

Chapter 1

Introduction

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010 – 2014* (the Plan) is a national plan that commits all governments in Australia to a unified approach to closing the gap in education outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

It was developed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) as part of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG's) reform agenda to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

The Plan reflects commitments by governments to introduce substantial structural and innovative reforms in early childhood education and schooling as outlined in National Agreements between all governments.

Background

History

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* is Australia's national policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The policy features 21 national goals for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training, which were endorsed by all Australian governments when the policy was launched in 1989. The overarching objective of this policy is about bringing equity in education and training outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000* supported this objective with outcomes attained, through the provision of funding under this Act, being reported annually in a National Report to Parliament.

Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005 – 2008 provided recommendations to focus national effort over the 2005–2008 quadrennium through recommendations intended to accelerate the pace of change by engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in learning.

During 2009, a review was conducted to determine the effectiveness of *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* in improving outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and a report prepared for

MCEECDYA. The report included recommendations on priorities for future collaborative work to be undertaken by education authorities in the government, Catholic and independent school sectors.

The Plan was developed taking into consideration the findings and recommendations of this review.

Overarching National Agenda

The *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (NIRA) was agreed by COAG in November 2008. The agreement:

- commits all jurisdictions to achieving the *Closing the Gap targets*
- spells out an integrated strategy for achieving the targets in urban and regional areas, as well as in remote Australia
- defines responsibilities and promotes accountability among governments
- notes the significant funding provided through Indigenous-specific *National Partnerships* to assist in meeting the targets
- links to other National Agreements and National Partnerships for all Australians that include elements addressing the *Closing the Gap targets*.

The targets to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are:

- to close the life-expectancy gap within a generation
- to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- to ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities within five years
- to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade
- to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

Overarching Bilateral Indigenous Plans agreed between the Australian Government and each State and Territory, underpin cooperative work to realise the commitments and objectives made under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, by:

- incorporating implementation plans developed under all Indigenous-specific National Partnerships
- progressing implementation of the National Urban and Regional Service Delivery Strategy for Indigenous Australians
- clearly articulating activities that the Australian Government, States and Territories will undertake to improve data required under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement
- establishing bilateral governance mechanisms.

National School Education Agenda

The *National Education Agreement (NEA)* contains objectives, outcomes, outputs and performance indicators, and clarifies the roles and responsibilities, that guide the Australian Government and States and Territories in the delivery of services. Through this Agreement, all governments commit to the objective that all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy. This objective will also be pursued through the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*

The NEA is one of six National Agreements that provide an improved focus on accountability for better outcomes and service delivery. The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) is another of these six agreements, all of which comprise one of the schedules under the Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations.

Another schedule under the Intergovernmental Agreement is National Partnerships. National Partnership payments are a mechanism to:

- support the delivery of specified outputs or projects
- to facilitate reforms

- to reward those jurisdictions that deliver on nationally significant reforms.

The Australian Government and State and Territory governments have entered into the Smarter Schools National Partnerships aimed at addressing disadvantage, supporting teachers and school leaders and improving literacy and numeracy. Schools participating in the Smarter Schools National Partnerships will identify reform activities and the progress of those activities in their school level plans.

Additionally, a national *Australian Curriculum* for schools in all States and Territories of Australia, from the year prior to Year 1 to Year 12, is currently being developed. The *Australian Curriculum* will set out the core knowledge, understanding, skills and general capabilities important for all Australian students. The first stages are scheduled to commence in 2012.

Purpose

The purpose of the Plan is to assist education providers to accelerate improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

The Plan seeks to progress the goals of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* and the *Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals of Young Australians*, and is part of a broader Council of Australian Government's reform agenda for school education that will contribute to closing the gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers. It outlines how the MCEECDYA will work to achieve the *Closing the Gap* targets. Non-government education providers have agreed to join with governments to achieve these targets and progress actions outlined in the Plan. It is acknowledged that this sector includes providers that operate autonomously as they are not part of a system authority and will therefore require a more flexible approach.

Commitments made in National Partnerships and National Agreements are brought together in the Plan with a number of new and continuing complementary measures to close the gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students.

Structure of the Plan

The Plan identifies fifty-five national, systemic and local level actions in six priority domains – Readiness for School; Engagement and Connections; Attendance; Literacy and Numeracy; Leadership, Quality Teaching and Workforce Development; and Pathways to Real Post-school Options – that evidence shows will contribute to improved outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These priorities and actions will guide effort over the next five years.

In addition to the actions nominated for each level, the Plan details the desired outcomes, as well as targets and performance indicators for each of the domains. Progress will be monitored by examining progress against the targets and performance indicators and implementation of actions.

Responsibilities

Ministers for each State and Territory are responsible for the outcomes noted in the Plan.

To achieve these outcomes:

- government and non-government schools, and in particular focus schools, are responsible for implementing local level actions
- States and Territories will monitor and report progress against local level actions and implement, monitor and report progress against systemic actions
- the Indigenous Education Consultative Body in each State and Territory will work with the community to support the implementation of actions and provide advice through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group

- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group, on behalf of MCEECDYA, will ensure that the national collaborative actions within the Plan are addressed, and compile an annual report, for Ministers, on progress toward achieving the national targets and outcomes outlined in the Plan.

Focus Schools

A key group of schools called ‘focus schools’ have been identified. Focus schools are those schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the greatest need and where effort should be focused to make the greatest difference. States and Territories identified focus schools using a three-tier process, which is detailed in the Plan. By monitoring and taking action in focus schools, the benefits of national reforms will reach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. More effective use of resources will support the closing the gap targets. Focus schools will begin implementing actions outlined in the Plan during 2011, with all actions established as part of school planning processes by the end of the 2011 academic year.

While the Plan is for all schools and sectors, the role of the focus school is to implement specific local level actions in the Plan. For example, Action 20: Focus schools will commence establishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family forums in 2011 through school and community partnership agreements, with terms of reference and operating guidelines jointly developed by schools, staff and families.

Reporting

An annual national report for the Plan will be produced within 12 months of the end of the calendar year in scope. The report will be published on the MCEECDYA website.