

Strengthening Aboriginal Self-Determination in Education

Campfire Conversations: reflections and directions

2022-2023



Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Artwork	4
Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) Foreword	6
Minister for Education Foreword	7
Campfire reflections and directions: an executive summary	9
Part 1: Background and Context	14
Truth-telling and deep listening about education in Victoria	15
What is self-determination and why is it important?	15
VAEAI Partnership: increasing Koorie representation in education	17
Demographic Context	18
Policy Context	22
Part 2: The Campfire Conversations	26
The space for storytelling and deep listening	27
Engagement opportunities	30
Self-determination in education: a redistribution of power	33
What we heard: Core Connections for self-determination in education	35
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People	38
What we heard: Barriers to self-determination and healing	50
Part 3: Strengthening Factors	56
What we heard: Strengthening Factors for self-determination in education	57
Part 4: Reform Directions	76
What we heard: Reform Directions	77
Conceptual Framework	77
Part 5: Next steps	84
How will strengthening self-determination in education be measured?	86
What can schools do now?	87
What can the department's corporate (central and regional) areas do now?	89
What can community do now?	91
APPENDIX	92
Acronyms	92
End notes	93

© State of Victoria (Department of Education) 2024



This report is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence. You are free to re-use the work under that licence, on the condition that you credit the State of Victoria (Department of Education), indicate if changes were made and comply with the other licence terms, see: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The licence does not apply to:

- » any images, photographs, trademarks or branding, including the Victorian Government logo and the DE logo; and
- » content supplied by third parties.

Copyright queries may be directed to copyright@education.vic.gov.au

Acknowledgements

The Department of Education acknowledges and pays respects to Elders and all Victorian Aboriginal communities. We honour and respect Traditional Owners, past and present, and value the rich culture and history of the First Peoples of this land.

We acknowledge the enduring commitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were denied their rights to formal education, but never gave up in advocating for better opportunities for future generations. We acknowledge the legacy of their wisdom and strength in overcoming discrimination and exclusion, while continuing to nurture and protect others.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and community members who opened their hearts and shared their stories through the Campfires. Your voices have been the heart of the storytelling and shaped the directions for the department to evolve to meet your aspirations of self-determination.

We acknowledge the members of the Self-determination in Education Reform Partnership Group who have provided oversight and guidance throughout the whole initiative. Your wisdom has ensured that the process is genuine, impactful and responsive to the needs of the community. The members of the group represent the following community organisations:

- » Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (co-chair)
- » Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)
- » Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited (VACSAL)
- » Koorie Youth Council (KYC)
- » Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young Peoples' Alliance
- » Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations
- » Aborigines Advancement League.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Traditional Owner groups who hosted gatherings with their communities. Your support created a space for members of the wider community to have their voices heard and identified opportunities for how schools should work in partnership with community organisations.

We acknowledge the schools who created a space for learners, families, and the community to have their voices heard. Schools have not always been welcoming and inclusive spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, but your support of the campfires has allowed the department to better understand how the system can evolve to be a space that empowers and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education.

Terminology

The Department of Education's standard practice is to use the term Koorie to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living, working and learning in Victoria. This practice is in line with advice from the department's principal partner in Koorie education, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated.

Within this document, however, the term Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is used to recognise the diversity of those who participated in Campfire Conversations and the communities they represent. Participants emphasised the importance of terminology being inclusive of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria, including families with connections to other parts of Australia who do not identify as Koorie. Feedback highlighted that inclusive terminology reinforces a student's pride in their culture and helps strengthen their sense of identity.

The use of Koorie, Indigenous, First Nations and Aboriginal is retained in the names of programs, initiatives and specific feedback.

“Victoria will be a state where the rich and thriving culture, knowledge and experience of our First Nations peoples are celebrated by all Victorians; where our universal service systems are inclusive, responsive and respectful of Koorie people at every stage of their learning and development journey; and where every Koorie person achieves their potential, succeeds in life, and feels strong in their cultural identity.”

– Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026

Artwork

The Artist

Nakia Cadd is a Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung and Bunitj woman, mother and artist who grew up in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

Her work has strong design elements of line work that connect with her family lines and landscapes of her Countries. Nakia's artwork is also inspired by her motherhood journey, family and Country. She likes to use art opportunities and platforms to creatively honour and retell her families' stories that symbolise immense strength and resilience.

Artist's Statement

The gathering circle in the middle, within the campfire, represents Country and place. Self-determination already exists, but it's about providing a culturally safe and inclusive space to have those yarns.

A campfire is a place where there's a spot for everyone to sit; to listen, share, connect or contribute. It's about sparking those conversations to keep that fire going.

The footprints depict our Elders and ancestors who have demonstrated self-determination, and who have advocated for our rights and continuously conveyed strong messages of hope for our future generations.

The five rock gatherings represent the different yarns happening outside the campfire in our many communities.

Additional illustrations and graphic recordings by Debbie Wood.



Self-determination is our campfire, Nakia Cadd, Gunditjmarra, Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Bunitj

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) Foreword

Self-determination has been the guiding principle of VAEAI ever since we first established as a community-led organisation in 1976. It has also been a central concept in education and advocacy, and one that we have long fought hard for as a community. It was the absence of our self-determination across all areas of social life that was a major contributor to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. Our community needed to come together to advocate for greater access to equitable education systems, which was a shared experience nationally. *The Aboriginal Consultative Group report to the Schools Commission* (1975) highlighted that our students were “The Excluded” in education, due to schools making deliberate decisions “on noticing and not noticing the Aboriginal child” (McLeod & Healy 2017, p.147). Today, Koorie student enrolment numbers are increasing annually, and there is a heightened awareness of the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education by the teaching profession and in curriculum development.

VAEAI welcomes the increasing recognition of the importance of self-determination in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the public domain. Self-determination continues to be our everyday business at VAEAI. As the peak Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) for education in Victoria, we strive to contribute to the empowerment of the Koorie community to have our voice heard at every level of bureaucracy; at local, regional, state, and national levels. Our philosophy of education is not compartmentalised. We consider learning pathways holistically from early childhood through to adult education. When fundamental pillars: empowerment, voice, and choice, are embraced through an accountable and responsible education system, our community will continue to succeed in broadening futures available to our people.

VAEAI believes that Koorie learners and their families must participate in a system that is designed with us, not for us. Self-determination is knowing that we have a role in determining our own futures, in education and beyond. It builds our motivation, enthusiasm, purpose, and trust in systems, when we know that our point of view and life experiences are recognised.

An education institution that upholds the importance of self-determination contributes to a strong and culturally responsive system. When schools responsibly recognise and respect the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, learning environments become better places for Koorie students to thrive and feel successful. Just as they will be for all Victorian learners.

The *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026* is a significant step towards the Victorian education system to respond responsibly to the individual, and collective community needs of Koorie learners and their families. We believe that this *Aboriginal Self-Determination in Education Reform* is the next necessary policy reform with community empowerment at its core. This year has seen multiple levels of engagement with the Koorie community, where the Victorian Department of Education has been able to listen to, and reflect upon, the diversity of our community’s voices previously left out of these conversations. The conversations we have had this year have identified that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ‘self-determination’ simply means playing an active role in the systems that shape our lives. As we pave the next steps together, we would like to thank all of those who took the time to participate in this important process of community-led policy reform. Know that your voices have been heard. Now, it’s time to move beyond listening and step into action.

Geraldine Atkinson

Bangerang

President, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

Minister for Education Foreword

Victoria is working to achieve lasting change through truth, healing and Treaty for Aboriginal people. The first truth and justice process is currently underway through the Yoorrook Justice Commission and later this year, it is anticipated that Treaty negotiations will commence between the Victorian Government and the First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria.

However, we know there is more to do, and education is no exception. We know that, historically and systemically, the education system includes barriers to access, equity, and opportunity for Aboriginal people. We must change this.

Through the Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan we are working alongside the Koorie community, including our principal partner, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for Koorie Victorians. Marrung’s vision, as determined by the Koorie community, is for Victoria to be a State where the rich and thriving culture of First Nations peoples are celebrated by all Victorians; where universal service systems are inclusive, responsive and respectful of Koorie people at every stage of their learning and development journey; and where every Koorie person achieves their potential, succeeds in life, and feels strong and safe in their cultural identity. While significant progress has been made towards realising this vision, we must always reflect on how we strengthen the voice of community and be open to different ways of working.

This Report is a culmination of what has been heard from over 3,000 people who participated in more than 180 Campfire Conversations and generously shared their experiences, both good and bad, and aspirations for their education, for their schools and for their community. We heard how important it is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to participate and feel culturally safe and empowered at school, so that they can excel in learning and in life and, importantly, we also heard what needs to happen to make this a reality.

This Report includes the Self-determination in Education Reform Directions – Accountability, Truth-telling, Voice, Capacity building, Partnerships and Cultural safety – the areas of focus for the education system going forward if we are to make meaningful and sustainable improvements to the experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal students through strengthening self-determination and the cultural safety of our schools.

Prioritising self-determination will be a new way of working for our system, and together we will need to seek different approaches, new partnerships, and continue to develop, learn and improve. As is outlined in this Report, self-determination is not a new concept for Aboriginal people, who know what is best for their communities and who, in the words of a Campfire participant, “have been getting up, standing up and showing up for a very long time”. We can be confident to take the lead from the Victorian Aboriginal community and their more than 60,000 years of teaching and learning expertise.

My sincere thanks to everyone who participated in what has become the largest consultation on Aboriginal education in Victoria’s history. Your experiences and knowledge will shape a system that will work better for Aboriginal students and for Victoria as a whole. We will learn from and action what we have heard.

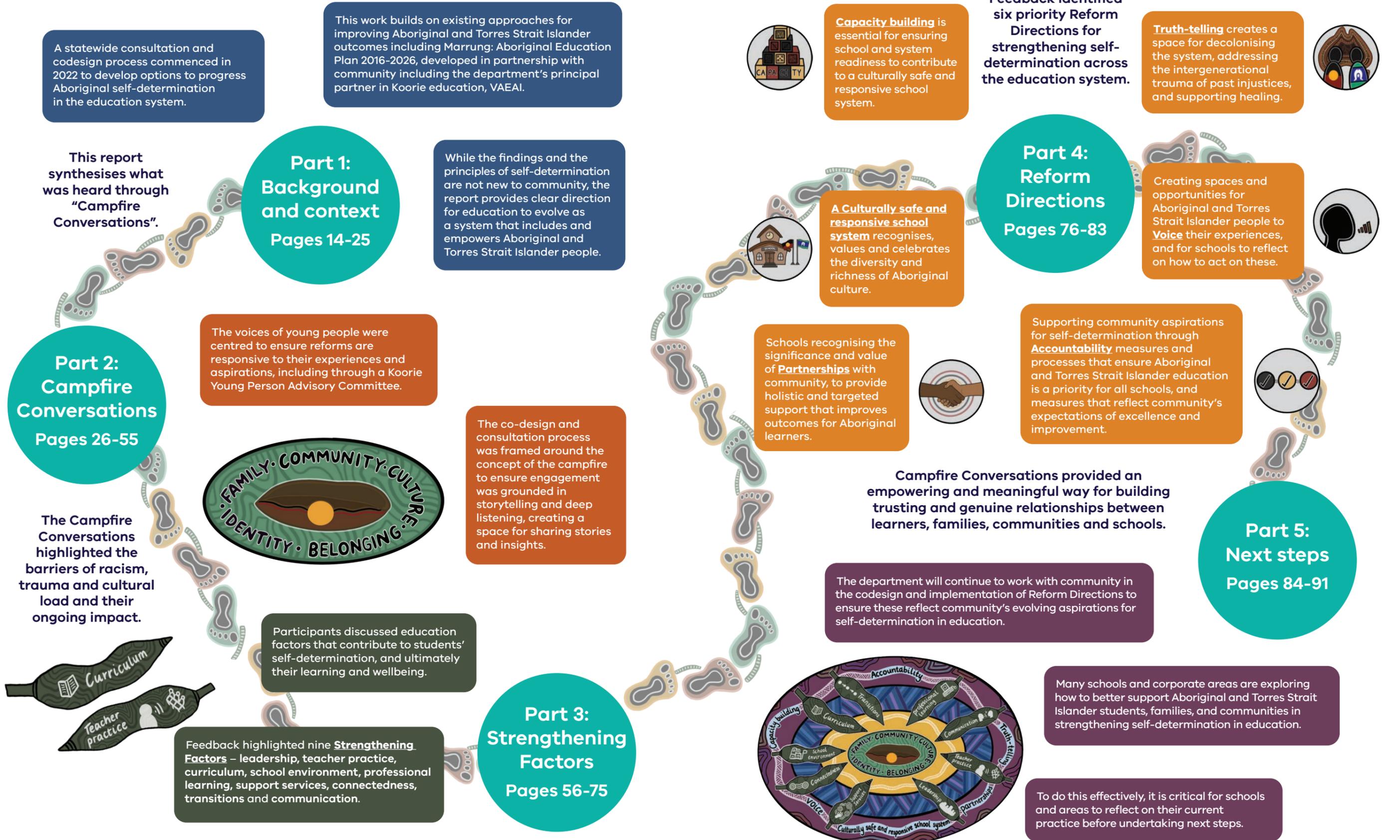
The Hon. Ben Carroll MP

Minister for Education



**Campfire reflections and
directions: an executive
summary**

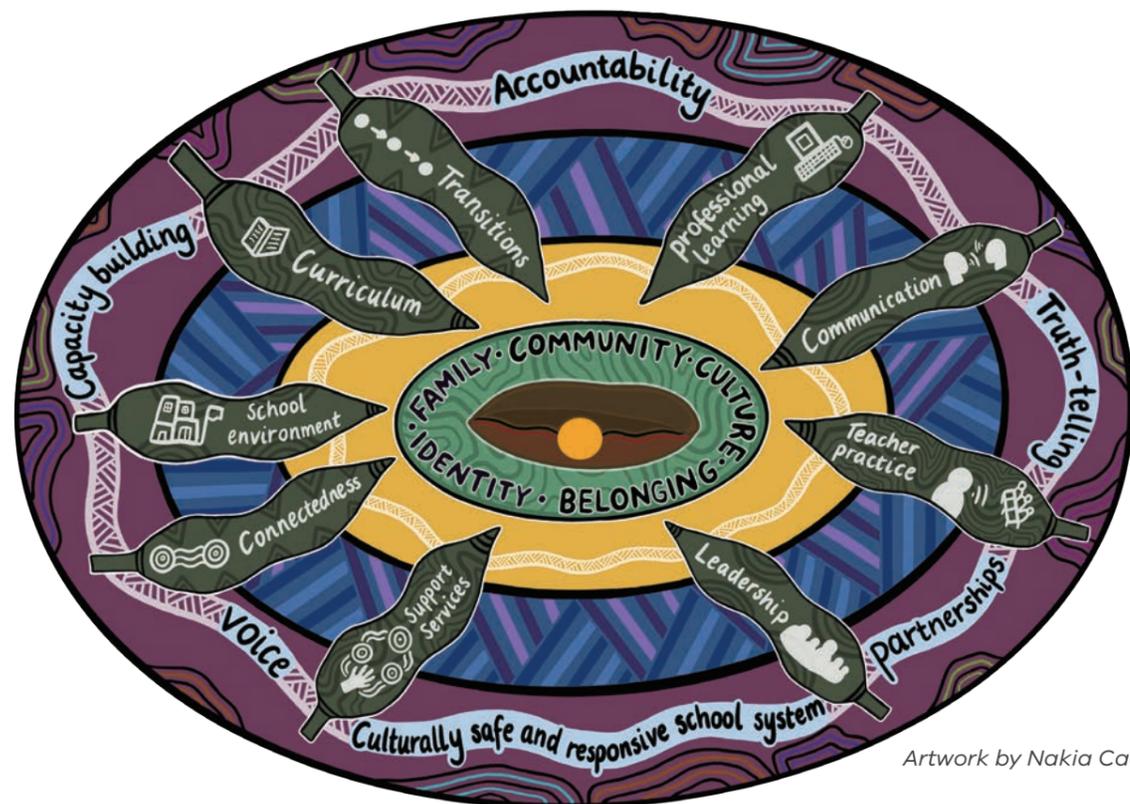
Report Overview



Throughout 2022, a series of Campfire Conversations on self-determination in education were held across Victoria, bringing together Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and schools to listen, share and connect about the possibilities and opportunities for strengthening self-determination in education. This report provides a synthesis of what was heard through these conversations.

More than 3,000 people participated in 180+ Campfire Conversations hosted by schools, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS), and the department. These conversations have provided clear direction for the action required for excellence in learning and wellbeing experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, through prioritising self-determination.

Overwhelmingly, discussions and suggestions for change align to one or more of the following themes: accountability, partnerships, culturally safe and responsive school system, truth-telling, capacity building and voice. These are the priority Reform Directions for strengthening self-determination across the education system and are illustrated in the Self-determination in Education Reform Conceptual Framework below, alongside the 'Strengthening Factors' for self-determination in education, and 'Core Connections', which were discussed as being the building blocks of self-determination in education.



Artwork by Nakia Cadd

The student is at the centre of the reforms. The coolamon represents how their self-determination is strengthened by the **Core Connections** students bring with them to their education - **family, community, culture, identity** and their sense of **belonging** - which must be nourished and protected by the education system.

The **Strengthening Factors**, represented through the gum leaves, are the influences that impact a student's learning and wellbeing. They signify how the system contributes to nourishing and protecting a student's Core Connections.

The **Reform Directions** outline the priority areas for strengthening self-determination across the system. The Reform Directions circle through the Strengthening Factors, symbolising areas of growth that will ensure all levels of the system strengthen self-determination and empower Aboriginal learners.

Campfire Conversations provided clear directions about the reform required to strengthen self-determination in education.

In the next phase of the work, the department will continue to work with community in the co-design and implementation of these Reform Directions, including through:

- 

ACCOUNTABILITY

 - » Reforming systems, processes and success measures to ensure these are meaningful to Aboriginal people and prioritise Aboriginal-led decision-making and governance.
- 

TRUTH-TELLING

 - » Ensuring the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and enduring impact/legacy of colonisation on the educational experiences of learners, families and communities are reflected in the teaching of the Victorian Curriculum.
- 

VOICE

 - » Embedding processes to ensure Aboriginal voice is heard and acted upon, including through strengthening opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in educational decision-making at local, regional and system levels.
- 

CAPACITY BUILDING

 - » Strengthening ongoing capacity and capability building for education staff in areas such as cultural understanding and responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, decolonising the education system, building partnerships that support self-determination, and truth-telling through the curriculum.
- 

CULTURALLY SAFE AND RESPONSIVE SCHOOL SYSTEM

 - » Ensuring all schools 'establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued' (Victoria's Child Safe Standards: Standard 1).
- 

PARTNERSHIPS

 - » Formalising and resourcing local partnerships with the Aboriginal community to enable genuine partnerships and shared decision-making.

The department is committed to ongoing Campfire Conversations aligned to existing Marrung structures to ensure that any system changes embody the Reform Directions and reflect community's evolving aspirations for self-determination in education.

Part 1: Background and Context

Truth-telling and deep listening about education in Victoria

2022 marked 150 years of public education in Victoria. The Education Act of 1872 made Victoria the first Australian colony to introduce free, secular and compulsory education for Victorian children aged 6-15 years old. However, historically, schooling – first through Church of England mission schools and then from 1877, through the education department – was used as a means of removal, control, and assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For much of the history of schooling in Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children did not have the same opportunity for or access to education, and the effects of a colonial education system are still being felt today.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students continue to be adversely impacted by the ongoing effects of colonisation on the school system in which they are learning. Their education is also impacted by the negative experiences that their parents and families have had in the past, and their parents before them. Truth-telling and deep listening were major features of Campfire Conversations throughout the state. There were calls for revised school curriculum that tells the truth of Victoria and Australia's history. Campfire Conversations included reflections on how educational practices have been an ongoing source of injustice – for example participants noted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are excluded (suspended or expelled) at unacceptable levels and many participants spoke of personal experiences of schools being a source of racism. For many, the history of schooling in Victoria is something to be reflected upon and learned from, rather than celebrated.

"It may help to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities if everyone is taught about Aboriginal culture and history and to respect the Country they are living on. Our kids have learnt about the different seasons, animals and some history of the particular Country they are on. They feel more connected to the land and they love sharing their knowledge with non-Aboriginal friends who love learning this too. Growing up I was taught plenty of history involving the Americas and Europeans but nothing about our own Indigenous history. It may help stamp out some of the racism that comes when information is mis-told or withheld."

– Engage Victoria submission

What is self-determination and why is it important?

While Aboriginal self-determination means different things to different people, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) describes self-determination as the ability for Indigenous people to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development...

Self-determination is the key approach that has produced effective and sustainable improvement in outcomes for Indigenous people across many jurisdictions. Government action to enable self-determination acknowledges that Aboriginal Victorians hold the knowledge and expertise about what is best for themselves, their families, and their communities.

(Victorian Government Self-Determination Reform Framework, 2019)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a collective right to self-determination as Australia's first peoples (United National Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). The Victorian Government has committed to progressing self-determination through the Self-determination Reform Framework.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2003) describes self-determination as “an ongoing process of choice ...to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs [including education needs] ... without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Australians to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession”.

Self-determination requires the transfer of power, control, decision-making and resources to Aboriginal communities and their organisations from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector. Strengthening self-determination throughout Victoria's education system means moving along the Self-determination Continuum from a position where Aboriginal students, families and community have no or little control and limited influence, to a self-determining position where Aboriginal people have decision-making power and control of resources in Aboriginal education.

The Victorian Government's commitment to advancing Aboriginal self-determination is outlined in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 and the Victorian Government Self-Determination Reform Framework (2019) – see Part 3: Policy Context.

The feedback and insights from the Campfire Conversations on what self-determination means in the education space is included at Part 5 of this report.

“The whole thing around Self-Determination in Education Reform is so community members, parents/carers and students can have a say.”

- VAEAI Campfire participant

“We know that having the power to make decisions about our own lives and communities is how we can create a better future for our children.”

- Aunty Geraldine Atkinson and Marcus Stewart, Co-Chairs of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria

“Aboriginal people know what is best for themselves, their families and communities. We acknowledge the right of Aboriginal Victorians to have decision-making control over the issues that affect their lives.”

- Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023

VAEAI Partnership: increasing Koorie representation in education

The Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) is the department's principal partner in Koorie education in Victoria and in the delivery of Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 (Marrung). VAEAI representatives, including those from its constituent Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs), sit on governance groups that oversee all department-funded Koorie-specific education initiatives. VAEAI advocacy is also integral to the governance structures that oversee significant universal reforms and programs across the department.

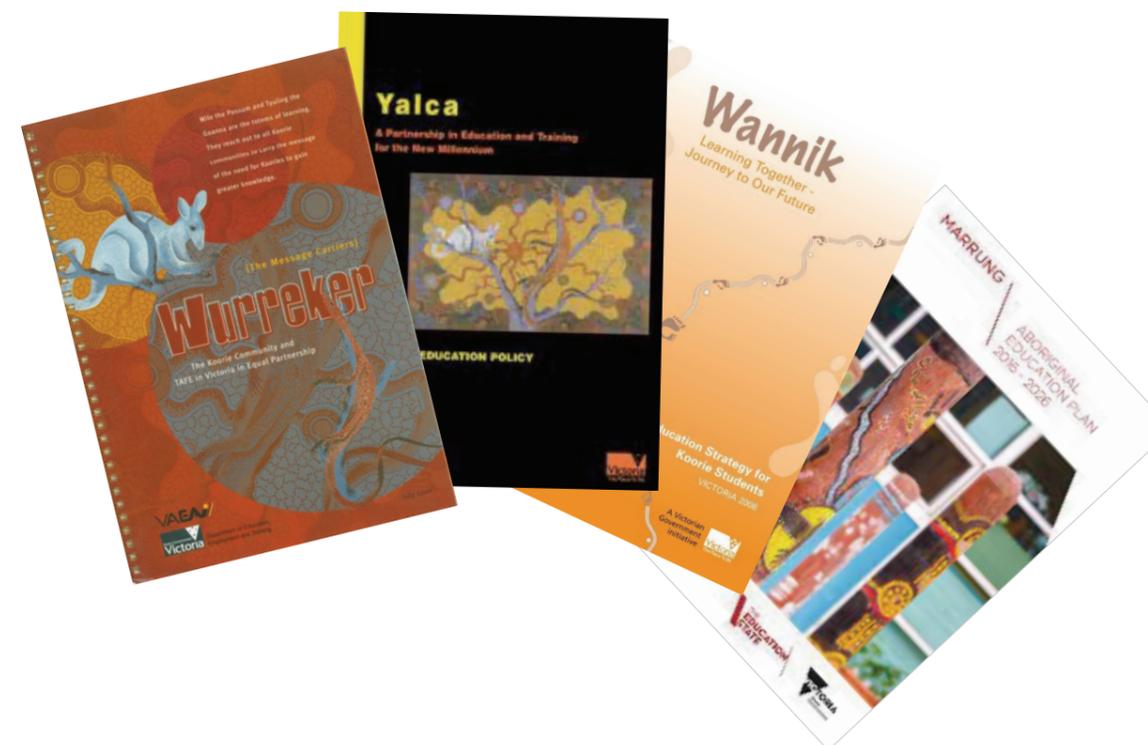
VAEAI was first established in 1976 as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (VAECG) to increase the presence and voice of Koorie people in education and training decision-making, and representatives from Koorie communities across Victoria came together to participate in the development of this formal advocacy body.

Today, VAEAI represents the Koorie community in relation to education and training policy development and strategic programming at the local, state and national levels. VAEAI supports the provision of education and training that reinforces Koorie cultural identity and increases awareness in the wider community of Koorie culture and aspirations in Victorian education and training.

The department and VAEAI have worked in formal partnership for over 30 years, commencing with the 'Partnership in Education: Koorie Education Policy' (1990). The partnership has strengthened through successive education and training and skills strategies, including the Wurreeker Strategy (2000), Yalca (2001), Wannik (2008), and now Marrung (2016).

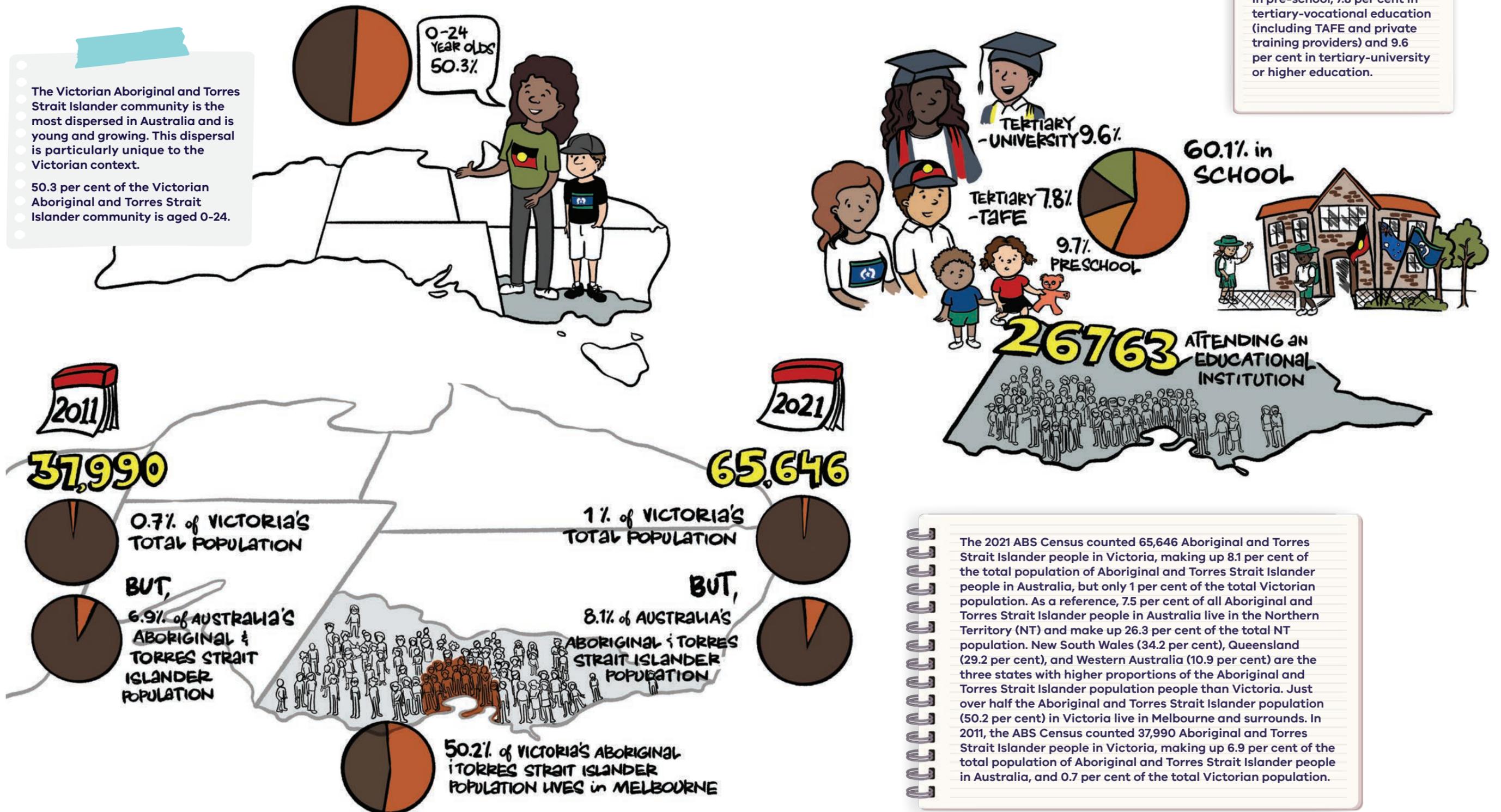
“VAEAI's philosophy has always been that Aboriginal Studies is an essential part of the education of all students in Australia; and that education is a life-long process: birth to death. Every person has the right to know the heritage of this country – and only when we do this, will this Nation reach its full maturity.”

- Aunty Geraldine Atkinson, President VAEAI

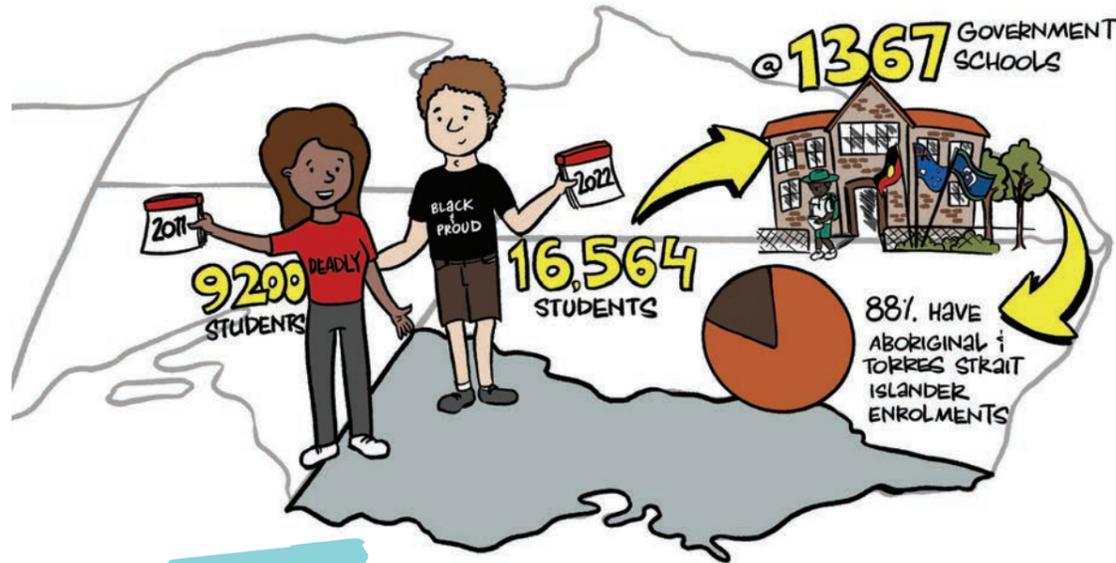


Demographic Context

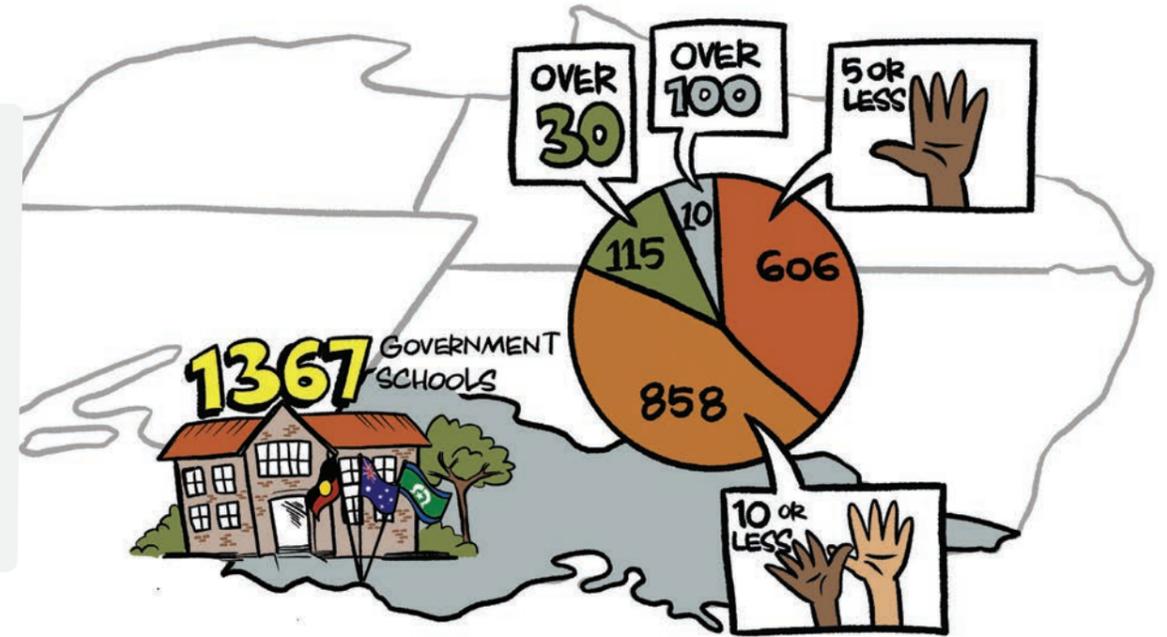
Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population



Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population

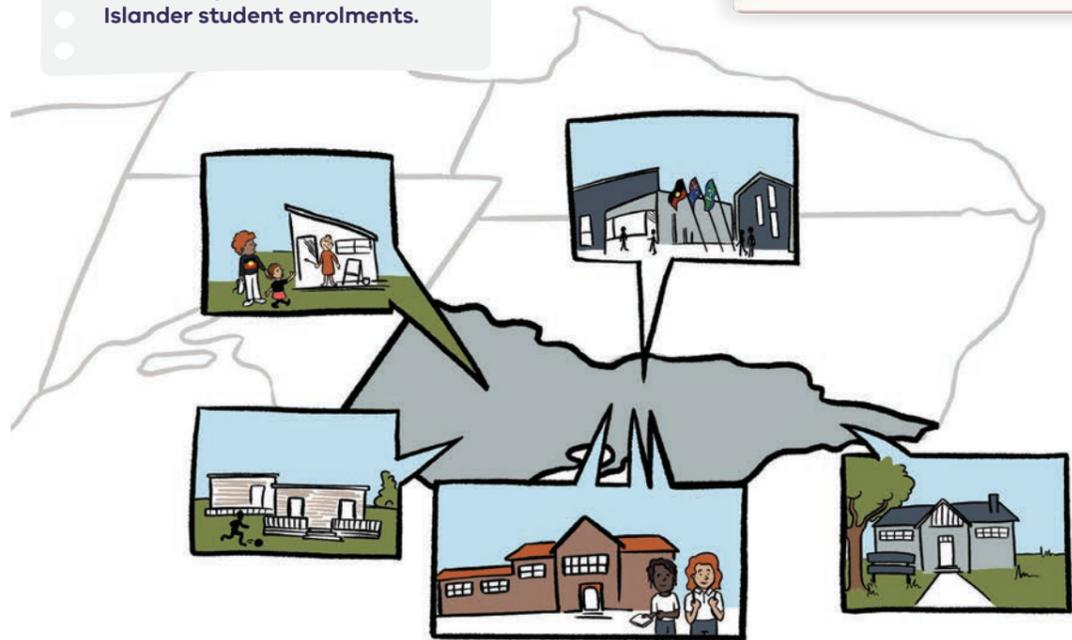


Of the 1,367 schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled, 606 had a cohort of five or less Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled at the school, 858 had fewer than 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and 10 schools had greater than 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in 2022.



The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population in Victorian Government schools has grown from around 9,200 students in 2011 to 16,564 in 2022. In 2022, these 16,564 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were enrolled in 1,367 Victorian Government schools, meaning 88 per cent of Victorian Government schools had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments.

The high dispersal and variability of learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlight the importance of systemic approaches that build schools and early childhood education and care services' capacity to be more culturally inclusive and responsible for improving Aboriginal students' outcomes. They also highlight the need to support schools to engage effectively with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community on shared responses to locally identified needs, priorities and aspirations.



Cultivating a culturally safe learning environment is especially important for the schools with small numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It is these students (and their families and carers) who will often be living away from their community or who may not have strong community networks to call on, compared to students attending large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population schools in areas with higher populations.



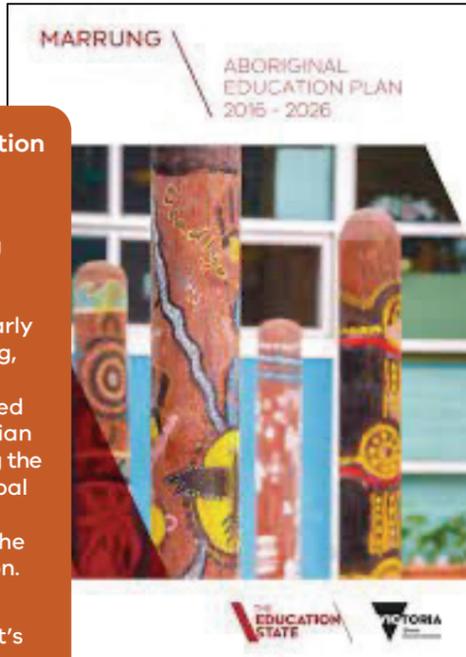
Schools play an important role in facilitating the learning for non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and histories, and doing it well, so that the Victoria of the future is a more cohesive, inclusive and safe place for all. Given the young and fast growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Victoria, the 12 per cent of schools that do not currently have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled are likely to have students in the very near future.

Policy Context

Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026

Marrung is an integrated ten-year plan to improve learning and development outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners across the early childhood, schools and training, skills and higher education sectors. Marrung was developed in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal community including the Victorian Government's principal partner in Koorie education, VAEAI and is underpinned by the principles of self-determination.

Marrung's vision provides the foundation for the department's work to improve education outcomes and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.



Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023

Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework

The Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2018-2023 (VAAF) is the overarching framework for Aboriginal affairs in Victoria. It sets the agenda for how the Victorian Government works with Aboriginal Victorians, organisations and the wider community to drive action and improve outcomes. The VAAF sets out the whole of government self-determination enablers and principles and commits government to significant structural and systemic transformation.



Victorian Government Self-Determination Reform Framework

Victorian Government Self-Determination Reform Framework

The Victorian Government has strengthened its commitment to Aboriginal-led decision-making resulting from an improved understanding of the meaning and importance of self-determination.

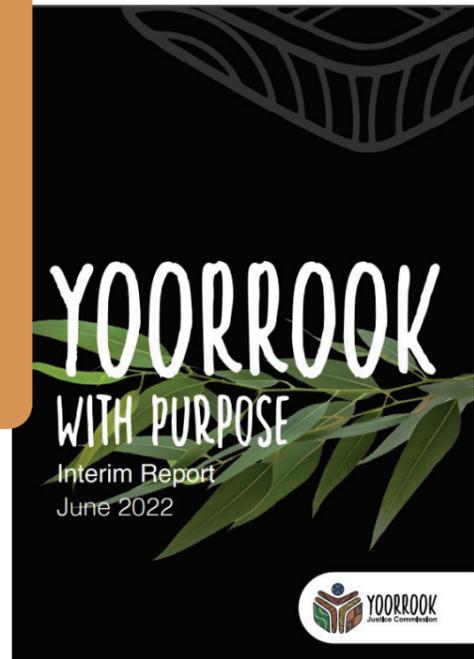
This commitment is outlined in the Self-determination Reform Framework, (2019), which guides public service action to enable self-determination in line with commitments in the VAAF.



The Yoorrook Justice Commission

Following generations of advocacy by Aboriginal Victorians and in partnership with the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria, in May 2021 the Victorian Government established the Yoorrook Justice Commission as the nation's first truth-telling process. The Yoorrook Justice Commission is investigating both historical and ongoing injustices committed against Aboriginal Victorians since colonisation by State and non-State entities, across all areas of social, political, and economic life, including in education.

The Commission's interim report 'Yoorrook With Purpose' highlighted that, 'for many First Peoples, historical injustice continues to affect the present. Ongoing injustices are part of systems still governed by their historical colonial underpinnings' (p.27), and that government systems must 'actively and critically examine [their] own colonial foundations and assumptions' (p.15). The Commission will deliver its final report by 30 June 2026.

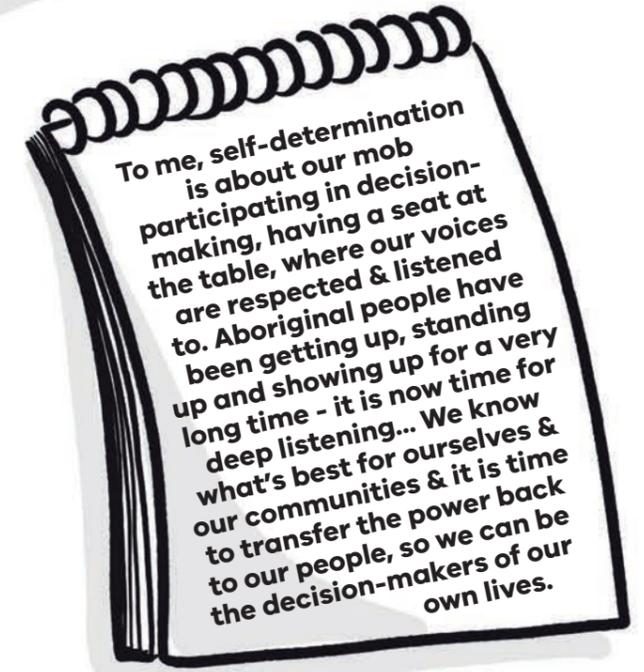
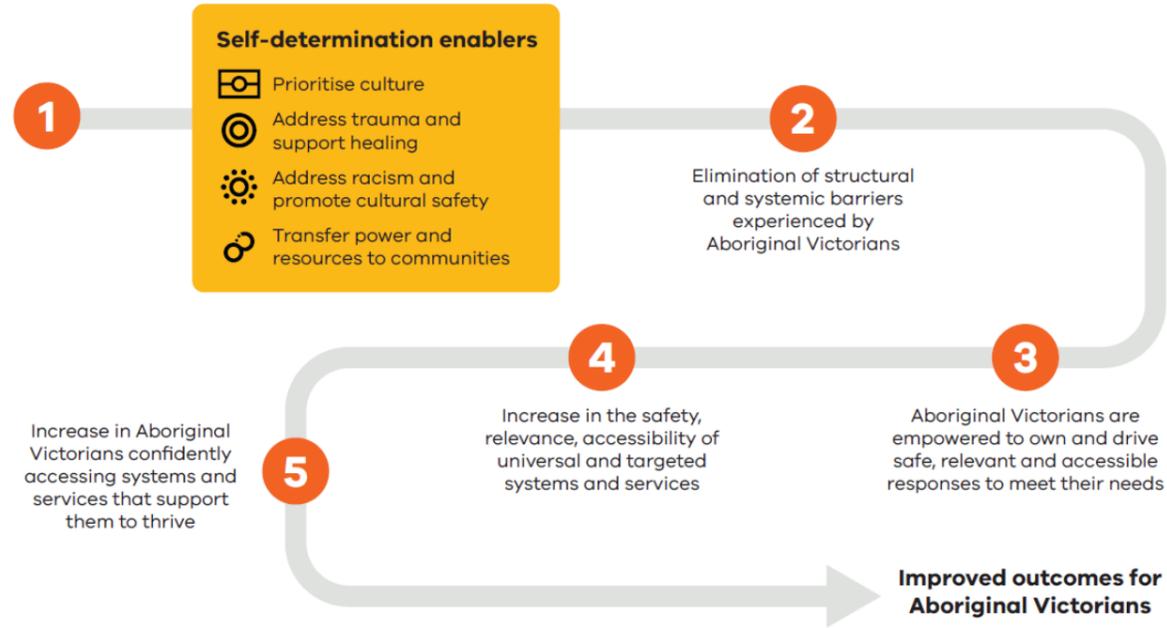


Treaty for Victoria

In response to ongoing calls from Aboriginal Victorians, the Victorian Government committed to pursuing Treaty in 2016 and has since negotiated, agreed and established all of the treaty elements required under the Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018, with Treaty negotiations scheduled to commence in 2023. Treaty is an opportunity to further recognise and celebrate the unique status, rights, cultures, and histories of Aboriginal Victorians. It is an opportunity to address wrongs and redefine relationships between the State, Aboriginal Victorians, and non-Aboriginal Victorians (Victorian Government, 2022)

The Treaty Act envisions a 'renewed and matured relationship' which is 'one of equal partnership, founded on mutual respect' and commitment to shared rights and obligations.

VAAF action logic and self-determination enablers:



How does self-determination in education fit with Treaty?

The education system can support work towards Treaty through supporting individual agency and through increasing the awareness, knowledge and understanding of all Victorians about the process. It is hoped that improved self-determination in the education system will also support system readiness for the changes that will come through the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and Treaty.

While Treaty will likely necessitate future changes to the way the education system operates, it was also made clear through the Campfire Conversations that Government must continue work to progress education outcomes and experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria, through the provision of education that is equitable, culturally safe and of high-quality.



Part 2: The Campfire Conversations

The space for storytelling and deep listening

The Campfire Conversations encouraged the gathering of communities, young people and schools to build a shared understanding of what self-determination is and what it means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education.

The co-design and consultation process was framed around the concept of the campfire to ensure engagement was grounded in culture, reciprocity and amplifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing have allowed communities to thrive and keep culture strong for thousands of years. One of the many ways that communities have passed on culture and knowledge is through campfires. A campfire is a place where everyone has a spot to sit; to listen, share and connect with each other. It is a place for storytelling and deep listening.



Government-led consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are most often transactional or procedural, leading to inaction or outcomes that do not centre the aspirations of community. This impacts the level of trust that community places in consultation processes as mechanisms for genuine change. To develop reform options that strengthen Aboriginal self-determination in the education system, it was crucial that community trusted the process and felt a genuine commitment from the department to generate change. The space for conversation needed to be safe and respectful of the stories of pain and trauma that might arise. It was equally important that such stories were heard in the spirit of openness and reciprocity in which they were shared.

The design of the statewide Campfire Conversation process ensured representation of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in Victoria. Attendees shared their diverse life experiences, including in education, and we heard about peoples' differing levels of connection to culture, from Victorian Traditional Owners living on Country, to people from other parts of Australia who have moved only recently to Victoria and are still establishing community connections here.

The Campfire Conversations were also designed as an opportunity to build ongoing relationships that support healing and moving forward. These relationships are critical for continuing conversations about self-determination that reflect the evolving aspirations and needs of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The process enabled schools to reflect on the role they play in creating empowering relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and the wider community. Many schools fully embraced the opportunity to do things in a way that embodies the principles of self-determination. For other schools, the process provided a starting point for building meaningful relationships with community and better understanding their roles in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

A discussion paper (Strengthening Aboriginal Self-Determination in Education) provided stimulus questions to start a conversation about self-determination while allowing the space for each community and school to focus on topics relevant to their unique context. Professional learning was provided to participating schools to better understand storytelling and the importance of deep listening from a cultural perspective, and the role they play in creating a safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and community to share their stories.

We heard from students who are the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in their household; those living in multi-generational households with strong links to community; from families who are just beginning to learn about and explore their cultural identity; and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in youth detention. Campfire Conversations were held with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability, their parents, carers and support workers, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and with the Koorie Education Workforce (KEW). Aboriginal Organisations were invited to host their own Campfire Conversations with their stakeholders, and these included conversations with Elders, Traditional Owners, ACCO staff, with some ACCOs considering specific cohorts such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care.

This is a great opportunity for awareness & appreciation of Aboriginal Culture to increase within the school and the wider community.

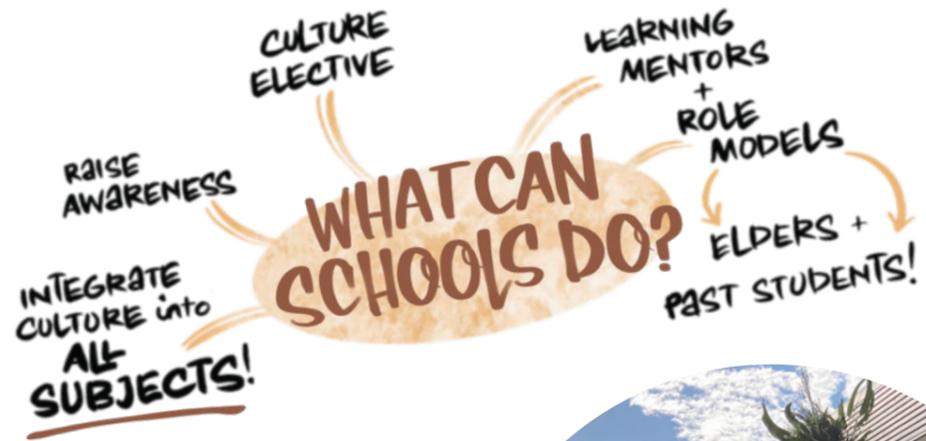


Given the school has the highest number of Aboriginal students in our area, I was surprised when a comment was made that this is the first time they had seen all of the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander students together in one space...

When all the students had returned back to school, it was leadership who started the conversation around the many areas of improvement within their school.

It was also noted that the conversation with the students wouldn't end with this campfire, that they understand the importance and want to run campfires throughout the year.

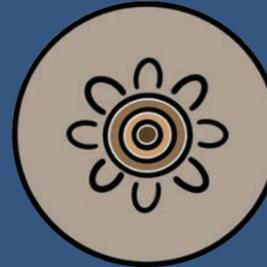
The school Campfire has created the opportunity for stronger partnership with the Area's KESO workforce. The conversations have given me as a KESO hope that there will be change for our Aboriginal students & their families. The school is sitting by that campfire & ready to listen.



Engagement opportunities

A wide range of engagement opportunities was established to ensure that as many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as possible could participate in the process, including those who may not have had the opportunity to input into education decision-making in the past. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is engaged with the education system in many ways, including as students, families, school education staff, regionally and centrally based department staff, and community members and partners. The Campfire Conversation process was co-designed to reflect this diversity in engagement and ensure multiple opportunities for inclusion and participation.

12 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Traditional Owner groups hosted Campfire Conversations for their respective communities, particularly for community members who may not be actively engaged in the school space.



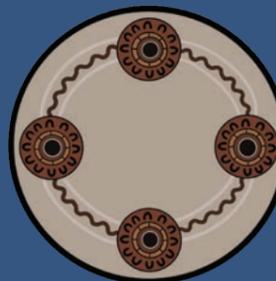
89 schools across Victoria hosted Campfire Conversations. These schools represented a wide range of contexts to ensure that the reform options are responsive to individual school needs and ensure strategic implementation across the system.



Young People Workshops were hosted throughout the 17 department Areas, providing Area leadership and staff with an opportunity to engage with and hear directly from the young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people they support. These workshops, in addition to the school campfires, ensured that the reform options addressed the needs and experiences of young people in their education.



The Engage Victoria website was a mechanism for interested stakeholders to send direct submissions responding to questions from the discussion paper. Themed Campfires provided opportunities for interested stakeholders to engage in specific conversations that focused on the KEW, the department's Senior Koories Influencing Practice and Perspectives (SKIPP) group, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff, racism, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability, and curriculum.



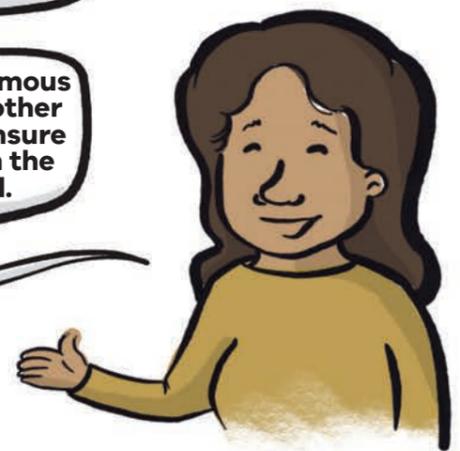
VAEAI convened Koorie Education Roundtables with LAECGs and community stakeholders, ensuring contributions from community members who have been extensively involved in education.





It was an incredible evening to be a part of. The overall sentiment was what can we do now to promote self-determination in our community rather than waiting for any government report.

There was also a unanimous agreement to hold another campfire in term 2 & ensure the other principals in the area attend as well.



Self-determination in education: a redistribution of power

Throughout the Campfire Conversations, while it was evident that each person and community understood and expressed their self-determination in a unique way, participants also articulated similar understandings of the core principles of self-determination. There was a consistent message that prioritising and strengthening self-determination in education will improve learning and wellbeing experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians and the importance of continuing these conversations.



Through Campfire Conversations, we heard that:

- » inherent to self-determination is the right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to define for themselves what self-determination means, looks and feels like in practice – that this is not the place of government.
- » self-determination in education means different things for different communities, and from person to person, and that it must be left open to local communities to decide what self-determination in education means for them, and how they would like to enact it locally.
- » while government cannot define, give or take self-determination, it does control many systems, services and levers that work to either strengthen or weaken self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians.
- » self-determination requires the transfer of power, control, decision-making and resources from government and the non-Aboriginal service sector to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their organisations.
- » improved self-determination in the education system will facilitate improved learning and wellbeing experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and will support system readiness for the changes that will come through the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and Treaty.



"The school needs to reflect the Country they are on - the Koorie colours, art, language, music, songs, plants, stories family members being involved, so that the whole community embraces, respects and is proud of the rich cultural heritage their school sits on."

- Engage Victoria submission

"Most people get involved with our kids because they have to, but some people get involved with our kids because they care - and we see that and feel that and it makes a huge difference."

- School Campfire participant

"...not telling the actual truth or rawness of the actual cultural trauma that occurred and was caused, so how can we heal, if we do not know our own proper history or anyone else. How can we move forward?"

- Community Campfire participant

"Principals either embrace Aboriginal culture or they don't, and this filters down into the staff - we need to influence at this level."

- Community Campfire participant

"A welcome to Country does not qualify as Aboriginal learning but does acknowledge that maybe schools are ready for more. I think guidance needs to be given as we have been approached by our son's primary school for ideas on how to improve but a huge barrier is that even schools are reluctant to add anything to curriculum for fear of being wrong or members of the particular Country taking offence to the material if not provided by a Koorie person of that Country."

- Engage Victoria submission

"Talk to the parents as each community is different, some may feel that having a culturally safe space is needed for their children so may see that just seeing Aboriginal people in the school could be empowering."

- Engage Victoria submission

"Listen to us - just because you have worked with Aboriginal people in the past or studied Aboriginal people does not mean you know us or what is best for us."

- Community Campfire participant

"It would be great for our young community members to see their elders engaged in their school and understand that the community see education as an important issue."

- Engage Victoria submission

"When things aren't working well in schools e.g., students not attending, families not engaging with the school, negative behaviours from students or parents, the focus tends to be on what they are doing wrong, rather than the focus being on what the school could be doing better."

- Engage Victoria submission

What we heard: Core Connections for self-determination in education

The stories and experiences shared at the Campfires highlight the importance of **culture, identity, family, community** and **belonging** as **Core Connections** that need to be recognised, valued and supported by the education system. Participants felt that these connections were the building blocks on which to strengthen self-determination in education. It was also evident that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and communities continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in the education system, which is perpetuated by a lack of awareness of these Core Connections and their importance. These experiences have significant repercussions on social and emotional wellbeing, which not only impact an individual's aspirations and sense of self-determination, but their general sense of inclusion on a daily basis.

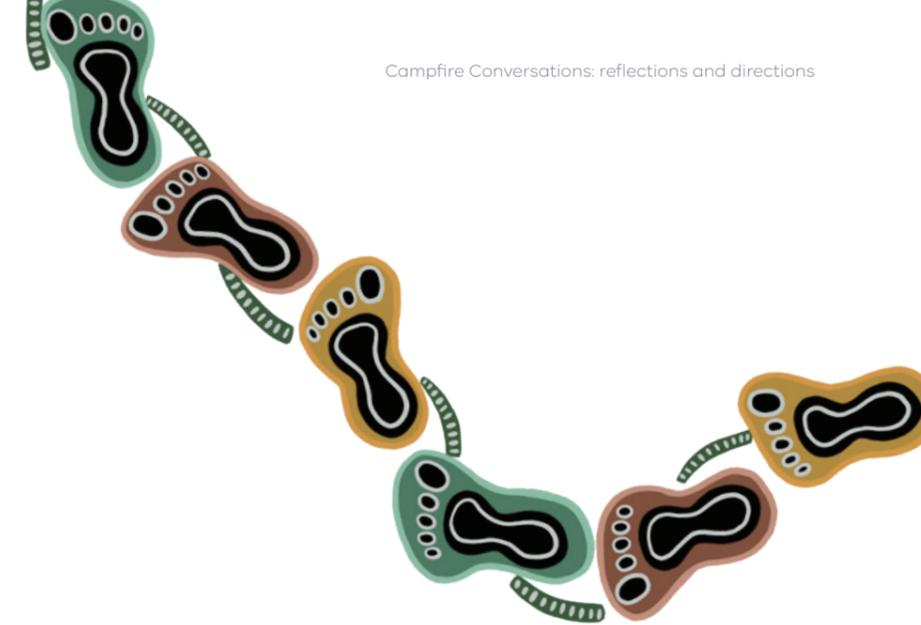
We heard that deficit thinking and unconscious bias are often encountered at school by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families and must be addressed to stop the perpetuation of stereotypes and low expectations. Feedback from the KEW highlighted the desire to have the capacity to work with all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including those who are achieving at the expected levels and those who are excelling. Other feedback made clear teachers should ensure high expectations of students, recognising that the incidence of giftedness is the same for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as their peers. These high expectations should also be reflected in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Programs and activities should encourage pride in identity including the incorporation of a diversity of positive role models, rather than focus only on stereotypical strengths, such as sport and art. Engagement with students, families and communities should highlight the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as resilience and culture, and move away from stereotypes and deficit perceptions.



Core Connections

Family and Community

In addition to schools needing more education about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, participants highlighted that the significance and needs of **family** and **community** are often overlooked or misunderstood by schools. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures extend beyond immediate family, often including grandparents, aunts and uncles, extended family and wider community members, all of whom have a shared responsibility to care for the child. Families who experience marginalisation, disempowerment and disadvantage in education, as well as in other aspects of life such as health and employment, fear that their children will be subjected to the same historical prejudices and discrimination they have endured. This intergenerational trauma impacts the trust that families and community place in schools and influences how comfortable they are in engaging in their child's education. The feedback clearly outlined the need for schools to recognise the impact of the Stolen Generation on family structures and connectedness to culture. Families may not be connected to, or have knowledge of, their kin and culture, and may be at different stages of exploring and embracing their identity. As a result, there are families who choose not to identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, impacting on the identity of younger generations. Participants felt that schools should work closely with community to support students with their cultural identity, especially in situations where families are unable to do so. Links to Elders and community will not only support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but provide opportunities for all students to learn about the local community on Country. The feedback also indicates that parents and carers commonly experience fatigue from having to advocate for their children, compounded by not feeling heard or valued when providing feedback on curriculum or their child's needs.



Identity

How a school recognises and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, families and community has a significant impact on a student's confidence in their **identity**. Schools cannot teach culture, but they can provide opportunities for students to learn about, celebrate and participate in experiences that strengthen their identity. The feedback identified the importance of teacher attitudes in supporting a student's sense of identity, with participants feeling that teachers do not understand the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, make judgements about students based on stereotypes, and treat students differently because of their identity. Participants highlighted the importance of supporting students to share their culture, but not in a way that singles them out or compromises their wellbeing. Students expressed feeling pressure to be cultural experts to compensate for peers and teachers lacking knowledge. Even if a student is strong in their identity, it is crucial to understand that each student is on their own cultural learning journey and should be empowered to share their culture in ways of their own choosing. The feedback identified reports of students hiding their identity or feeling shame when identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander because of the discrimination they experience at school. Given the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, it is important to view individual students through a holistic lens that recognises giftedness, disability, orientation and living in out-of-home care in connection with their cultural identity.



Culture

A consistent theme emerging from the feedback is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners and their families continue to experience many forms of racism in schools, stemming from a limited understanding of **culture** amongst non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For students to feel safe, it was clearly identified that their culture must be valued and respected in the school environment. Participants shared that attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture are often grounded in stereotypes, resulting in bullying or non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students making fun of culture. This is reinforced by a perception that 'real Aboriginals' are only found in the Northern Territory or in the desert, often leading to students with fair skin experiencing colourism and being questioned about their identity. In order to challenge deficit thinking and stereotypes, the feedback emphasised the importance of schools understanding the diversity of communities and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not a homogenous group.

Belonging

A recurring theme throughout the feedback is that a student's sense of **belonging** at school is strengthened when schools understand and value a student's culture, family, community and identity. Failing to recognise or appreciate any of a student's Core Connections diminishes their emotional wellbeing, negatively impacting their engagement in learning and connectedness to school. The stories shared at the Campfire Conversations highlighted the numerous barriers that reinforce a sense of exclusion experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and community. Community's aspirations for self-determination will not be fully realised until these barriers are addressed, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel valued by the school community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young People

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are the leaders of tomorrow who will continue the 60,000+ year stories of their ancestors. Young people have the potential to imagine and create new norms, and education is fundamental in empowering them with the knowledge, skills and confidence to make positive contributions that shape the future. Throughout the Campfire Conversations, it was important for young people to have their voices heard as they are interacting with the system as it is now.

Selected Feedback from Area Young People workshops

"People asking 'how much Aboriginal are you?' is really offensive. There needs to be more education around why it is offensive so people understand and stop asking."

- Area Young People Workshop



"I have been in class while they are teaching and the lesson has made me feel uncomfortable because I hadn't been told that sensitive things about my culture would be discussed."

- Area Young People Workshop

"Flying the Aboriginal flag makes me feel proud."

- Community Campfire participant

"Students told they are 'too white' when tell friends/students they have Indigenous heritage."

- Area Young People Workshop

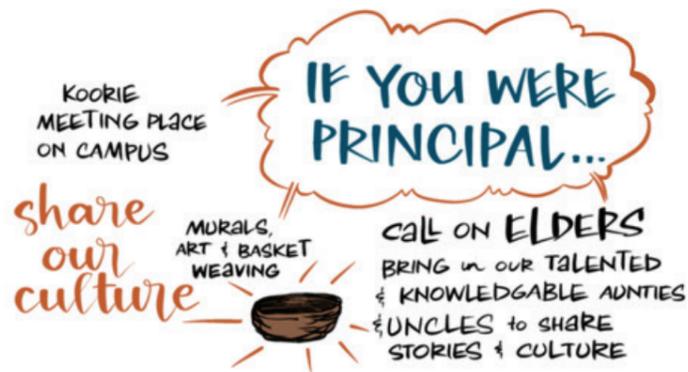
"There is too much reliance on Indigenous students to provide cultural education, when they are still learning about it themselves."

- Area Young People Workshop



"It would be good to have someone who knows you and your cultural background."

- Area Young People Workshop



"Wish friends knew that just because you are white doesn't mean you aren't Aboriginal and knew about Dreamtime and Aboriginal beliefs."

- Area Young People Workshop

"Acknowledge the intergenerational resilience and strength of Aboriginal people, not just the bad stuff that's happened."

- Area Young People Workshop



"What self-determination means for me and our mob especially our younger mob... is that we ourselves need to encourage them to be self-determining and to listen to their opinions and having their input... because we lack it; sometimes we don't listen to our young people, yet we should be encouraging that to happen all the time."

- VAEAI Campfire participant

"We feel like we never get heard and they do not care about what we have to say. Discrimination is a big one especially if we had a sibling muck up in past years or have a family member that has been in the news or gone to prison, then we get targeted and tarred with the same brush."

- Community Campfire participant

Summary Feedback from Area Young People workshops.



Summary Feedback from Area Young People workshops.

CAMPFIRE CONVERSATIONS

PEOPLE WANT to Go

WHAT DOES A SAFE, RESPECTFUL SCHOOL LOOK LIKE SOUND LIKE FEEL LIKE?

OUR VOICES are HEARD!

SUPPORT

LISTENING to TEACHERS

STAFF OPEN to LEARN

TEACHERS HAPPY to CELEBRATE SPECIAL DAYS

NO BULLYING!

NO RACISM!

STAND STRONG!

EXPRESS CULTURE

connected TO

ART safe space WELLBEING

WHAT DOES A SCHOOL WHERE YOU CAN EXPRESS yourself freely LOOK LIKE?

NO JUDGEMENT

HAPPINESS

ACCEPTANCE

EVERYONE GETTING ALONG

STUDENT VOICE

NO ASKING HOW ABORIGINAL ARE YOU?

IDENTIFY AS KOOKIE WITHOUT FEAR

FLAGS AROUND the SCHOOL

Graphic Recording by @deb_sketches www.debbiewood.com.au Captured on Wurundjeri Land

Koorie Young People Advisory Group

A Koorie Young People Advisory Group was established to ensure that the feedback and design of reform options is responsive to the experiences and perspectives of young people in education. The group consists of twelve young people from across Victoria, aged 13-25, who have been meeting regularly to discuss the initiative and the findings from the Campfire Conversations. Members generously shared their own stories in response to the feedback, and it was evident that young people share many of the same challenges in education despite their unique stories and journeys. Group members recognised the strength of yarning with each other and found comfort in connecting with young people who could relate to their experiences.

To extend this sense of connectedness with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people across Victoria, the group came up with a list of statements outlining what they want their teachers and schools to know about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The statements were designed to provide teachers with greater insight and disrupt practice that perpetuates the negative experiences reflected in the findings. The statements also act to strengthen identity and self-determination in education.



Artwork by
Nakia Cadd

Possum skin cloaks were once an everyday item for Aboriginal communities in parts of Victoria. Each person had their own unique cloak from the time they were born. As they grew older, they would hunt possums and continue to add more pelts to their cloaks. With each new pelt they would add artwork that represented their life and their community. There would be images of the Country, totems and other markers of their identity.

This possum skin artwork pieces together statements created by the Koorie Young People Advisory Group to reflect the stories and experiences that young people shared through the Campfire Conversations. Each statement represents a key message that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people want schools, teachers and other students to hear and understand, in order to make schools welcoming, safe and empowering.

Important aspects of identity to consider

Many gains have been made in Aboriginal education over the past decades. There is much to be proud of – including the steady increase in the number of Aboriginal students completing Year 12 as well as an increase in students going on to tertiary studies. However, as participants in the Campfire Conversations expressed, these are not the only measures of success, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are diverse and have a variety of aspirations and different understandings of education that incorporate cultural knowledge and values.

What we heard about supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability

- » We need to change the attitude of low expectations and relate to people as people. Everyone benefits from the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability because it fosters appreciation, understanding and respect.
- » As for all students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability should have agency around how to express their cultural identity. Student, parent and KESO voices need to be part of this process.
- » There is a need for strength-based approaches, so that schools become safe places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with disability. This entails capacity-building for teachers, especially in creating a culturally safe space for students and families and centres their voices and aspirations.
- » Disability documentation needs to be accessible to families and incorporate cultural considerations. This could include allowing for extended family members to be named on enrolment/contact forms and involving them in discussions around developing support profiles. Relationship-building will assist in making discussions and meetings around disability and education support collaborative rather than procedural.
- » Culturally relevant and responsive disability resources need to be developed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- » Ensuring opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to share and strengthen their culture and to connect with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the community is just as important for students with a disability, and additional considerations such as having access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support staff and culturally appropriate communication aids may be required to enable this.

“There’s a difference between being visible and being heard.”

– Themed Campfire participant

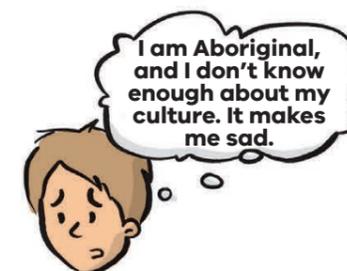
“Non-Aboriginal people’s role is to learn and listen, and then do as much as possible with the influence they have.”

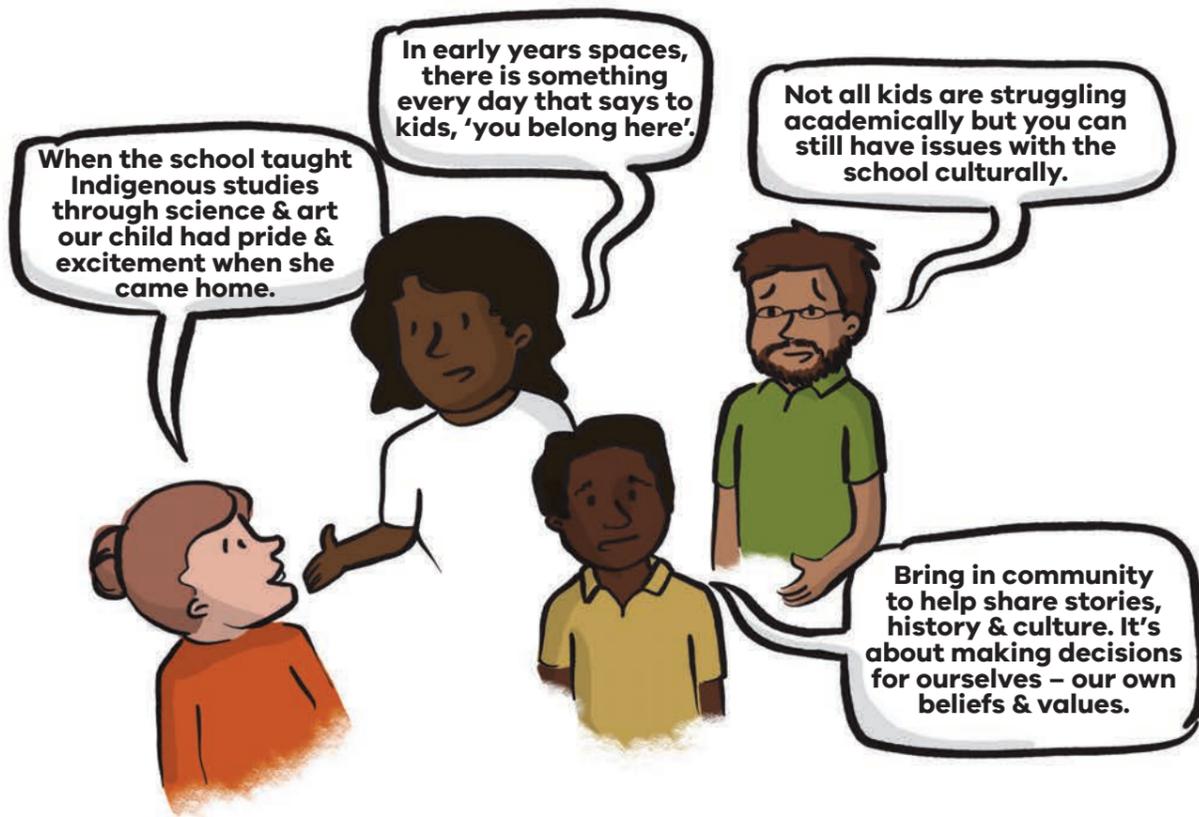
– Themed Campfire participant



What we heard about supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in out-of-home care

- » Schools should communicate with parents and carers regarding students’ successes as well as any concerns that may arise and provide parents and carers with the necessary information and time to prepare for any meetings.
- » Trust and relationships can be built through listening to parents and carers’ opinions and ideas.
- » Schools should engage in localised cultural awareness and trauma training that includes resources relevant to students in out-of-home care contexts.
- » Some students in out-of-home care do not know who and where their mob and Elders are, which can cause them to be unsure of their identity and where they belong. Schools have a role in helping these students connect with and strengthen their cultural identity.
- » When possible, students living in out-of-home care should be enrolled in schools with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to foster community connection.
- » Teachers need to have training around intergenerational trauma and its impacts such as loss of culture, disconnection from family and community, and mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- » It can often be difficult for children living in out-of-home care to regularly attend school, therefore greater supports are required for parents and carers in this situation.
- » Parents and carers may feel more comfortable engaging with schools when supported by ACCO or community members.





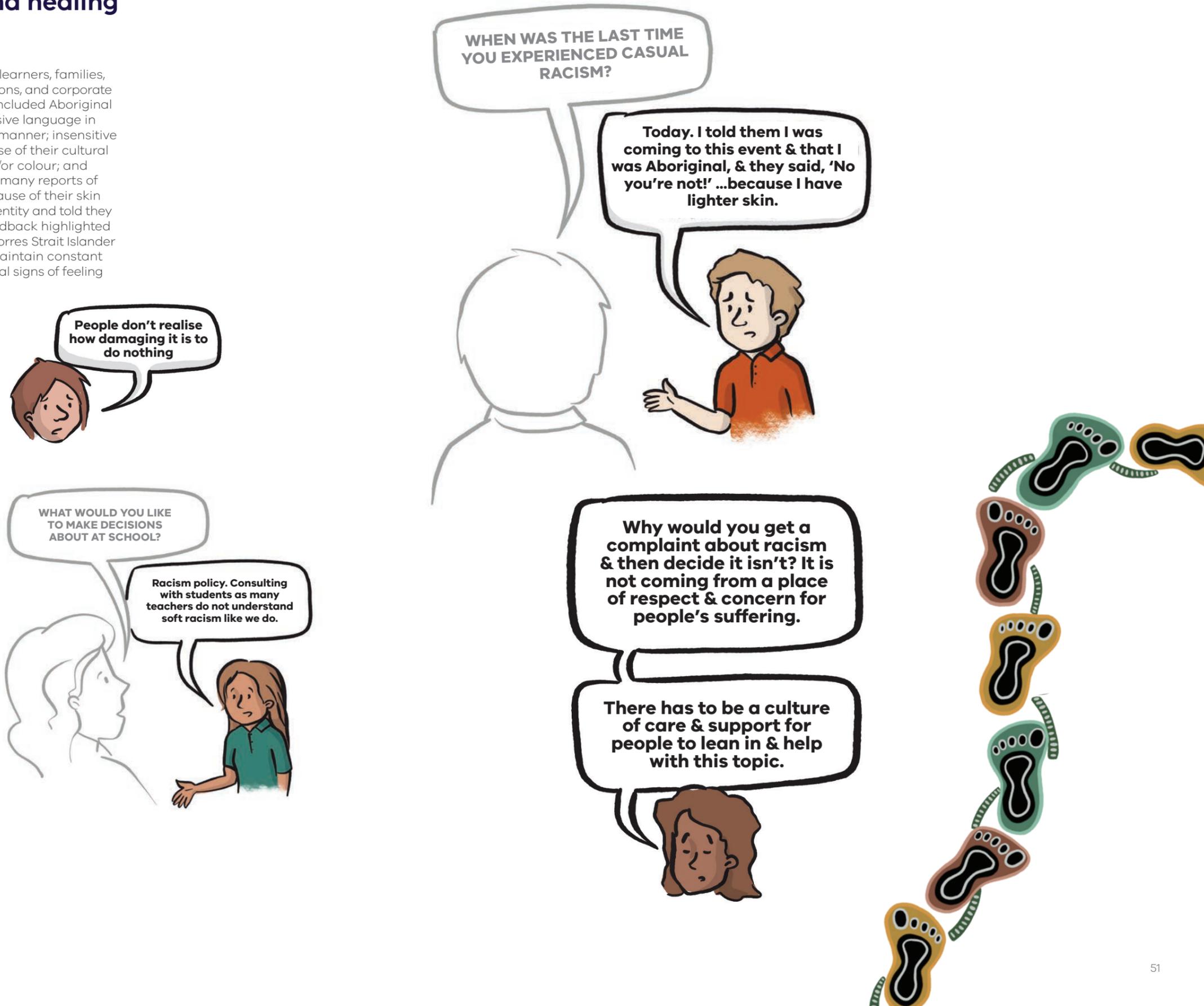
What we heard: Barriers to self-determination and healing

Racism

As captured in the feedback, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families, school staff, community members, staff from community organisations, and corporate staff reported recurring experiences of racism in education. This included Aboriginal and Torres Islander people witnessing or being the target of offensive language in relation to their identity; culture being referenced in a derogatory manner; insensitive generalisations or stereotypes being made about a person because of their cultural identity; being treated or judged differently because of race and/or colour; and exclusion from opportunities because of their identity. There were many reports of colourism, where students reported being bullied or excluded because of their skin colour. Students with fairer skin are often challenged about their identity and told they do not 'look like' an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Feedback highlighted concerns and frustrations that schools stereotype Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as not valuing education. Refusing to attend school or maintain constant communication is misinterpreted as disinterest, rather than potential signs of feeling culturally unsafe.

Participants shared that racism was not a one-off event, but a significant barrier that is experienced continually throughout life, including in education. Senior students and department staff highlighted that racism was experienced or witnessed multiple times throughout primary and secondary school, and socially outside of school. The enduring and repeated experiences of racism diminish a sense of belonging and connectedness to a student's peers and teachers. Students and families reported a reluctance to attend a school environment where there was a high risk of racism or discrimination, or not feeling safe or valued because of their identity.

Participants noted that cultural bias, stereotypes and colonial perspectives continue to influence how schools address or respond to racism, often perpetuating exclusion and culturally unsafe practice. Feedback highlighted the need for more awareness around what racism looks, feels or sounds like, with participants feeling that schools fail to recognise or address racism appropriately. There was a desire for racism to be addressed across the system and approached from the cultural lens of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Students and families felt that schools often overlooked or diminished experiences of racism, noting that school staff may not have the lived experience or perspective to recognise the impact of racism. The department's Community Understanding and Safety Training (CUST) was referenced as an important first step for addressing racism, but that further learning and development is vital for schools to recognise and celebrate the richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.



In 5 years, we want to be sitting here & not hearing that person's grandson is experiencing racism. We don't want to be hearing that some schools are still refusing to engage in CUST.



Teachers need to have training around intergenerational trauma & its impacts -loss of culture; disconnection; & the ongoing impact for children in care.



Trauma

Through the Campfire Conversations, participants stressed the importance of the system building a deeper understanding of trauma, its relationship to colonisation, and the continued impact of colonisation on communities. Participants shared the ongoing pain and heartache of past injustices and government policies that resulted in the Stolen Generations, missions, loss of culture, and disconnection from community, all of which have affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families for generations. This has shaped how community perceives schools and government more broadly, including a fear of accessing government services that were historically involved in taking children away from families. Schools are seen as reinforcing the trauma of these policies and practices by:

- » not recognising the loss of identity, culture and connectedness due to colonisation
- » teaching a curriculum that ignores Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of colonisation
- » teaching offensive material or stereotypes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- » setting low expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- » not appropriately addressing racism or discrimination
- » not recognising or valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

The stories shared by young people in schools echo the trauma of racism and discrimination endured by older generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. Parents can find it uncomfortable participating in their children's education due to their own trauma, with some parents reluctant to openly identify for fear that their children may be exposed to the same pain and suffering at school. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, both in school and corporate roles, shared that workspaces across the department are often culturally unsafe and reinforce experiences of trauma, adding to the emotional burnout from cultural load and racism.

The need for trauma-informed training for teachers came through very strongly in the feedback, with parents stating that teachers need more professional development to understand how trauma impacts student behaviour and wellbeing at school. Schools must also recognise that for children in care, particularly those without strong connections to family or community, there is an added dimension of trauma that needs to be addressed. Such professional training would equip teachers with the skills to address trauma and provide culturally appropriate support.

Truth-telling and a respectful teaching of the curriculum were also highlighted as key steps for creating a space for understanding the past and its impact on the present, which is crucial for healing and moving forward.

Cultural Load

The issue of cultural load permeated many of the Campfire Conversations, referring to the additional workload and cultural pressures experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Cultural load can take different forms, but students, parents/carers and staff consistently reported the expectation to organise cultural events, be an expert on cultural matters, and act as a representative or spokesperson for all communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in schools and regions often feel obligated to share their life experiences or personal stories to educate others. Participants shared that these experiences were often challenging and exhausting, particularly when managing confrontational discussions about racism or colonisation. Students and staff identified that cultural load is intensified when they are the only Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in the school, creating a stronger sense of cultural isolation and often resulting in burnout.

Despite the implications for mental health and wellbeing, participants identified a range of factors and pressures that contribute to their experiences of cultural load. For staff, especially early career teachers, the structures of schools made it difficult to say no or push back on any requests that came from leadership. Power dynamics also come into play when having to educate other staff on complex issues such as racism or unconscious bias or challenging culturally inappropriate behaviour. These power dynamics are heightened for students, who look to teachers for support and protection, but often face the same challenges with teachers as well their peers.

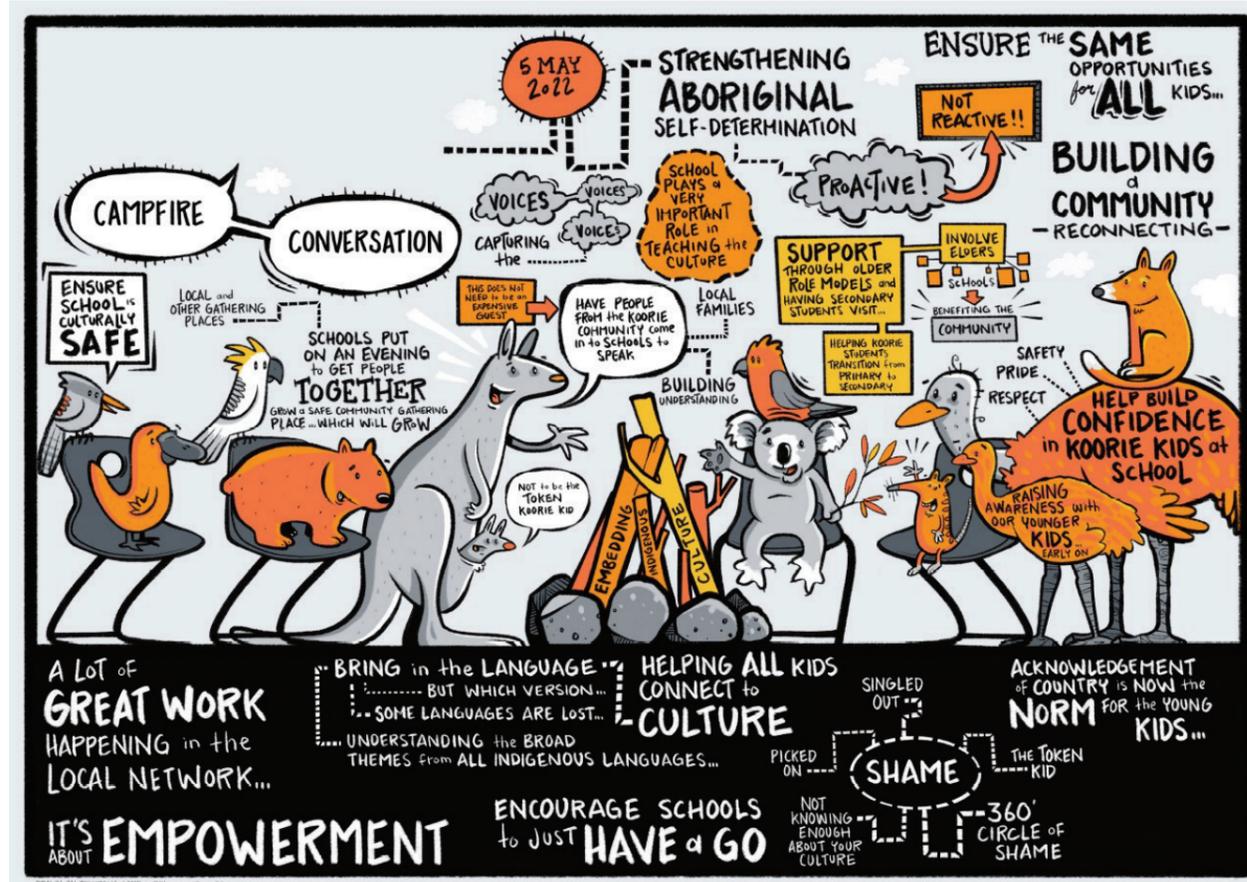
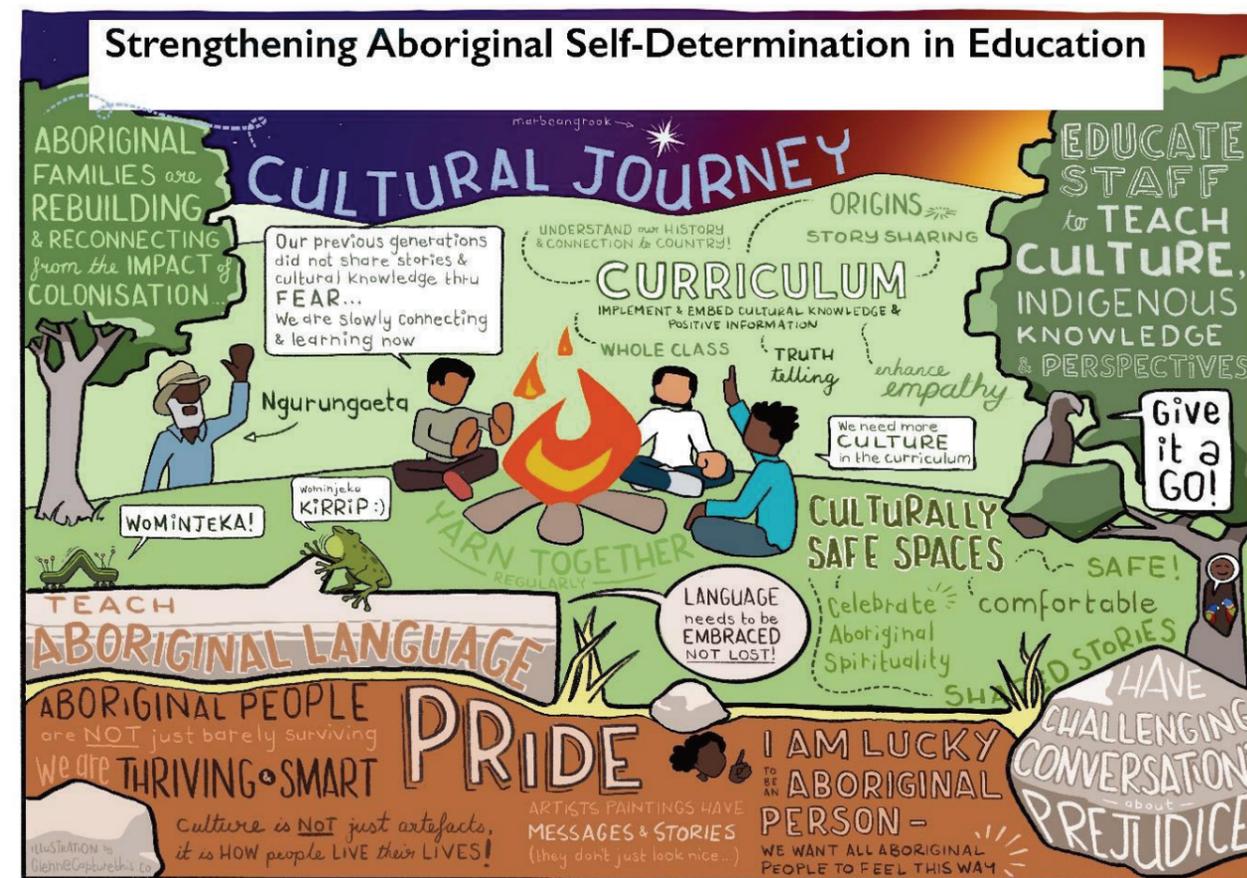
While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff welcome the opportunity to be involved in cultural school programs and the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, they should not be expected to bear sole responsibility. It is important that non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are mindful of this and actively work to share responsibility for cultural events, activities and the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This requires open dialogue, empathy and the withholding of assumptions. Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff should also be mindful of the cultural load placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Establishing networks and cultural gatherings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff were identified as positive opportunities to reduce cultural isolation and support others in managing cultural load to keep staff within the department.

Allyship from non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students can go a long way to lessening this cultural load. Participants stated that this can be achieved through checking in with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and students, striving for collaboration and sharing decision-making. Further, it involves non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff being aware of cultural nuances and engaging in discussions without expectation.

“The tension between wanting to share culture and history, but then having to hold it all yourself can be quite isolating.”
 – Themed Campfire participant

“[It’s] always about us sharing our stories, but sometimes we get tired talking about this stuff.”
 – Themed Campfire participant

“[Teachers] try to avoid what they don’t know. The system can generate those starting points, such as Traditional Owners talking about what Country means to them, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don’t have to do all the educating.”
 – Themed Campfire participant



Part 3: Strengthening Factors

What we heard: Strengthening Factors for self-determination in education

Participants discussed factors within the education system that contribute to either the strengthening or weakening of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student's self-determination, and ultimately their learning and wellbeing. The factors discussed most often were: **transitions, connectedness, school environment, support services, leadership, teacher practice, communication, professional learning** and **curriculum**. Participants discussed what is required in order for these to operate as **Strengthening Factors**, rather than barriers to self-determination.

Importantly, a strong sentiment arising from the Campfire Conversations, is the desire to see localised action from schools regardless of department reforms as this would instil trust and encourage inclusion whilst working towards partnership with community.

"There's an appetite for change. An awareness that we could and should do more."

– School Campfire participant

"You cannot be what you cannot see. If our children don't see their culture and its strengths reflected and taught appropriately and reflected daily in the resources used, it is difficult for them to see this space as culturally safe and to shine."

– School Campfire participant





For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to thrive in education, schools require professional learning to understand, develop and embed practice that supports and strengthens self-determination for learners, families and local communities.

The feedback from Campfire Conversations often began by noting that many teachers feel paralysed by fear of 'getting it wrong' or not knowing where to begin. Professional learning is required to build teacher confidence and capacity in delivering content relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum.

The need for teachers to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives confidently and meaningfully across the curriculum and in all subjects was discussed as being essential for students seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, and to all students having the opportunity to learn about the ongoing living cultures of Australia's First Peoples. Suggested methods to achieve this include professional learning on how to incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing, learning and teaching into yearly planning, complemented by access to and the sharing of quality resources.

The importance of teachers engaging in ongoing learning in cultural understanding and responsiveness from a range of providers and perspectives, especially those offered locally, was highlighted as a means to understand and support students in their cultural identity and their learning journey. This would promote teacher awareness of and respect for Koorie English and the challenges students face in code-switching. It was also widely held that professional learning regarding the impacts of trauma and exclusion, would further strengthen teacher capacity and assist schools in combating racism.

It is believed that these steps will not only build teacher capacity but also enhance teacher student relationships, improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' social and emotional wellbeing and learning outcomes.

"There needs to be more training for teachers in this area. I only did one subject in my teaching course, it's not good enough."

– Themed Campfire participant

"Being scared to make a mistake is just an excuse – it just shows where your priorities are at, it takes time and effort, but you need to start somewhere. Learning is a big part of teaching."

– Themed Campfire participant

"If anything, this [conversation about professional learning] has strengthened my resolve to keep going with this, look for opportunities to provide resources and facilitate connection... and keep the conversation going."

– Themed Campfire participant

"It is not just about the content and intention of the curriculum... It is the way that you teach as much as what you teach."

– Themed Campfire participant

What could this look like in practice?

Empowering teachers' cultural capacity through access to continuous professional learning relating to cultural education, the impacts of trauma and exclusion, and anti-racism training.

Providing teachers access to high quality and locally-tailored professional learning, networks and resources in relation to embedding Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum in all subjects and fostering Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing.



Frequent and varied forms of communication were seen as integral to improving relationships between schools, students and families. Overwhelmingly, Campfire Conversations were recognised as opportunities for sharing knowledge, supporting students and engaging with families and community in a culturally responsive manner and should therefore be ongoing. In terms of day-to-day operations, feedback indicated that families want regular and transparent updates including positive news, as this would help to build trust.

Different modes of communication should be incorporated, be they via newsletter, social media or phone calls, with the underlying aim that parents and carers are comfortable with the mode undertaken. Further, schools should look for regular opportunities to engage with community and Aboriginal organisations around events and programs.

"I really don't get involved much because I don't feel comfortable. Once I'm able to communicate with teachers better I feel I can involve myself in more school activities and then have a more strengthened relationship with the school."

– Community Campfire participant

"Building that confidence [in parents], that they're doing a deadly job, that they are their child's first educator."

– VAEAI Campfire participant

"Going to meetings is often stressful because generally they called a meeting when my child did something wrong. A heads up would be good to lessen this anxiety."

– Community Campfire participant

"[There should be] regular conversations between parents and schools. Schools to personally invite parents and carers to things. Not just phone calls when things go wrong, call for the good things too."

– Community Campfire participant





A consistent message through the feedback is for schools to appreciate the significant impact that teacher practice has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feeling safe and valued in the classroom. A relationship where teachers recognise students as individuals with unique aspirations, learning styles, needs and interests was highlighted as crucial for student success. Students reported that they are generally perceived from a deficit mindset influenced by stereotypes and low expectations, rather than from one focusing on their strengths and abilities.

Central to the feedback was the importance of teacher-student relationships extending to relationships with family and community. It was often noted that teachers seemed afraid to engage for fear of 'getting it wrong'. The overwhelming feedback from young people, families and communities is they would prefer teachers to 'have a go' rather than do nothing.

Feedback also stressed the need for teachers to commit to ongoing professional learning including cultural understanding, the impact of trauma, and how to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum. Teachers should not expect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be experts on culture, should check in to see how comfortable students are in sharing their knowledge, communicate with students and families prior to teaching sensitive topics, and avoid putting students on the spot.

It was also acknowledged that teachers need to be empowered by schools with the provision of appropriate resources and access to supports. This could include more experienced teachers mentoring less experienced teachers to build skills and confidence, reaching out to community organisations to discuss resources, and funding to enable learning on Country.

"Kids tell us what they need, but as teachers, do we hear them?"

– Themed Campfire participant

"Gaps in the knowledge of teachers can really affect a child's sense of identity and belonging."

– School Campfire participant

"My son was asked to bring in cultural books to share and it made him feel proud because the teacher was interested."

– Community Campfire participant

"Do not pressure students who are Indigenous to know everything. It is hard enough for students who are culturally different from others, they do not need to carry the burden of uneducated peers or teachers."

– School Campfire participant

What could this look like in practice?

Schools and teachers ensuring all Aboriginal students have a strengths-based and culturally empowering Individual Education Plan in place that is developed, regularly reviewed and updated in partnership between the teacher, student, family and Koorie Education Workforce and any other relevant professionals.

Teachers empowered through pre-service training and continuous professional learning, resource development, networks and other supports to build skills, understanding and share practice and resources on creating culturally safe and responsive learning environments, and teaching practices that enhance self-determination and truth-telling.

Teacher Performance and Development/Career Progression Plans that reflect the high expectations of behaviours, responsibilities and accountability with regard to AITSL Standards 1.1, 1.4 and 2.4.



It is crucial that department and school leadership set the tone for schools in how well the Aboriginal self-determination in education Reform Directions and actions are implemented. This includes taking a holistic and strengths-based approach to excellence, and leading staff to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not seen from a deficit lens.

Campfire Conversations have reiterated the need for Regional and Area Directors, principals and school leaders to engage in critical self-reflection, understanding the necessity to listen, learn and do better. A genuine commitment to building relationships between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is integral to this process, recognising Aboriginal education is everyone's business and that it is 'done with' not 'done to'.

Feedback stated the strong desire for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in leadership contexts that is more than merely an advisory mechanism, but rather is involved in making, actioning and evaluating decisions. Methods for achieving this could include ensuring progress against Marrung is embedded in schools' Annual Implementation Plans and that teachers are held accountable for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their day-to-day practice as required by AITSL Standards 1.4 and 2.4.

It was acknowledged during discussions that there exists a broad range of cultural capability in schools and leadership and that schools engaging in exemplary practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are well positioned to provide leadership to networks of other schools. Shared responsibility through partnerships between leadership and the KEW, community and LAECGs would further enable opportunities for self-determination in education to be realised.

Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be supported in taking up formal leadership positions, along with recognition of and respect for the different forms leadership can take within the community and among students, was recommended.

"It's about a redistribution of power."

– School Campfire participant

"All Aboriginal roles are 'advisor' or 'support' roles. We have no decision-making power. In essence, we spend our days begging those who hold the power to support our cause."

– Themed Campfire participant

"[We] need to invest in community in the lead up to this change. Not just Western ways of leadership, but Aboriginal ways of leadership."

– Themed Campfire participant

"I feel like we ... often go into rooms with white bureaucrats or white government... and they'll listen to us, but not much is put in place."

– VAEAI Campfire participant

"Leadership set the tone for how seriously teaching Aboriginal content is taken and how well it's implemented."

– Themed Campfire participant

"I don't want to give leadership a history lesson every time I talk to them. If we don't have to give that bloody history lesson every time we deal with a new person, we could get so much further."

– Themed Campfire participant

What could this look like in practice?

'Marrung Champions' appointed and supported in all schools to drive school accountability and action against Reform Directions.

Principal and department leadership Performance and Development Plans that reflect the high expectations of leadership behaviour, responsibility, and accountability with regard to providing the enabling environment for self-determination.

Dedicated resourcing and capacity building to increase the number of Aboriginal people in leadership roles within the education system, including for Aboriginal teachers to move into school leadership positions.

The department's commitment to and responsibility for strengthening Aboriginal self-determination communicated widely, including on the department's website, on all published documents, on position descriptions and employment contracts.



The KEW, community organisations, Elders in residence and greater awareness and co-ordination of services were deemed essential in ensuring the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are adequately met.

KESOs were noted as providing a holistic lens to student support, and are seen as an important conduit between schools and families, with feedback suggesting a strengthened workforce would allow for KESOs to work with all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to support success, not just in times of crisis.

Gender was raised as a significant factor to consider in the provision of culturally appropriate support programs, including access to male and female role-models, and equal access to gender-based programs that reflect student interests and aspirations.

Financial costs associated with school uniforms and learning equipment sometimes impact on student participation and engagement. Access to information on available supports would alleviate financial stress that parents and carers may have to navigate with such costs.

Feedback emphasised the importance of resourcing ACCO capacity to support education programs. ACCOs have a strong desire to be more involved in education, but time-limited funding often restricts capacity to facilitate programs and assess the long-term impacts of targeted supports.

Participants did note that sometimes there was a reluctance to utilise support services due to other school members perceiving these supports as handouts or special treatment.

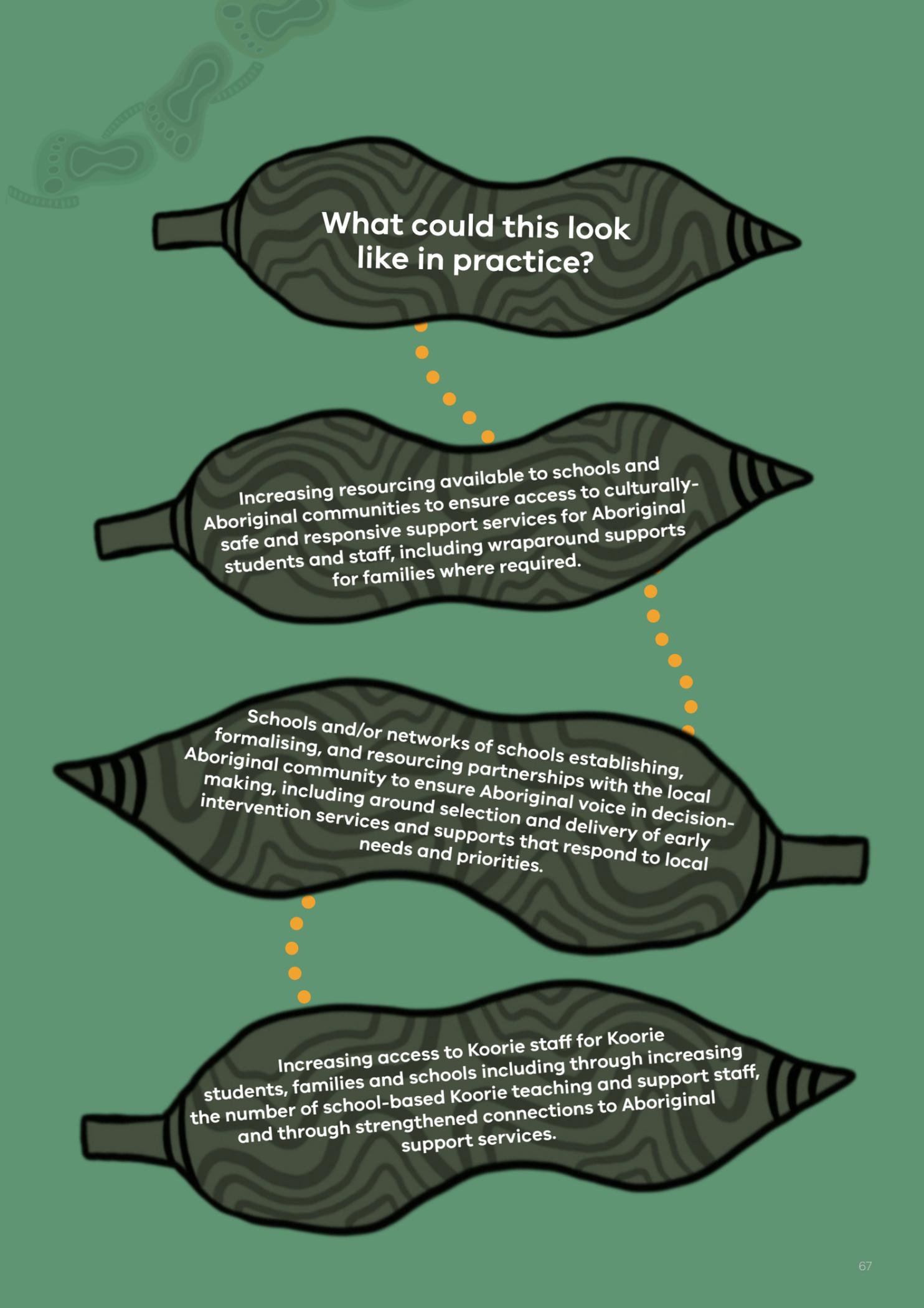
Well co-ordinated support services would contribute to mental health and well-being assistance, and appropriate and timely liaisons with families and schools before issues escalate, coinciding with necessary classroom support. The development of a centralised support database, accessible to all schools, is seen as crucial to achieving this well co-ordinated approach.

"I don't want my kids to be struggling; not because of my choices or their choices, but because of the system."

– School Campfire participant

"In rural areas the wait list for any assessments is very long and this is impacting on the outcomes of students. Teachers can label them as naughty or bad, but they may have a learning delay."

– Community Campfire participant



What could this look like in practice?

Increasing resourcing available to schools and Aboriginal communities to ensure access to culturally-safe and responsive support services for Aboriginal students and staff, including wraparound supports for families where required.

Schools and/or networks of schools establishing, formalising, and resourcing partnerships with the local Aboriginal community to ensure Aboriginal voice in decision-making, including around selection and delivery of early intervention services and supports that respond to local needs and priorities.

Increasing access to Koorie staff for Koorie students, families and schools including through increasing the number of school-based Koorie teaching and support staff, and through strengthened connections to Aboriginal support services.



Students feel a great sense of connectedness to school and their peers when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are celebrated at school.

Feedback suggested that schools should seek opportunities for bringing students, families and community together to enable cross-cultural sharing and increase cultural knowledge and awareness. This would facilitate the sharing of language and experiences, links to community events and local Aboriginal organisations. Such opportunities would allow members of the student's extended family to be recognised and feel valued in the student's education, establishing a relationship where schools can work collaboratively with the family to support the student. When students see that their cultures and communities are valued by the school, they do not have to hide their cultural identity or fear being treated differently.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (KESOs, teachers, Education Support) are seen as a vital cultural presence for students due to their lived experience, cultural knowledge and skills, and the desire to increase staff numbers at all levels came through strongly. Schools are encouraged to connect with and form relationships with Elders, LAECGs and Traditional Owners. These relationships not only benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students but the broader school community. Such connections could allow for learning on Country, hearing from Elders and engaging in different ways of doing.

For students in schools with low Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments, opportunities to engage with community and students from other schools create a sense of cultural connectedness and reduce cultural isolation in schools.

"We look forward to the exciting possibilities that a program such as [Campfire Conversations] enables for the school. This is a great opportunity for awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal Culture to increase within the school and the wider community."

– School Campfire participant

"A Community with no Elders is like a tree with no roots."

– Themed Campfire participant

"Parents of Aboriginal children need someone at the school they can go to and feel safe with and talk honestly about their concerns. Someone they can trust."

– Community Campfire participant

"If children feel safe, they will want to go to school – if you find going to school a negative experience then you feel unworthy, which leads to depression – why would you want to go to school if it makes you feel like this. All schools should be safe. All children should feel that they can achieve at school."

– Community Campfire participant

What could this look like in practice?

Schools promoting belonging and inclusion for students by providing opportunities for Koorie students to come together and by recognising student participation in specific cultural events and programs within the school context.

Schools developing respectful and meaningful partnerships with families and the local Aboriginal community that promote cultural awareness, amplify voice and encourage broader support for and participation in local Aboriginal community events and programs.

Creating opportunities for increased connectedness between teachers and schools to share good practice relating to the Strengthening Factors and Reform Directions.

Creating opportunities for increased connectedness between Aboriginal teaching staff and pre-service teachers, especially in relation to strengthening wellbeing and managing the impacts of cultural load.



Reviewing a school's practice and physical environment is viewed as a practical first step to ensuring schools are welcoming, culturally responsive and safe places. Indeed, the area of school practice and environment is seen as underpinning all other Strengthening Factors discussed in the Campfire Conversations.

Depending upon where a school is in its journey towards supporting Aboriginal self-determination in education, feedback emphasised the need to begin with small steps in collaboration with local community. These steps can include visual representations throughout the school such as artworks, murals, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander symbols on school uniforms, language names for rooms and buildings and flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.

The physical environment could also incorporate yarning circles, Indigenous gardens and culturally safe places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff to gather. In terms of policies and procedures, it is believed that a genuine and ongoing commitment to celebrating and respecting cultural events beyond NAIDOC and Reconciliation Weeks would benefit the whole school community.

Taking specific measures to ensure that the self-determination process is not led by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but becomes a shared responsibility of the school community, provides opportunities to commit to having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives on School Council and on staff who contribute to decision-making. In undertaking the above, it is envisioned that Victorian schools will become places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have agency to participate and express their cultural identity.

"Our schools should put more focus on building confidence in our youth. When children don't feel they are given a voice in a setting they are comfortable with, they tend to shut themselves off more than before... When a child feels you understand them without judgement, they will trust the school and show you their true potential."

- Community Campfire participant

"It is difficult to feel welcome when you don't see yourself in the space... I have been in schools where they try to create more welcoming environments, but community is left out of the conversation. [There is] so much more room there for agency and voice."

- Themed Campfire participant

"We should insist that there are places for Koorie people to sit on the councils/boards/ student body...and with employment we can insist that there are percentage rates/targets for them to reach with employment of Aboriginal people. If we need to make this a culturally safe space for ourselves, our children, our parents, we need to see our people in those spaces."

- VAEAI Campfire participant

What could this look like in practice?

Schools and/or networks of schools establishing, formalising, and resourcing partnerships with the local Aboriginal community to ensure Aboriginal voice in decision-making.

Schools and/or networks of schools working with the local Aboriginal community to agree on and implement actions to increase representation and visibility of Aboriginal people, culture and perspectives throughout the school environment. This could include action relating to the physical environment, Aboriginal school-based staff, events and programs, and curriculum.

Schools outlining actions to strengthen self-determination in education in Annual Improvement Plans and School Strategic Plans, as agreed with the local Aboriginal community.

Schools and/or networks of schools and the local Aboriginal community developing agreed measures that reflect the expectations of the Aboriginal community to track schools' progress towards establishing and maintaining culturally safe environments.

Schools with Aboriginal students providing avenues for students to engage with decision-making and exercise their agency in education.



Prominent in the discussions was the acknowledgement of the great work undertaken in the early childhood education sector in this area, and that these efforts need to be consolidated and extended in primary and secondary schooling.

Truth-telling, in terms of the legacy and impacts of colonisation, incorporating massacres, resistance and survival, is of paramount importance to the participants in the Campfire Conversations as it is believed this will lead to greater empathy and reduce racism. Furthermore, this will highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the longest living culture that is ongoing, diverse and contemporary and thus challenge stereotypes. This ties in with the importance of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum so that these become central to the knowledge and understanding of all students in all subject areas. It was often recommended that the curriculum should begin with local history and culture before broadening to the state and national contexts. To support this, local Aboriginal language should be incorporated where possible and in partnership with Aboriginal organisations.

Learning on Country was also emphasised as important for students to meaningfully engage with and learn about culture to reinforce what is learned in the classroom. Another common theme that arose was for greater opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to engage with culture during school hours, not as extracurricular activities or in place of core classes.

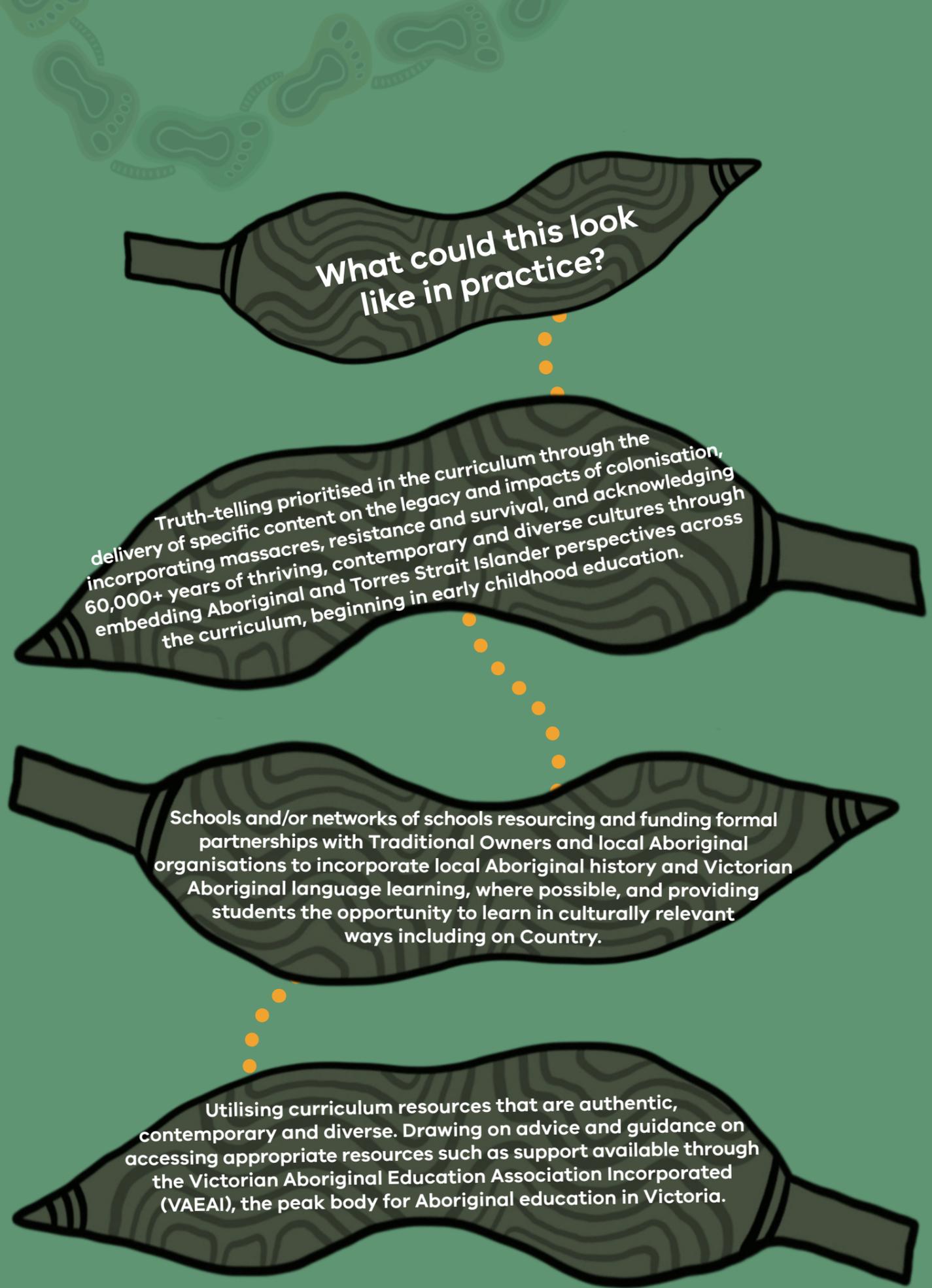
“Schools should focus on the advantage for ALL kids of having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives embedded in the curriculum.”
– Themed Campfire participant

“Telling stories and learning more about our history is important for everyone.”
– Community Campfire participant

“Our young people want their community to be proud of history and to value what they have to offer in terms of being the first peoples of this nation. They want to feel valued and supported to be able to do well. They want to feel safe at school especially when sharing their personal stories.”
– Engage Victoria submission

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives aren’t separate from the rest of the curriculum – this needs to be understood and then embedded.”
– Themed Campfire participant

“Non Aboriginal [people] want the stories to be warm and fuzzy, not the truth.”
– School Campfire participant

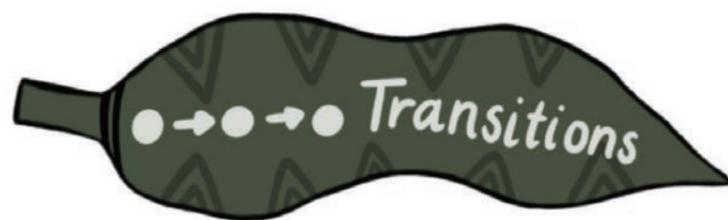


What could this look like in practice?

Truth-telling prioritised in the curriculum through the delivery of specific content on the legacy and impacts of colonisation, incorporating massacres, resistance and survival, and acknowledging 60,000+ years of thriving, contemporary and diverse cultures through embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the curriculum, beginning in early childhood education.

Schools and/or networks of schools resourcing and funding formal partnerships with Traditional Owners and local Aboriginal organisations to incorporate local Aboriginal history and Victorian Aboriginal language learning, where possible, and providing students the opportunity to learn in culturally relevant ways including on Country.

Utilising curriculum resources that are authentic, contemporary and diverse. Drawing on advice and guidance on accessing appropriate resources such as support available through the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), the peak body for Aboriginal education in Victoria.



Different points of transition were discussed in the Campfire Conversations; early childhood into primary school, primary school into secondary school, and finally secondary school into post school pathways. In considering how to make these transitions culturally responsive and seamless, several key themes arose.

The necessity of meaningful connections between the various educational providers as well as connections between these providers and families was emphasised.

Existing relationships with members of the school alleviate the potential cultural isolation students and families may experience when transitioning to a new learning environment. Parents and carers noted that their preferences for schools where relatives, peers from kindergarten, or larger Koorie enrolments attend, are often limited by zoning.

The role of students supporting each other was seen as another critical factor, and suggestions included the development of buddy programs (in which older students mentor younger students) and connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the same year level. Both ideas could constitute elements of a broader culturally supportive induction program. This links closely with calls by participants for role models and mentors, which could be former students, those involved in further education, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and/or community members. This could contribute to students being fully informed as to their post school options whether those be into further education and training, or the workforce

“Transition to prep can be challenging especially coming from Koorie specific childcare – not having the one to one once they start at school.”

– Community Campfire participant

“[Students need] exposure to different work/business environments. Work experience is not enough, they need to see alternative pathways for the future.”

– VAEAI Campfire participant

“It’s concerning when students leave a great primary school and then go to a high school that’s not so inclusive. Zoning can make the choice to find the right high school very difficult.”

– Community Campfire participant

What could this look like in practice?

Culturally supportive induction and transition programs to encourage meaningful connections between education providers, Aboriginal organisations and support services.

Mentor and buddy programs for Aboriginal students, drawn from peers, alumni and the local Aboriginal community, with a focus on education, developmental and cultural transition points.

Regular communication with students and families so they are fully informed of all VCE and post-school pathways options, including those provided by local Aboriginal organisations.

Taking family preferences into account when enrolling students e.g., opportunity for students from the same Aboriginal kinder to be in the same class when beginning prep; extended family members being able to attend the same school as their cousins irrespective of enrolment zones.

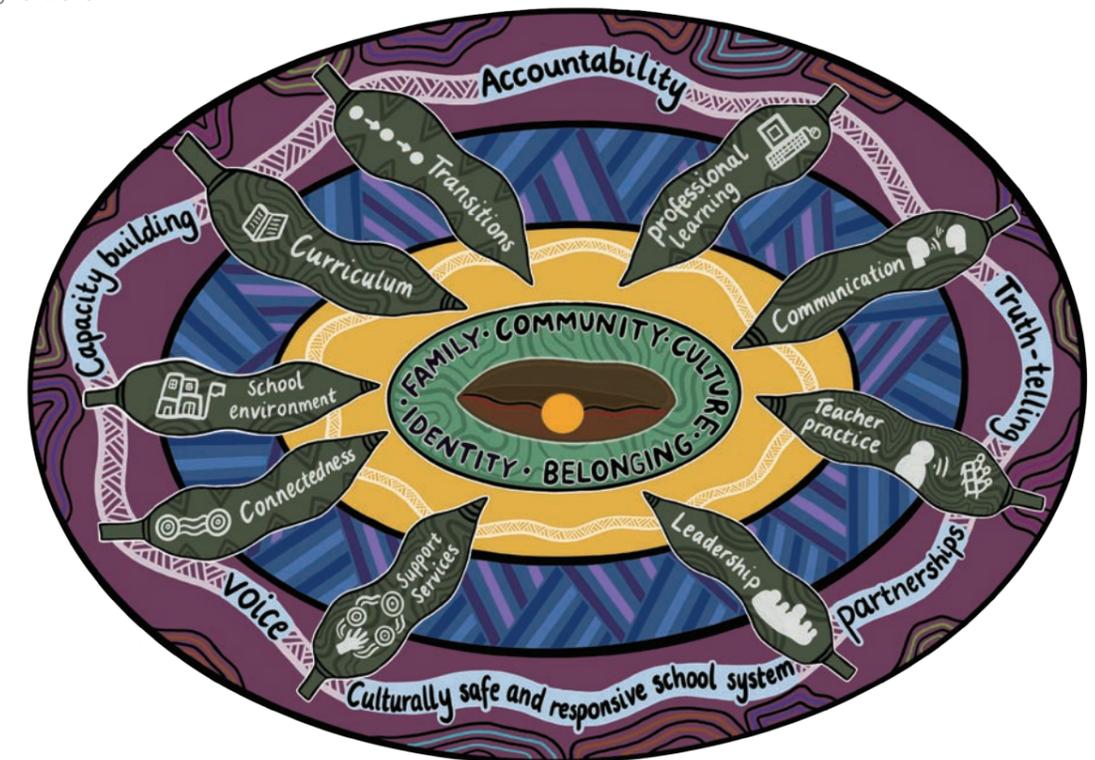
Part 4: Reform Directions

What we heard: Reform Directions

Overwhelmingly, discussions and suggestions for change aligned to one or more of the following themes: **Accountability**, **Partnerships**, **Culturally-Safe** and **Responsive School System**, **Truth-telling**, **Capacity Building** and **Voice**. These are the priority **Reform Directions** for strengthening self-determination across the education system.

Conceptual Framework

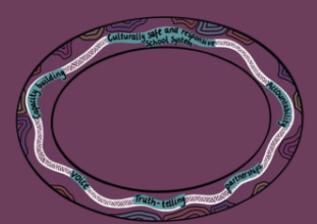
A Conceptual Framework has been developed to illustrate the interconnected and interdependent nature of the feedback and how they inform the department's work moving forward.



The student is at the centre of the reforms. The coolamon represents how their self-determination is strengthened by the **Core Connections** students bring with them to their education - family, community, culture, identity and their sense of belonging - which must be nourished and protected by the education system.



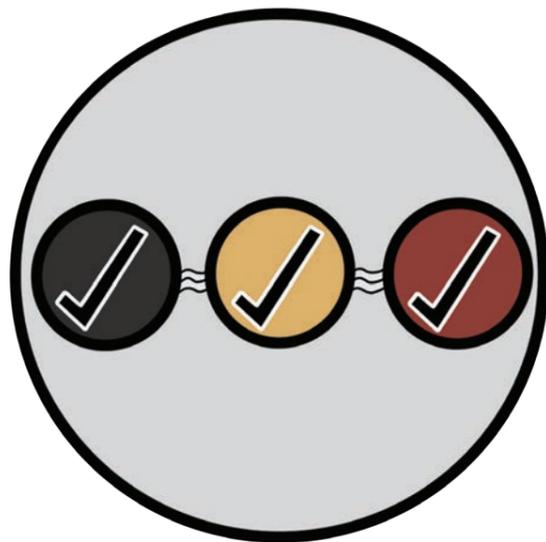
The **Strengthening Factors**, represented through the gum leaves, are the influences that impact a student's learning and wellbeing. They signify how the system contributes to nourishing and protecting a student's Core Connections.



The **Reform Directions** outline the priority areas for strengthening self-determination across the system. The Reform Directions circle through the Strengthening Factors, symbolising areas of growth that will ensure all levels of the system strengthen self-determination and empower Aboriginal learners.

Accountability

Reforming systems, processes and success measures to ensure these are meaningful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and prioritise Aboriginal-led decision-making and governance.



What we heard:

- » Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has not been prioritised as core business for schools and schools have had very little accountability for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.
- » Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education typically relies on teachers who are passionate or committed to working in the space, often depending on the goodwill of staff to lead change.
- » Reporting measures such as NAPLAN and attendance data are regularly used as the main indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student success, but provide little indication of a school's commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.
- » To support community's aspirations for self-determination, the department will need to explore accountability measures and processes that reflect community's expectations of excellence and improvement.

Why it's a priority:

Embedding self-determination in the core business of education requires the transfer of power, decision-making and resources to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The department is accountable to community for enabling this change, and for the learning and wellbeing outcomes and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Victorian school system.

Truth-telling

Ensuring the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and enduring impact/legacy of colonisation on the educational experiences of learners, families and communities are reflected in the teaching of the Victorian Curriculum.



What we heard:

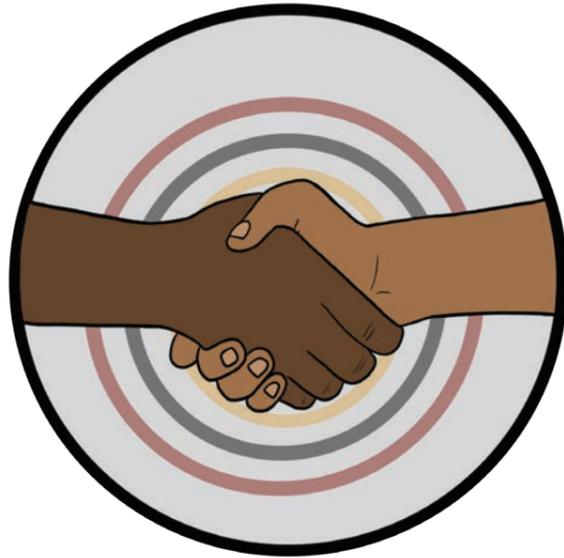
- » Truth-telling, as conceptualised in the Yoorrook Justice Commission, recognises the impacts of colonisation and addresses historic and ongoing injustices.
- » In Victoria, past policies and practices have excluded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the full benefits of the education system, often disempowering learners in their cultural identity and aspirations.
- » The legacies of past policies and practices perpetuate the racism that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still experience from other students, teachers and within the curriculum.
- » Truth-telling creates space for decolonising the system, addressing the intergenerational trauma of past injustices, and supporting healing.

Why it's a priority:

Truth-telling is an essential prerequisite for self-determination and healing, and for creating an education system that is respectful and responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, one that acknowledges and teaches all Victorian students about the shared history of this country and of Victoria.

Partnerships

Formalising and resourcing local partnerships with the Aboriginal community to enable genuine partnerships and shared decision-making.



What we heard:

- » Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is everyone's business; it is not the sole responsibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and community to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes.
- » Respectful, reciprocal, and meaningful partnerships between schools and community significantly improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.
- » When schools recognise the significance and value of working with community, they can provide holistic and targeted support that improves outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.
- » Partnerships between schools and communities establish a space where community is involved in decision-making, strengthening community's ability to exercise self-determination in education.

Why it's a priority:

Self-determination in education and improved wellbeing and learning outcomes are not achievable without strong, respectful, reciprocal, and meaningful decision-making partnerships between the department, schools and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, from the student to the system level.

Culturally safe and responsive school system

Ensuring all schools "establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued". (*Victoria's Child Safe Standards: Standard 1*)



What we heard:

- » A culturally safe and responsive school system is one that recognises, values and celebrates the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.
- » Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel empowered when schools recognise and accept their cultural identity unconditionally, whether that is in teacher practice, the way that culture is represented through the curriculum, or in the physical environment at school.
- » If culture is disrespected, misinterpreted or disregarded, the system creates a space that compromises the emotional and social wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- » A culturally safe and responsive school system continually evolves to ensure it does not diminish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learner's cultural identity, but instils a sense of pride.

Why it's a priority:

Schools should be places where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners are proud to bring their whole selves to and where their cultural identities are demonstratively respected and celebrated through teacher practice, curriculum, and the school environment.





Voice

Embedding processes to ensure Aboriginal voice is heard and acted upon, including through strengthening opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in educational decision-making at local, regional and system levels.



What we heard:

- » Despite exclusionary policies and practices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have always used their voice as self-determining people to advocate for change and improved experiences and outcomes in education.
- » Communities possess the knowledge and lived experience to best understand what allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to thrive, but this wisdom has not always been recognised or respected.
- » The Campfire Conversations have highlighted the importance of creating spaces for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and communities to articulate their experiences, which is an opportunity for schools to listen and reflect on how to evolve as inclusive environments.
- » It is crucial that those voices are not only heard but centred in decision-making that impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners

Why it's a priority:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria are the people best placed to know what works when it comes to achieving better outcomes for their own communities.

Capacity building

Strengthening ongoing capacity and capability building for education staff in areas such as cultural understanding and responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, decolonising the education system, building partnerships that support self-determination, and truth-telling through the curriculum.



What we heard:

- » Capacity building is essential for ensuring that all staff, processes and structures are ready, able and equipped to contribute to a culturally safe and responsive school system.
- » Professional learning, reflective practice and ongoing dialogue will provide opportunities to enhance the cultural responsiveness of education staff, ensuring they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. This will also provide staff with the tools for appropriately addressing and preventing racism.
- » The system should be strengthened to ensure it has the capacity to grow and continue to be responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, including the changes that will be necessitated by Treaty/treaties in Victoria.
- » Long-term commitment from government is required to build the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, so they can meet current and future demand, including significantly increased service demand that will be required as a result of strengthened self-determination in education.

Why it's a priority:

To enable the scale of change required to meet our obligations to strengthen self-determination in education, an equivalent level of ongoing resourcing and capacity building is required across the Reform Directions and Strengthening Factors.

Part 5: Next steps

The Campfire Conversations brought communities, young people and schools together to build a shared understanding of what self-determination is and what it means to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. The process has provided an empowering and meaningful way for building trusting and genuine relationships between learners, families, communities and schools. Campfire Conversations have generated valuable information to enable the department to embed priority areas for strengthening self-determination across the system through the Reform Directions of accountability, partnerships, truth-telling, voice, capacity building, and a culturally safe and responsive school system.

In the next phase of the work, the department will continue to work with community in the co-design and implementation of these Reform Directions, including through:

- » Reforming systems, processes and success measures to ensure these are meaningful to Aboriginal people and prioritise Aboriginal-led decision-making and governance.
- » Ensuring the findings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and enduring impact/legacy of colonisation on the educational experiences of learners, families and communities are reflected in the teaching of the Victorian Curriculum.
- » Embedding processes to ensure Aboriginal voice is heard and acted upon, including through strengthening opportunities for Aboriginal people to participate in educational decision-making at local, regional and system levels.
- » Strengthening ongoing capacity and capability building for education staff in areas such as cultural understanding and responsiveness, trauma-informed practice, decolonising the education system, building partnerships that support self-determination, and truth-telling through the curriculum.
- » Ensuring all schools 'establish a culturally safe environment in which the diverse and unique identities and experiences of Aboriginal children and young people are respected and valued' (Victoria's Child Safe Standards: Standard 1).
- » Formalising and resourcing local partnerships with the Aboriginal community to enable genuine partnership and shared decision-making.

The department is committed to ongoing Campfire Conversations aligned to existing Marrung structures to ensure that any system changes embody the Reform Directions and reflect community's evolving aspirations for self-determination in education.

"We need something tangible to come out of these Campfire Conversations – can't just be another 'sitting at a table with Aboriginal people and asking them – yet again – to tell you what the education system needs."

– School Campfire participant



How will strengthening self-determination in education be measured?

Through Campfire Conversations we heard about the accountability expected by community of schools and of the department, which necessitates alternative and additional ways of measuring success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their education. We also heard of the need for specific indicators to track schools' progress towards creating an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inclusive learning environment and progressing self-determination in education, and the need to hold schools to account for this progress.

Government has historically been the sole decision-maker about what information is collected, why and with whom it is shared, and the department is no exception to this. We heard that data collected by the department and used to track outcomes and measure 'success' does not do justice to the full experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education, nor does it necessarily provide meaningful information on other factors which are important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including social, emotional and cultural wellbeing outcomes.

We heard that government efforts are overwhelmingly focused on 'closing the gap' with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes: however, this does not align with how families and communities view 'success' for their children, which is often more holistic and strengths-based. Commissioner at the Yoorrook Justice Commission and Distinguished Professor, Maggie Walter suggests that government-collected data on Indigenous people are overly focused on '5D Data'; that is data that shows difference, disparity, disadvantage, dysfunction and deprivation. Commissioner Walter suggests "there is no shortage of these type of statistics. If, however, you seek information outside this model you meet a data desert. There are no data that engage more than cursorily with our lifeworlds – that is, the embodied experience of the social, political, historical and cultural realities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives as Indigenous people" (Walter, 2018, 'The voice of indigenous data: Beyond the markers of disadvantage', the *Griffith Review*, p. 256-263).

To date, the emphasis has been on student and cohort performance, not on the school or system performance that is an enabler of student and cohort performance. Campfire participants often cited attendance as an example of this, noting that this is not a learning outcome itself, but is an indicator for a whole raft of things that require contextual understanding (e.g.: school inclusivity, feelings of safety and adequacy of support services).

It is clear that community want to set different measures for success and excellence, for example, measures that recognise cultural strengths and wellbeing, and reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations and ideas of excellence and equity. The concepts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data governance and data sovereignty will assist the mindset change that is required within government to measure progress towards strengthened self-determination.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DATA GOVERNANCE

Maiam nayri Wingara Indigenous Data Sovereignty Collective defines 'Indigenous Data Governance' as "the right of Indigenous peoples to autonomously decide what, how and why Indigenous Data are collected, accessed and used. It ensures that data on or about Indigenous peoples reflects our priorities, values, cultures, worldviews and diversity... Exercising Indigenous Data Governance enables Indigenous peoples, our representative and governing bodies to accurately reflect our stories. It provides the necessary tools to identify what works, what does not and why. Effective Indigenous Data Governance empowers our peoples to make the best decisions to support our communities and First Nations in the ways that meet our development needs and aspirations." (Maiam nayri Wingara, 2018)

"'Indigenous Data Sovereignty' refers to the right of Indigenous peoples to exercise ownership over Indigenous Data. Ownership of data can be expressed through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination and reuse of Indigenous Data." (Maiam nayri Wingara, 2018)

What can schools do now?

Following the initial rollout of Campfire Conversations, many schools are exploring how to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities in achieving self-determination in education. To support self-determination effectively, it is critical for schools to reflect on their current practice before undertaking next steps.

The table below provides schools with a practical tool to assist reflection based on the findings of the Campfire Conversations.

"The school needs to be brave and willing to bring this change... The school needs to organise another campfire to continue the discussion and establish pathways to ensure our responsibility to support self-determination is understood and met."

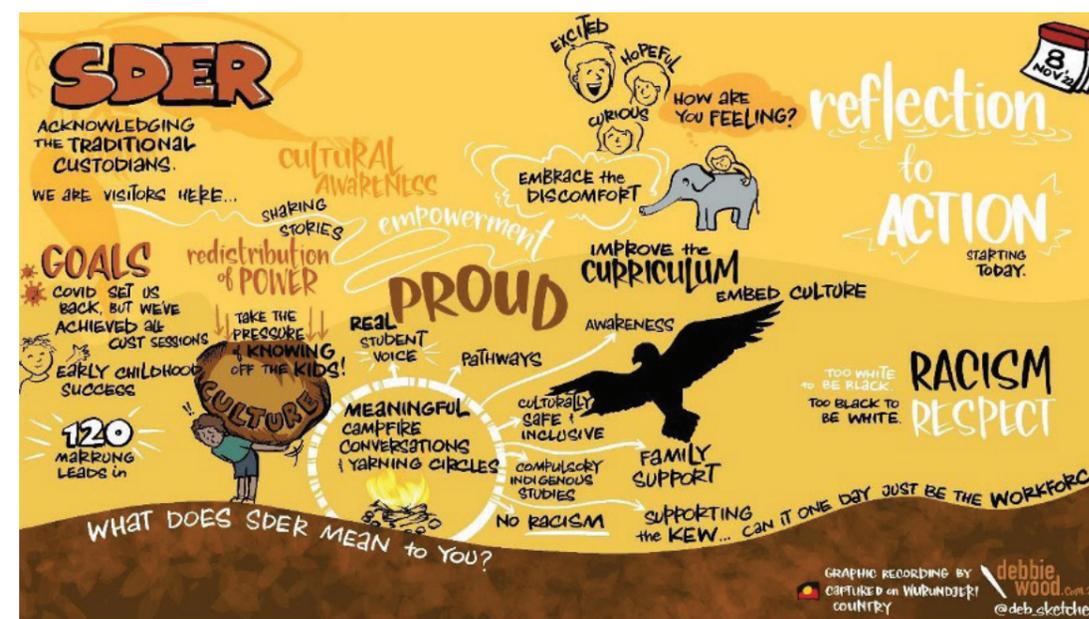
– School Campfire participant

"We are committed to making the campfire a permanent feature in our school. Some of the discussion was around holding yarning events in the future to continue to catch up with families so they can be part of the school more often."

– School Campfire participant

"We as a school are now going to continue with our RAP, and next term reviewing our maths scope and sequence to ensure that we cover Koori perspectives in mathematics. The difference now is that we have families who have offered to support us in these projects. We don't have to navigate this alone."

– School Campfire participant



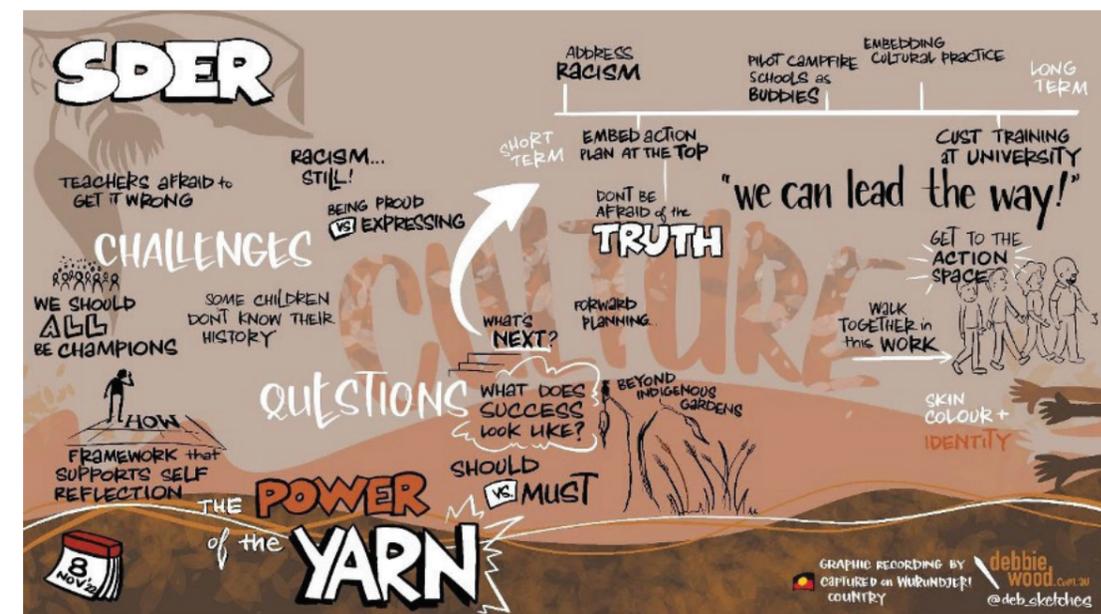
	Reflect on Reform Directions	Possible actions
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is our commitment to strengthening outcomes and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reflected in our Annual Implementation Plan (AIP)/strategic planning? How do all staff demonstrate their shared responsibility in this space? How do we assess ourselves according to community's expectations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise a dedicated Marrung/ Koorie Education focus in Performance and Development Plans (PDP)/AIPs. Appoint a Marrung Champion to support staff with our responsibilities and practice. Work with the KEW and community to identify meaningful success measures.
Truth-telling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does our whole-school curriculum recognise the legacy and ongoing impacts of colonisation? Do all of our subjects highlight the strength, diversity and enduring cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? How do we work with our families and community to ensure we support truth-telling respectfully and authentically? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively seek opportunities to learn about and incorporate the stories and experiences of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community including families. Audit the curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across all learning areas and year levels. Audit library and curriculum resources to ensure the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and experiences are represented. Engage people from your local school community (Traditional Owner group, ACCO, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents/families) to ensure truth-telling is authentic and respectful.
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do our parents want to be involved in their children's education? How do we engage meaningfully with our parents to support their children? How can our school work and partner with local community organisations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host a Campfire Conversation. Include parents and students in the development of IEPs. Invite community to events beyond NAIDOC and Reconciliation Week. Seek advice from the KEW on how to meaningfully and respectfully engage with community (including LAECGs, VAEAI, Traditional Owners). Be mindful of, and seek ways to alleviate, cultural load of those who are regularly sought for their voice and expertise.
Culturally safe and responsive school system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we know if our school is culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? How can we work with our local community to assess the cultural safety of our school? How do we work with the local community to agree and implement actions to increase representation and visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and perspectives throughout the school environment? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt measures to ensure racism is identified, confronted, and not tolerated, and strengthen supports for those who have experienced racism. Develop and maintain policies and structures for reviewing the cultural safety of the school in partnership with community. Partner with community to create yarning circles, Indigenous gardens and culturally safe places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, students, and families to gather. Be mindful of cultural load being placed on Aboriginal students, parents, workforce, and community. Ensure the responsibility to create a culturally safe and responsive school is shared by all at the school and not placed solely on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff/workers.
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we create space for deep listening and storytelling? How do we amplify the voices and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families in our schools? How is our school being responsive to the voices of our local community? How do we utilise the advice of the Koorie Education Workforce in our decision-making? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Host a Campfire Conversation. Facilitate opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to connect and share their perspectives. Actively support opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student representation in decision-making. Promote and support parent/community representation on school council. Employ or engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who can bring cultural knowledge and expertise to the school (e.g., education support, health and wellbeing, Elders in residence, mentors, language teachers).
Capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we support our staff in understanding the learnings from this report? How do we build the knowledge of our staff in identifying and supporting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students? What resources, knowledge and tools are available to build the capacity of our staff? How do we ensure our school is responsive to the aspirations of Treaty? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review/develop our school's CUST action plan. Explore professional learning opportunities hosted by Aboriginal people/organisations (E.g. cultural awareness, trauma and healing etc.) Invite guest speakers from community and local organisations to work with the school. Utilise resources and professional development offered by VAEAI.

What can the department's corporate (central and regional) areas do now?

Central and regional corporate areas also have a responsibility to reflect on practice and actively work to build capacity in order to strengthen self-determination in education, aligned with the Reform Directions. Below are some suggestions that may be useful to guide reflection and possible actions as a starting point.

"I believe it begins from within, by our allies being on a journey of self-reflection, listening deeply to the community, and acknowledging that some unlearning may need to occur along the way."

– Direct Submission



Continuum towards Aboriginal self-determination

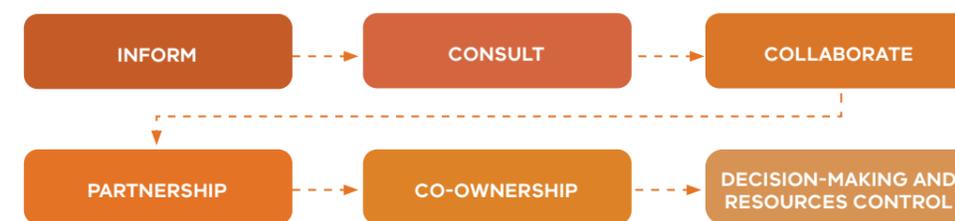


fig: Continuum towards Aboriginal self-determination, VAAF 2018-23, p.3.

	Reflect on Reform Directions	Possible actions
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How is our commitment to strengthening outcomes and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reflected in our Business Plan? How do we demonstrate our shared responsibility in this space? How do we assess ourselves according to community's expectations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include a dedicated Marrung/Aboriginal education/self-determination capability in position descriptions. Appoint a lead staff member to encourage and support other staff with responsibility and practice. Review governance, reporting and accountability arrangements with the view to increasing the opportunity for input from the Aboriginal community and ensuring the measures against which we are measuring success are meaningful to the Aboriginal community.
Truth-telling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do our programs, materials, policies and advice take into consideration the legacy and ongoing impacts of colonisation and actively work to address these? Do our programs, materials, policies and advice highlight the strength, diversity and enduring cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen to the public hearings of the Yoorrook Justice Commission (recordings available on its website). Audit the outputs, programs, materials, policies and advice to ensure inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives across the work of the Division/Area. Explore opportunities to learn about and incorporate the stories and experiences of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community/communities where our office is located, or where our services reach.
Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What formal and informal partnerships do we have with Aboriginal community stakeholders and are these resourced appropriately? How do we engage meaningfully with our Aboriginal community stakeholders? Where does our work with community sit on the Continuum towards self-determination (see fig. above)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore opportunities to formalise and resource partnerships with Aboriginal community stakeholders involved in our work. Be mindful of, and seek ways to alleviate, cultural load of those who are regularly sought for their voice and expertise. Invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues and stakeholders to provide feedback on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> where our work sits on the self-determination Continuum (see fig. above) and how we will know if we are tracking in the right direction.
Culturally safe and responsive school system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we encourage a culturally safe and responsive school system through increasing representation and visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and perspectives in the work that we do? How do we know if our workplace is culturally safe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Do our policies or processes make it harder or easier for schools to create a culturally safe and responsive learning environment? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt measures to ensure racism is identified, confronted and not tolerated. Familiarise ourselves with the vision, objectives and actions of the department's guiding documents relating to Aboriginal education and inclusion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan Dhelk Wukang: Aboriginal Inclusion Plan Aboriginal Employment Plan Discuss how to progress these actions to achieve the vision and objectives of these guiding documents, within our spheres of influence. Be mindful of, and seek ways to alleviate, cultural load of those who are regularly sought for their voice and expertise. Ensure the responsibility to create a culturally safe and responsive system is shared by all and not placed solely on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff/workers.
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we capture and amplify the voices of local Aboriginal community/communities? How do we invite and utilise the input of Aboriginal staff, organisations and community stakeholders in our decision-making? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively support and seek out opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in decision-making. Ensure that recruitment processes encourage employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and foster leadership growth and career pathways.
Capacity building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do we support our staff in understanding the learnings from this report? How do we build the knowledge of ourselves and our staff in identifying and supporting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and working respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations? What resources, knowledge and tools are available to build the capacity of our staff? How do we ensure our work area is responsive to the aspirations of Treaty? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that all staff have access to professional learning opportunities hosted by Aboriginal people/organisations (E.g., cultural awareness, trauma and healing, Indigenous data governance etc.) Include specific Marrung/Aboriginal education/self-determination goals in PDPs and Business Plans. Reach out to the Koorie Outcomes Division and/or the regional Koorie Education Workforce to discuss our work and options to build capacity and capability. Utilise resources and professional development offered by VAEI. Learn about the work and roles of the Victorian Treaty Authority and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria.

What can community do now?

The Campfire Conversations have provided an opportunity for community voice to be heard and centred in conversations around self-determination in education. Community have made it very clear that the Campfire Conversations are only the starting point for discussing self-determination, and that the conversations need to be ongoing.

Community has an important role to play in setting the standards for excellence and defining what self-determination should look like in practice. The Continuum towards Aboriginal self-determination (see fig. above) outlines the process for government to improve and build its capability in strengthening self-determination. The Continuum can be used as a tool for:

- » deciding how community want to be engaged at each stage.
- » determining what each stage of the Continuum should look like in practice.
- » defining how education practice is assessed against the Continuum.



End notes

APPENDIX

Acronyms

- » **ABS** Australian Bureau of Statistics
- » **ACCO** Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation
- » **AIP** Annual Implementation Plan
- » **AITSL** Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
- » **CUST** Community Understanding and Safety Training
- » **IEP** Individual Education Plan
- » **KESO** Koorie Engagement Support Officer
- » **KEW** Koorie Education Workforce
- » **KYC** Koorie Youth Council
- » **LAECG** Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
- » **NAIDOC** National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
- » **NAPLAN** National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
- » **PDP** Performance and Development Plans
- » **RAP** Reconciliation Action Plan
- » **SKIPP** Senior Koories Influencing Practice and Perspectives
- » **UNDRIP** United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- » **VAAF** Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework
- » **VACCA** Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
- » **VACSAL** Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited
- » **VAEAI** Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

Page	Quote	Source	Page	Quote	Source
25	"Self-determination is coming from a community viewpoint here. This is what we are trying to achieve. Not a department viewpoint."	VAEAI Campfire participant	48	"If it's not culturally appropriate, it won't work."	VAEAI Campfire participant
25	"Self-determination is about our local community being able to control our destiny and being appropriately supported to do it."	Engage Victoria submission	48	"[I feel] proud seeing my kids grow up with a sense of pride and being able to have a voice."	Community Campfire participant
25	"To me, self-determination is about our mob participating in decision-making, having a seat at the table, where our voices are respected and listened to. Aboriginal people have been getting up, standing up and showing up for a very long time – it is now time for deep listening. We know what's best for ourselves and our communities and it is time to transfer the power back to our people, so we can be the decision-makers of our own lives."	Themed Campfire participant	48	"Our kinship structure allows us to be part of those conversations, to have a voice on how we can better improve education and the system for our kids."	VAEAI Campfire participant
28	"This is a great opportunity for awareness & appreciation of Aboriginal culture to increase within the school and the wider community."	School Campfire participant	48	"When the school taught Indigenous studies through science and art our child had pride and excitement when she came home."	School Campfire participant
29	"Given the school has the highest number of Aboriginal students in our area, I was surprised when a comment was made that this is the first time they had seen all of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students together in one space..."	School Campfire participant	48	"In early years spaces, there is something every day that says to kids, 'you belong here.'"	Themed Campfire participant
29	"When all the students had returned back to school, it was leadership who started the conversation around the many areas of improvement within their school...it was also noted that the conversation with the students wouldn't end with this campfire, that they understand the importance and want to run campfires throughout the year."	School Campfire participant	48	"Not all kids are struggling academically but you can still have issues with the school culturally."	Community Campfire participant
29	"The school Campfire has created the opportunity for stronger partnership with the Area's KESO (Koorie Engagement Support Officer) workforce. The conversations have given me as a KESO hope that there will be change for our Aboriginal students and their families. The school is sitting by that campfire and ready to listen."	School Campfire participant	48	"Bring in community to help share stories, history and culture. It's about making decisions for ourselves – our own beliefs and values."	Community Campfire participant
32	"We held our campfire yesterday and it was a very humbling and powerful experience for everyone involved."	School Campfire participant	49	"Don't assume Aboriginal [people] know their own family or all about their culture - everyone is at a different level."	School Campfire participant
32	"I like that this is happening. It's been a long time for Aboriginal education, and it gives us a lot of hope for things to change and be better for our children."	Community Campfire participant	49	"Schools are important in valuing every student's identity. That's empowering for each student."	School Campfire participant
32	"The conversations in the car ride back to school were really nice to hear and the students also expressed their appreciation in being included in the event."	Area Young People Workshop	49	"[We want] students and communities [to] understand that we are human beings, just like them."	School Campfire participant
32	"It was an incredible evening to be a part of. The overall sentiment was what can we do now to promote self-determination in our community rather than waiting for any government report... There was also a unanimous agreement to hold another campfire in term 2 and ensure the other principals in the area attend as well."	School Campfire participant	50	"People don't realise how damaging it is to do nothing."	Themed Campfire participant
47	"Children in care are often not connected outside of school and schools need to be mindful and aware of this."	Themed Campfire participant	50	"Racism policy. Consulting with students as many teachers do not understand soft racism like we do."	Area Young People workshop
47	"I am Aboriginal, and I don't know enough about my culture. It makes me sad."	School Campfire participant	51	"(When was the last time you experienced casual racism?) 'Today. I told them I was coming to this event and that I was Aboriginal, and they said, 'No you're not'...because I have lighter skin.'"	Area Young People workshop
47	"I feel judged and shamed for missing school."	Area Young People Workshop	51	"Why would you get a complaint about racism and then decide it isn't? It is not coming from a place of respect and concern for people's suffering. There has to be a culture of care and support for people to lean in and help with this topic."	Themed Campfire participant
			52	"In 5 years, we want to be sitting here and not hearing that person's grandson is experiencing racism. We don't want to be hearing that some schools are still refusing to engage in CUST."	VAEAI Campfire participant
			52	"Teachers need to have training around intergenerational trauma and its impacts - loss of culture, disconnection; and the ongoing impact for children in care."	Themed Campfire participant
			85	"Let's move beyond tokenism."	School Campfire participant



Department
of Education

