consider how successful, evidence based approaches to engagement for both First Nations students and parents, carers and families can best be supported.

### Improving student mental health and wellbeing and cultural safety:

The NIAA agrees with the Expert Panel's focus on student mental health and wellbeing as they are interconnected and impact student educational attainment and achievement. It is crucial that wellbeing reforms and targets outlined in the next NSRA align with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap social and emotional wellbeing targets as well as other targets that intersect with priority equity cohorts. It must also consider how to effectively measure student wellbeing and engagement and ensure that there is accountability not only with individual teachers but with school management and departments for health and wellbeing-related outcomes specific to priority equity cohorts.

The NIAA supports the proposal to take a targeted approach to supporting First Nations students' wellbeing which must ensure that social and emotional wellbeing measures are holistic; developed in partnership with local First Nations families, communities, Elders and their representative organisations; and are in line with existing frameworks such as the [National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023](#). It is also important to note that education is a determinant of First Nations health.<sup>18</sup>

The NSRA should **include supports for the provision of culturally appropriate, evidence based and user-informed wrap around services for First Nations students to support educational engagement and attainment**. Separating youth and family support from educational outcomes is a misapprehension – while education funding should focus on engaging students and improving education outcomes, a young person's continuum of development needs a holistic approach and associated investment.

The NIAA further supports the recommendation that mental health and wellbeing must include a focus on cultural safety and a commitment to the identification and elimination of racism, consistent with Closing the Gap Priority Reform 3. As recognised by the Expert Panel, cultural safety is essential to meeting the learning and wellbeing needs of First Nations students. Attendance and engagement increase for First Nations students when schools are culturally responsive. Unfortunately, there is evidence that First Nations people, both students and teachers, continue to face systemic racism in schools on a regular basis.<sup>19</sup> This is unacceptable and all jurisdictions must work together to address experiences of racism in Australian schools.

Cultural safety needs to be considered at all levels of the schooling system, and critically in school leadership positions. First Nations students need to experience cultural safety and respect throughout school systems, curriculum and assessments as well as positive high expectations relationship building between teachers and students. Recognising the importance of this, the NSRA should **ensure accountability at all levels of schools and education departments for addressing racism and creating culturally safe schools**.

### Teaching and curriculum:

There is a direct link between effective teaching and student education outcomes.<sup>20</sup> Evidence shows that when teachers have a better understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures, they have a positive impact on educational outcomes.<sup>21</sup> In addition, where there is a strengths-based, high expectation

<sup>16</sup> [Chapter 2 - Parental and Community Support and Awareness – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Understanding family perspectives of school attendance in remote communities: evaluation of the Remote School Attendance Strategy | National Indigenous Australians Agency \(niaa.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework](#)

<sup>19</sup> [A Decade of Data: Findings from the first ten years of Footprints in Time 2020 pg. 95](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

<sup>21</sup> [aitsl\\_indigenous-cultural-competency\\_final-report.pdf](#)



approach to First Nations students, this also leads to better educational outcomes for students.<sup>22</sup> Teachers that can build aspiration for further tertiary study, working with students and their families during the whole of secondary school can also help students have the best opportunity for post school education and career pathways.

The next NSRA must **invest in teacher training that equips teachers with skills and confidence to work with and support First Nations students and their families**. The NIAA agrees with the Expert Panel that the next NSRA consider the Teacher Education Expert Panel<sup>23</sup> advice and other levers to drive the uptake of evidence based pedagogical models in the classroom. Part of this is a focus on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs which cover culturally responsive teaching for First Nations students and an awareness of trauma informed practices.

The national teacher workforce is not currently representative of the population, with only 2% of teachers identifying as Indigenous (compared to over 6% of the student population). Cultural responsiveness in schools will also require an increase in First Nations people employed in schools in all roles, including as teachers, teaching assistants and school leaders. The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI) found that engagement of and leadership by First Nations teachers and workers provides the cultural safety, respect and expertise that encourages more engagement and better outcomes for First Nations students.<sup>24</sup>

Under the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan every state and territory has committed to a First Nations teachers strategy which includes a plan to co-design actions to attract and retain more First Nations teachers. The next **NSRA reforms should support the full delivery of the NTWAP and the First Nations teachers strategies** being developed.

The next NSRA should also provide guidance and clarity in relation to the use of culturally responsive resources, and on strategies to support teachers to deliver a culturally responsive curriculum with respectful pedagogies. An example of such a resource is the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's project on Indigenous Cultural Competency in the Australian Teaching Workforce.<sup>25</sup>

The NIAA recommends implementing the Australian Curriculum Version 9 cross-curriculum priority 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures'<sup>26</sup> into **learning and pedagogy recognising that connection to language and culture can lead to improved educational outcomes for First Nations students**. This could include schools offering 'both ways learning opportunities', for example, learning on Country, embedding culture in the curriculum and learning First Nations languages. The *Footprints in Time* study found schools that embedded the Australian Curriculum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-Curriculum Priority achieved higher than average literacy, vocabulary and maths scores of First Nations students compared to schools that did not implement this.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, providing First Nations students with the opportunity to learn their own language results in increased school attendance, engagement and educational outcomes.<sup>28</sup> There are innovative opportunities for schools to partner with local First Nations Language Centres and use their digital resources to support learning.

Schools should embrace the strengths in First Nations students' multi-lingual capacities and formulate academic testing that is not solely focused on English Language proficiency, especially for First Nations students in remote communities where English can be a second, third or fourth language. The next NSRA could explore how reforms can strengthen school support for students with diverse language skills and align with the Australian Government's commitment to progressing Closing the Gap Target 16, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages are strong, supported and flourishing.

<sup>22</sup> Stronger Smarter Institute Response to the Interim report on the Review of the National School Reform Agreement

<sup>23</sup> [Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)

<sup>24</sup> University of South Australia, 2016, *Evaluation of the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative Report; Final Report*

<sup>25</sup> [aitsl\\_indigenous-cultural-competency\\_final-report.pdf](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures | V9 Australian Curriculum](#)

<sup>27</sup> *Footprints in Time - The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC): A Decade of Data: Findings from the first 10 years of Footprints in Time, DSS, 2020.*

<sup>28</sup> Review of the National School Reform Agreement — Interim Report, Indigenous Education Consultative Meeting (IECM) Submission

