

## **Submission - First Nations Education Policy Consultation**

**Submitted by:**  
**Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)**

### **Introduction**

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the new First Nations Education Policy. APPA represents primary school principals across Australia who are responsible for the day-to-day leadership of schools and who work in partnership with First Nations students, families and communities to support learning, wellbeing and belonging.

APPA strongly supports a national policy that moves beyond aspiration to action, embeds the Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and delivers sustained, system-level change. Primary principals are uniquely positioned to provide insight into what is required to translate national commitments into culturally safe, responsive and effective practice in schools.

This submission draws on APPA's position papers, research, and the lived experience of school leaders to outline what must be included to positively impact the educational experiences and outcomes of First Nations learners.

-oOo-

### **Aligning National Commitments with Action**

APPA supports the Policy's intent to translate key national commitments into tangible action, including:

- The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020);
- The *Mparntwe* Education Declaration;
- Better and Fairer Schools Agreements (2025–2034);
- The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy; and
- The Universities Accord.

To be effective, the First Nations Education Policy must:

- Explicitly embed the four Priority Reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap as non-negotiable foundations;
- Clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of governments, systems and education settings;
- Be supported by resourcing, workforce capability building, and accountability mechanisms; and
- Be adaptable to local contexts while maintaining strong national coherence.

Progress against education targets demonstrates that while gains have been made, structural barriers persist. A fundamentally different approach is required - one that centres First Nations voices, self-determination and strengths.

## Core Principles

APPA recommends the Policy be underpinned by the following principles:

- **First Nations self-determination:** First Nations peoples must have decision-making authority in matters that affect them.
- **Cultural safety, responsiveness and capability:** These must be defined, resourced and embedded in everyday practice, not treated as optional or additional.
- **Strengths-based approaches:** Policies and practices must recognise and value the cultural capital of First Nations learners, educators and communities and enable strategy to be adapted in place.
- **Shared accountability:** Responsibility for change must sit with governments and systems, not be placed on schools or individuals alone. This includes evaluation of the effectiveness of the policy design as too often the evaluation focuses on implementation 'effectiveness'.
- **Sustained change:** Long-term commitment, not short-term programs, is required to shift outcomes.

## Responses to General Questions in the Discussion Paper

### 1. Changes within education settings that would have the greatest positive impact

APPA believes the most significant changes would include:

- Embedding culturally responsive and locally informed curriculum and pedagogy across all learning areas, and providing principals and teachers with time, professional learning and system-level support to do this work well.
- Ensuring schools are culturally safe environments, free from racism and deficit-based narratives- this includes system messaging to the broader community, modelling of the behaviours we want to see and support for school staff to stand strong in the face of racism.
- Strengthening partnerships with First Nations families, Elders and community organisations as co-designers, not consultees and providing time to do this. Share positive case studies with schools.
- Increasing the presence and influence of First Nations educators and staff in schools.
- Providing principals and teachers with time, professional learning and system-level support to do this work well.

These changes require enabling conditions created by systems, including resourcing, policy alignment, review and accountability.



## 2. Initial four focus areas

APPA supports the four initial focus areas identified by the department and believe they appropriately reflect the priorities required for change. APPA emphasises that these focus areas are deeply interconnected and must be addressed simultaneously rather than in isolation.

## 3. Ensuring long-lasting change

To create lasting change, the Policy must:

- Be embedded in legislation, agreements and funding models where possible;
- Include clear implementation plans with defined roles and timelines;
- Establish evaluation measures that value cultural safety, relationships and wellbeing alongside academic outcomes and report on these to the profession;
- Invest in workforce capability, particularly in principal preparation so they are confident to be instructional and community leaders; and
- Be built ongoing partnership with First Nations communities in monitoring and review (which should include the inclusion of questions about cultural safety in school parent and student surveys).

### ***Focus Area One: Embedding Culturally Responsive Curriculum and Teaching Practices***

#### **Key considerations**

To ensure curriculum and teaching practices reflect First Nations cultures, voices, needs and aspirations, APPA recommends:

- Strengthening curriculum implementation through locally developed content in partnership with First Nations communities;
- Supporting schools to move beyond tokenistic inclusion to deep engagement with First Nations knowledges and ways of knowing; and
- Ensuring cultural responsiveness is embedded in teaching and principal preparation and standards, professional learning and performance processes.

#### **Effective programs and initiatives**

Effective initiatives share common elements:

- Co-design with First Nations educators, Elders and community members;
- Long-term relationships rather than short-term projects and allocation of the commensurate system and financial commitments for a generational commitment to improvement (25 years);
- Adequate resourcing and system support; and
- Alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and wellbeing supports.



## **Additional supports needed**

Teachers, teaching assistants and principals require:

- Ongoing, high-quality professional learning in cultural capability and responsiveness that is prioritised by systems until embedded;
- Access to First Nations expertise and mentoring;
- Time to build relationships with families and communities;
- Clear guidance and backing from systems when challenging racism or deficit thinking; and
- Clear system messaging to the broader community, backed up with supportive responses.

## **Focus Area Two: Improving Access, Linkages and Transitions**

### **Involvement of First Nations learners and communities**

APPA strongly supports:

- Formal structures for First Nations community input into program design, implementation and review;
- Valuing community knowledge as expertise; and
- Removing administrative and systemic barriers to genuine partnership.

### **Supporting access and transitions**

To improve transitions across the learning continuum, APPA recommends:

- Stronger continuity between early learning, primary, secondary and post-school pathways;
- Targeted transition support for students and families, building on successful programs and sharing this learning widely; and
- Coordinated planning across sectors and systems.

### **Connections with external services**

Education outcomes are inextricably linked to health, housing and social supports. Schools cannot address these challenges alone. APPA calls for:

- Integrated service models that wrap around learners and families;
- Clear pathways for collaboration between education and other sectors, showcasing of collaborative thinking and memorandums of agreement (MOU's) that reduce fragmentation and enable collaboration to be sustainable beyond the life of individual participants; and
- Recognition of the role principals play as connectors, without adding unsustainable workload.



## ***Focus Area Three: Creating Culturally Safe Learning and Working Environments***

### **Effective approaches**

Culturally safe environments are created when:

- First Nations peoples define what safety looks like and regular check-ins to ensure safety is maintained;
- Racism and the dominance of whiteness are actively addressed; and
- School policies, practices and behaviours align with stated values.

### **Supports required**

APPA recommends:

- System-wide expectations and accountability for cultural safety;
- Access to expert advice and culturally informed support;
- Clear processes for responding to racism and offensive behaviours; and
- Support for principals who are leading this work in complex environments (could include provision of additional admin time, professional learning and mentoring).

## ***Focus Area Four: Transforming Education Organisations***

### **Whole-of-school perspective**

At the school level, transformation requires:

- Leadership commitment to cultural responsiveness and safety and inclusion;
- Inclusion of First Nations perspectives in governance structures;
- Alignment between vision, curriculum, wellbeing and community engagement; and
- Reducing the cultural burden on First Nations staff, while recognising and valuing the cultural assets they bring to schools.

### **System-level perspective**

At the system level, APPA calls for:

- A deep inquiry into the problem before policy co-design, followed by coherent alignment across education, workforce and funding agreements;
- Data collection and reporting that reflects what matters to First Nations communities; and
- Investment in leadership preparation, capability and stability.



## **Measuring success**

Success should be measured through:

- Improved experiences of cultural safety as defined by First Nations learners and families, and measured via data gathered in surveys for that purpose;
- Stronger engagement and attendance;
- Improved transitions and post-school pathways; and
- Increased representation of First Nations educators and leaders.

## **Accountability**

Education systems must be accountable to First Nations peoples through:

- Transparent reporting against commitments that have been co-designed with the First Nation community;
- Ongoing partnership and shared decision-making; and
- Independent evaluation informed by First Nations perspectives.

-o0o-

## **Final Comments**

APPA strongly supports the development of a First Nations Education Policy that is bold, actionable and grounded in self-determination.

Primary principals stand ready to work alongside First Nations communities, governments and systems to realise a future where all First Nations learners are respected, represented and supported to thrive.

APPA looks forward to continued consultation and collaboration as the Policy is refined and implemented.

-o0o-

Angela Falkenberg  
APPA President  
4 February 2026

