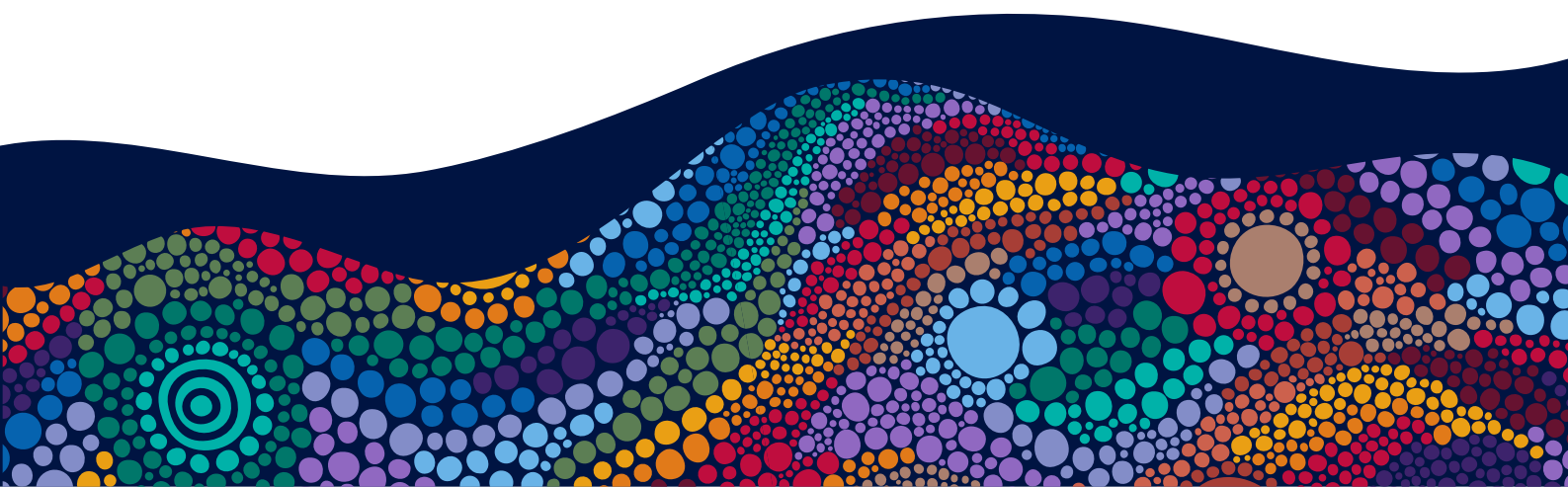


Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

Submission to the Standing Committee on
Education

June 2026



About NACCHO

NACCHO is the national peak body representing 148 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs). We also assist a number of other community-controlled organisations.

The first Aboriginal medical service was established at Redfern in 1971 as a response to the urgent need to provide decent, accessible health services for the largely medically uninsured Aboriginal population of Redfern. The mainstream was not working. So it was, that over fifty years ago, Aboriginal people took control and designed and delivered their own model of health care. Similar Aboriginal medical services quickly sprung up around the country. In 1974, a national representative body was formed to represent these Aboriginal medical services at the national level. This has grown into what NACCHO is today. All this predated Medibank in 1975.

NACCHO liaises with its membership, and the eight state/territory affiliates, governments, and other organisations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing policy and planning issues and advocacy relating to health service delivery, health information, research, public health, health financing and health programs.

ACCHOs range from large multi-functional services employing several medical practitioners and providing a wide range of services, to small services which rely on Aboriginal health practitioners and/or nurses to provide the bulk of primary health care services. Our 148 members provide services from about 550 clinics. Our sector provides over 3.1 million episodes of care per year for over 410,000 people across Australia, which includes about one million episodes of care in very remote regions.

ACCHOs contribute to improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing through the provision of comprehensive primary health care, and by integrating and coordinating care and services. Many provide home and site visits; medical, public health and health promotion services; allied health; nursing services; assistance with making appointments and transport; help accessing childcare or dealing with the justice system; drug and alcohol services; and help with income support. Our services build ongoing relationships to give continuity of care so that chronic conditions are managed, and preventative health care is targeted. Through local engagement and a proven service delivery model, our clients 'stick'. Clearly, the cultural safety in which we provide our services is a key factor of our success.

ACCHOs are also closing the employment gap. Collectively, we employ about 7,000 staff – 54 per cent of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders – which makes us the third largest employer of Aboriginal or Torres Strait people in the country.

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Recommendations

NACCHO recommends:

- 1 Any interventions to address factors driving educational attainment align with the National Agreement and its four Priority Reform Areas.
- 2 Investment in upskilling primary health staff in otitis media surveillance and ensuring access to specialist referral programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-4. This includes access to audiology, ENT, and speech therapy services to support early identification, intervention, and improved developmental outcomes.
- 3 Investment in cultural and language programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- 4 Bilingual schooling is prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- 5 Cultural responsiveness training for non-Indigenous students and teaching staff.
- 6 Further funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child protection services, to increase diversion rate, lowering the number of children in out of home care and therefore improve educational outcomes.
- 7 National data collections on schooling outcomes use culturally adapted assessments to ensure student potential is accurately captured.
- 8 Sustained, long-term funding for the ACCRTO sector to continue delivering high quality, culturally appropriate training.
- 9 A specific health-related VET in schools national program is funded and implemented.
- 10 Funding to develop further VET to higher education pathways for ACCHO workers.

Acknowledgements

NACCHO welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment. NACCHO would like to acknowledge the valuable input received to this submission. NACCHO supports the submissions to this consultation made by NACCHO Members and Affiliates.

National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Advocating for and securing the National Agreement on Closing the Gap was an historically significant act of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination. The National Agreement is evidence of a new era of engagement by and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It commits Australia to a new direction and is a pledge from all governments to fundamentally change the way they work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations – to support self-determination and build the capacity of the community-control sector.

This Government's first Closing the Gap Implementation Plan commits to achieving Closing the Gap targets *through implementation of the Priority Reforms*. This represents a shift away from focussing on the Targets, towards the structural changes that the Priority Reforms require, and which are more likely to achieve meaningful outcomes for our people in the long term.

The reforms and targets outlined in the National Agreement seek to overcome the inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and achieve life outcomes equal to all Australians. Governments at all levels have committed to the implementation of the National Agreement's four Priority Reform Areas, which offer a roadmap to meaningfully impact structural drivers of poor health and social outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Priority Reform Area 1 – Formal partnerships and shared decision-making

This Priority Reform commits to building and strengthening structures that empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share decision-making authority with governments, and to accelerate policy making that centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

Priority Reform Area 2 – Building the community-controlled sector

Recognising that community-controlled services achieve better outcomes, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are often preferred over mainstream services, this Priority Reform commits to building Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sectors to deliver services to support Closing the Gap.

Priority Reform Area 3 – Transformation of mainstream institutions

This Priority Reform commits to systemic and structural transformation of government organisations to identify and eliminate racism, embed and practice cultural safety, deliver services in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, support truth telling about agencies' history with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and engage fully and transparently with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when programs are being changed.

Priority Reform Area 4 – Sharing data and information to support decision making

This Priority Reform commits to shared access to regional data and information to inform local-decision making and support achievement of the first three Priority Reforms. This Priority Reform supports principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Despite some progress, the need for fundamental systemic reform remains evident. In its first review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the Productivity Commission found that governments are not adequately delivering on their commitments. Despite support for the Priority Reforms and some good practice, progress has been slow, uncoordinated, and piecemeal.



The Commission noted that to enable better outcomes, governments need to relinquish some control, share decision making and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know what is best for their communities. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations must be treated as critical partners rather than passive funding recipients, and trusted to design, deliver and measure government services in ways that are culturally safe and meaningful for their communities.

“Too many government agencies are implementing versions of shared decision-making that involve consulting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on a pre-determined solution, rather than collaborating on the problem and co-designing a solution”¹

NACCHO recommends any interventions to address factors driving educational attainment align with the National Agreement and its four Priority Reform Areas.

Background

The Inquiry is considering factors responsible for the differences between and among boys and girls in relation to various areas of education. However, there are several other educational inequities that worth attention.

In order to elevate educational attainment for all students, focus should be on low performing students. Decades of long-term policy focus has resulted in improved educational outcomes for girls. In 2024, females made up 62% of the domestic cohort beginning their higher education (252,590 females began their studies, and 158,103 males).² Other students, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, now require this same policy focus.

Historical background

Through the process of colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were subjected to laws or ‘protections’, the true aim of which was the genocide of Aboriginal people.³ Government mandated ‘protections’ extended to the removal of children. Governments forcibly removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities to attend segregated ‘training’ institutions, to then work for colonial settlers.⁴

¹ Productivity Commission, Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, Study Report, Canberra, 7 Feb 2024 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report>.

² Department of Education, Key findings from the 2024 Higher Education Student Statistics, February 2026, <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2024-student-data/key-findings-2024-higher-education-student-statistics>

³ Australian Museum, Genocide in Australia, July 2022, <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/genocide-in-australia/>.

⁴ John Ramsland in National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Bringing them home, 1997 https://humanrights.gov.au/bringing-them-home/sites/default/files/documents/bringing_them_home_report.pdf.

“...the ability of schools to exclude Aboriginal children led to the creation of a separate and inferior system of education for Aboriginal children across NSW. This system sanctioned a debased curriculum that focused on teaching manual skills under the assumption that Aboriginal people would be better suited to work as domestic labour for ‘white’ masters or employers.”⁵

Segregation in education continued throughout the 20th century. In New South Wales, “until 1972 school principals could and did exclude Aboriginal children from schools on the ground of ‘home condition’ or ‘substantial (community) opposition’”.⁶ This has led to continued disparity.

Data on adult language, literacy, numeracy and digital skills is scarce,⁷ however emerging evidence suggests that levels of literacy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is low. Research from the Literacy for Life Foundation estimates that between 40 and 65 per cent of Aboriginal adults are functionally illiterate in English.⁸

Closing the Gap in education

There are 5 Closing the Gap targets that directly relate to education:

- Target 3: By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education to 95 per cent.
- Target 4: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent.
- Target 5: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent.
- Target 6: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent.
- Target 7: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 per cent.⁹

Progress towards the Closing the Gap targets is complex. While there is mixed progress towards the targets, and there remains a gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people across all targets except Target 3.

	Most recent data	Nationally	Details
Target 3	In 2024, 94.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of the correct age were enrolled in a preschool program.	Nationally, the target shows good improvement and is on track to be met.	Although nationally the target is on track, Northern Territory is worsening. ¹⁰

⁵ Burrridge, N., Chodkiewicz, A. (2012). An Historical Overview of Aboriginal Education Policies in the Australian Context. In: Burrridge, N., Whalan, F., Vaughan, K. (eds) Indigenous Education. Transgressions, vol 86. SensePublishers, Rotterdam.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-888-9>.

⁶ National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, Bringing them home, 1997
https://humanrights.gov.au/bringing-them-home/sites/default/files/documents/bringing_them_home_report.pdf.

⁷ Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Don't take it as read: Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, March 2022,
https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/024806/toc_pdf/Don'ttakeitasread.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf.

⁸ Literacy for Life, Goal: To Read to my kids, <https://www.lflf.org.au/>.

⁹ Closing the Gap, Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>.

¹⁰ Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socio-economic outcome area 3 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years,
<https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/early-childhood-education/>.

	Most recent data	Nationally	Details
Target 4	In 2024, 33.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed were considered developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains.	Nationally, the target is worsening.	However, there is improvement towards the target for Victoria and Queensland. ¹¹
Target 5	In 2021, 68.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–24 years had attained Year 12 or equivalent qualification.	Nationally, the target shows improvement but is not on track to be met.	There is improvement across all jurisdictions. ¹²
Target 6	In 2021, 47.0% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–34 years had completed non-school qualifications of Certificate III or above	Nationally, the target shows improvement but is not on track to be met.	There is improvement across all jurisdictions. ¹³
Target 7	In 2021, 58.0% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15–24 years were fully engaged in employment, education or training.	Nationally, the target shows improvement but is not on track to be met.	While most jurisdictions are improving, South Australia and the Northern Territory are worsening. ¹⁴

Health and educational attainment

A broad range of structural and social factors (social determinants) influence health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Entrenched cycles of poverty, exacerbated by poor education, housing and employment outcomes and increased interaction with the justice system contribute significantly to poorer health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) notes that the links between socioeconomic disadvantages such as poverty, social dysfunction and exclusion, stress, racism and poor health are well established.¹⁵ This is true across urban, regional and remote areas. The consequent disparity in health outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians remains significant – 34 per cent of the health gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous Australians is attributable to social determinant factors.¹⁶

¹¹ Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socio-economic outcome area 4 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/children-thriving/>.

¹² Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socio-economic outcome area 5 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/student-learning-potential/>.

¹³ Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socio-economic outcome area 6 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach their full potential through further education pathways, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/further-education-pathways/>.

¹⁴ Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socio-economic outcome area 7 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are engaged in employment or education, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/youth-engagement/>.

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2.09 Index of disadvantage, <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-09-index-disadvantage>.

¹⁶ AIHW, Determinants of health for Indigenous Australians 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/social-determinants-and-indigenous-health>.

Case study: Hearing and education

Health can also impact educational attainment. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities experience a significantly higher burden of ear disease, particularly Otitis Media, which contributes to substantial health, social and economic impacts. Nationally, Medicare spends an estimated \$100–\$600 million each year on treating otitis media, yet the burden of this condition is more than five times higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than for non-Indigenous Australians.¹⁷

Children are disproportionately affected. Between 2022–24, 79% of all ear-related hospital procedures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were for children aged 0–14.¹⁸ Overall, 43% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 7 and over have measurable hearing loss.¹⁹

Children with ear disease can sustain hearing loss that leads to learning difficulties, such as speech delays. There can also be resulting communication difficulties, developmental delays, low self-esteem and educational challenges.²⁰ This can include difficulties adjusting to school and symptoms of poor social and adaptive functioning.²¹ Children with hearing loss are often identified or referred as having behavioural issues at pre- and primary-school.

The HAPEE Program led by Hearing Australia and various state led programs screen hearing for school aged children. However, despite the high prevalence of hearing disease, newborn hearing screening rates remain slightly lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies than for non-Indigenous babies. Fewer infants diagnosed with hearing loss are fitted with hearing aids within their first year of life. Rates of loss to follow-up after screening or diagnosis are also higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.²²

To address this unmet need, there remains a need for ear and hearing health workforce development. This includes:

- Investment in the upskilling of registered and regulated MBS providers such as Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Practitioners who are already delivering ear and hearing health services.
- Strengthen coordination mechanisms across existing stakeholders to ensure effective information sharing and minimise duplication of effort.
- Where possible, responsibility for coordinating and acting on these outcomes should be appropriately resourced and centred with ACCHOs, supporting community-led, culturally informed decision-making and service delivery.

¹⁷ Taylor, P. S., Faeth, I., Marks, M. K., Del Mar, C. B., Skull, S. A., Pezzullo, M. L., Havyatt, S. M., & Coates, H. (2009). Cost of treating otitis media in Australia. *Expert review of pharmacoeconomics and outcomes research*, 9(2), 133-141. <https://research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/publications/cost-of-treating-otitis-media-in-australia/>.

¹⁸ AIHW, Ear and hearing health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 2025, December 2025, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/ear-hearing-health-indigenous-2025/contents/summary>.

¹⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, November 2024, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-survey/latest-release>.

²⁰ Gotis-Graham, A., Macniven, R., Kong, K. & Gwynne, K. (2020). Effectiveness of ear, nose and throat outreach programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: a systematic review. *BMJ Open*, 10(11), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-038273>.

²¹ Deafness Forum Australia, Closing The Gap: Addressing the hearing health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the criminal justice system, March 2023, <https://www.deafnessforum.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Addressing-the-hearing-health-of-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Peoples-in-the-criminal-justice-system.pdf>.

²² ABS, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey, November 2024, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/national-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-survey/latest-release>.

NACCCCHO recommends investment in upskilling primary health staff in otitis media surveillance and ensuring access to specialist referral programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-4. This includes access to audiology, ENT, and speech therapy services to support early identification, intervention, and improved developmental outcomes.

Addressing the impacts of structural and social determinants of health requires structural reform and a strong intergovernmental response in partnership with the Aboriginal community-controlled sector.

School

Mainstream care and education systems have often excluded and been culturally unsafe for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.²³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families continue to experience the impacts of forced removal of children, systemic and interpersonal racism and exclusion, all of which undermine trust and subsequently engagement in government services and systems.²⁴ Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students speak English as an additional language or dialect. However, there is little help for these children.²⁵

Eliminating racism, embedding cultural safety, and improving engagement and partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities is essential to ensure accessibility to and engagement with services. Early, targeted support for children and families that is culturally appropriate and trauma informed is crucial to minimising adverse outcomes that greatly impact a child's life course.

“Policies, research and teaching often disregard the misalignment between western education structures and First Nations cultural practices, values and beliefs.”²⁶

This serves to sideline Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Additionally, systemic and interpersonal racism in the schooling system is known to affect student attendance and morale. This can manifest itself as a teacher who does not understand cultural sensitivity, or lowered expectations for certain students. Racially motivated bullying is a frequent experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.²⁷

Resources such as the Australian High school Anti-Racism Kit, the AIATSIS Education Strategy 2021-2025 and the Know Your Country initiative provide examples of initiatives that can be used to build schools' cultural competency and racial literacy.²⁸

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, language is crucial in connection to land, culture and ancestors.²⁹ The importance of language is echoed in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap's Target 16 – by 2031, there is a sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.

In some schools, local staff are employed to help facilitate communication between teachers and students. In a small number of remote communities, schools offer bilingual programs – using multiple languages to teach

²³ National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition, The School Exclusion Project, <https://www.niyec.com/the-school-exclusion-project>.

²⁴ SNAICC, Family Matters Report 2025, <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Family-Matters-Report-2025-v3.pdf>.

²⁵ Office for the Arts, National Indigenous Languages Report, 2020, <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-indigenous-languages-report-lowres.pdf>.

²⁶ Australian Education Research Organisation, Cultural responsiveness in education, September 2025, <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/summaries-explainers/research-summaries/cultural-responsiveness-education>.

²⁷ Biddle, N., and Priest, N., Racism hits Indigenous students' attendance and grades, Australian National University College of Arts & Social Sciences, October 2015, <https://cass.anu.edu.au/news/racism-hits-indigenous-students-attendance-and-grades>.

²⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission, Racism. It stops with me: Can I be sure my child won't experience racism at school?, <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/ask-yourself-hard-questions/question-and-context/can-i-be-sure-my-child-wont-experience-racism-school>.

²⁹ First Languages Australia, Why maintain our languages?, <https://www.firstlanguages.org.au/why-maintain-our-languages>.

subject areas such as maths, science, history or geography, rather than only learning language as a subject.³⁰ These schools assist students to learn while building student confidence and deepening cultural connection.³¹ Some schools offering bilingual education, such as the Warlpiri Education and Training Trust (WETT) are controlled by their local community, with school programs designed to meet community-identified education priorities. WETT has been an exemplar in support for bilingual, bicultural education and lifelong learning programs, earning them the Indigenous Governance Award in 2018.³²

Not every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child is able to attend bilingual or community-controlled schools. Mainstream schools also need to prioritise cultural appropriateness in order to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and allow them to excel.³³ This is especially true as new cross-sector programs such as Thriving Kids – which has elements of health provision and disability support, much of which will take place in the educational system – are rolled out.

NACCHO recommends investment in cultural and language programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

NACCHO recommends bilingual schooling is prioritised for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

NACCHO recommends cultural responsiveness training for non-Indigenous students and teaching staff.

Child protection and schooling

Research suggests that schooling plays an important role in keeping children safe.³⁴ However, out of home care can disrupt education and impact engagement with reading and literacy.³⁵ Data from Life Without Barriers, a not-for-profit organisation that provides care and community services to vulnerable people, shows that only 57% of young care leavers age 17-25 completed Year 12.³⁶

Reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care is Target 12 of the National Agreement. However, the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out of home care continues to be 10x that of non-Indigenous children.³⁷ This has flow on effects on educational attainment.

Local child protection solutions can incorporate traditional knowledge and cultural elements to strengthen their effectiveness. Working closely with families and children to facilitate self-determination leads to high rates of family reunification. Victoria's 'Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care' initiative gives authorised Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) legal responsibility for Aboriginal children or young people who have been placed on a Children's Court protection order. Under this program, an authorised

³⁰ First Languages Australia, Jintangka marlpa jungu nyinanjaku: What is bilingual education?, November 2015, <https://www.firstlanguages.org.au/news/jintangka-marlpa-jungu-nyinanjaku-what-is-bilingual-education?rq=bilingual%20education>.

³¹ Office for the Arts, National Indigenous Languages Report, 2020, <https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/national-indigenous-languages-report-lowres.pdf>.

³² Central Land Council, Warlpiri Education and Training Trust, <https://www.clc.org.au/wett/>.

³³ Biddle, N., and Priest, N., Racism hits Indigenous students' attendance and grades, Australian National University College of Arts & Social Sciences, October 2015, <https://cass.anu.edu.au/news/racism-hits-indigenous-students-attendance-and-grades>.

³⁴ Dzulkpli, A., Black, N., Johnston, D.W., and Segal, L., The crucial link between schooling and child safety, Monash University, September 2025, <https://www.monash.edu/business/che/impact-and-engagement/research-bites/the-crucial-link-between-schooling-and-child-safety>.

³⁵ Life Without Barriers, Education for children in out-of-home-care, August 2021, <https://www.lwb.org.au/ctfassets/iljnyQbJ1JCa0Ed3cZNSZ/>.

³⁶ Life Without Barriers, Education for children in out-of-home-care, August 2021, <https://www.lwb.org.au/ctfassets/iljnyQbJ1JCa0Ed3cZNSZ/>.

³⁷ Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Information Repository: Socio-economic outcome area 12 – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not overrepresented in the child protection system, <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/child-protection/>.

ACCO works with the child's family, community, and other professionals to develop a case plan which addresses protection concerns in culturally appropriate ways that are in the best interests of the child.

The Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency's (VACCA's) *Nugel* Program

The *Nugel* Program takes full responsibility for Aboriginal children and young people on Children's Court protection orders, who would otherwise be subject to Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Child Protection practitioners. *Nugel* offers Aboriginal-led child protection practice, working in partnership with Aboriginal families. Since launching, the program has improved reunification, parental involvement in decision making, keeping children connected to their culture, and better health and wellbeing outcomes for the children in the program.³⁸ The program achieved a diversion rate (that is, no return to Child Protection) of 78 per cent.³⁹

Successful child protection programs that keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with their families ensure that they have the best platform for educational attainment.

NACCHO recommends further funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled child protection services, to increase diversion rate, lowering the number of children in out of home care and therefore improve educational outcomes.

Data collection on schooling outcomes

To be 'developmentally on track' (Target 4), a child must meet cut off points across five domains: physical health and well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge. The *Annual Data Compilation Report* on the National Agreement, July 2024 states that "It is a developmental measurement tool based on a Western paradigm, and as such it may not fully demonstrate the progress and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children".⁴⁰ Additionally, this reporting is carried out by the child's teacher.⁴¹ The 2017 Speak Out Against Racism study found that 43% of students reported seeing incidents of racial discrimination directed towards other students by teachers.⁴² This racism in the teaching workforce may add an additional layer of bias to the data.

Similarly, National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests are not appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. They do not take into account children in remote communities who grow up learning traditional languages, various English-based creoles and Aboriginal English.⁴³

The impact of culture on test score particularly noticeable in NAPLAN literacy scores. One study adjusted NAPLAN tests to include objects and images familiar to local students – for example, a prompt about looking after a guinea pig (which are more common pets among urban, middle to upper class families) was changed

³⁸ Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA), *Nugel*, <https://www.vacca.org/page/services/children-and-families/children-in-care/nugel>.

³⁹ Wise, S., Atkinson, B., Brewster, G., Fary, L., Hudson, H., Johnson, N., Pell, S., McLeod, D., Sebire, A., Stanton, J. and Uhe, B., The new approach keeping Aboriginal children out of child protection, Sep 2023, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/the-new-approach-keeping-aboriginal-children-out-of-child-protection>.

⁴⁰ Australian Government Productivity Commission, Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report, July 2024, . <https://assets.pc.gov.au/2025-06/closing-the-gap-annual-data-compilation-july2024.pdf?VersionId=5RqOqnIV8gC4zBnDIGJAXWL36oiQCfs4>.

⁴¹ Australian Early Development Census, AEDC fact sheet: AEDC summary, <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/aedc-fact-sheet-aedc-summary>.

⁴² Australian Human Rights Commission, Racism. It stops with me: Can I be sure my child won't experience racism at school?, <https://itstopswithme.humanrights.gov.au/ask-yourself-hard-questions/question-and-context/can-i-be-sure-my-child-wont-experience-racism-school>.

⁴³ Wigglesworth, G., & Simpson, J., & Loakes, D. (2011). Naplan language assessments for Indigenous children in remote communities: Issues and problems. Australian Review of Applied Linguistics. 34. 320-343, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305864442_Naplan_language_assessments_for_Indigenous_children_in_remote_communities_Issues_and_problems.

to one about looking after a dog. In the study, these changes led to an improvement of nearly 25 points among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, pushing many students above the minimum standard.⁴⁴

The difference in performance on contextualised reading tests represents 33% of the rural-urban gap and 50% of the Indigenous non-Indigenous gap.⁴⁵

NACCHO recommends national data collections on schooling outcomes use culturally adapted assessments to ensure student potential is accurately captured.

Vocational Education and Training

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is the preferred method for education for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, within the VET sector, availability of culturally appropriate student supports and wrap around support is vital.

Aboriginal Community-Controlled Registered Training Organisations (ACCRTOs) play a vital role in delivering culturally safe, community-led education and training, across a number of sectors (from health to retail and hospitality to the creative arts). They are uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners by embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, local languages, community priorities into vocational pathways and providing essential wrap around supports

ACCRTOs are critical enablers of regional workforce development and educational pathways. They provide a diversity of both accredited and non-accredited training to ACCHOs and their wider communities to build a skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce. Central to this is a model of delivery that embeds high levels of holistic, wrap around supports, including:

- continued genuine supervision and mentoring,
- tutoring both on the job and as part of the training, including language, literacy, numeracy and digital support,
- delivery of block training and project-based knowledge and skill assessments,
- wrap around supports that consider everything from students' lived experiences (including negative relationships with education and early school leavers), home/personal situations, family commitments such as childcare needs, and cultural commitments such as Sorry Business and community responsibilities
- travel and accommodation needs.

This approach has been shown as essential to improve course completion rates.⁴⁶

Case study: First Nations Health Worker Traineeship Program

NACCHO's First Nations Health Worker Traineeship Program is designed to address the critical shortage of qualified Aboriginal Health Workers (AHWs) and Aboriginal Health Practitioners (AHPs) within the ACCHO sector.

⁴⁴ Baker, J., 'What's an avocado?': Localising NAPLAN questions lifts scores, Sydney Morning Herald, 13 December 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/what-s-an-avocado-localising-naplan-questions-lifts-scores-20211209-p59g8b.html>.

⁴⁵ Dobrescu, I., Holden, R., Motta, A., Piccoli, A., Roberts, P., and Walker, S., Cultural Context in Standard Tests, University of New South Wales, <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/business/general/research-reports/manos-innovation-laboratory-of-education/cultural-context-in-standardised-tests-3.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Gwynne K, Rojas J, Hines M, Bulkeley K, Irving M, McCowen D, Lincoln M. Customised approaches to vocational education can dramatically improve completion rates of Australian Aboriginal students. Aust Health Rev. 2020 Feb;44(1):7-14. doi: 10.1071/AH18051. PMID: 30867086.

Recognising the importance of strong training pathways, the program embeds additional wrap-around support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, aiming to improve course completion rates and ease the transition of new graduates into the workforce.

The most recent publicly available data from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) shows that among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who commenced AHW and AHP qualifications (HLT30113, HLT40113 and HLT40213) in 2020:

- 29.9% studying at TAFE had completed their studies by 2024.
- 40.9% studying at dual sector universities completed their studies by 2024.⁴⁷

While the time period is not comparable due to NCVER constraints, 68% of eligible First Nations Health Worker Traineeship program students who started in 2023 or 2024 had completed their studies by May 2026.

NACCHO recommends sustained, long-term funding for the ACCRTO sector to continue delivering high quality, culturally appropriate training.

School-based VET pathways

School-based VET pathways (VET in Schools and School Based Apprenticeships programs) allow secondary students gain nationally recognised VET qualifications, skills, and credits towards their senior secondary certificates by completing accredited courses, apprenticeships, or traineeships at school. These programs provide a critical pathway to further education, training, or employment by offering hands-on, industry-specific experience and qualifications while students are still completing their senior schooling.

However, school-based VET pathways could further their uptake through:

- Supporting the innovative traineeship and apprenticeships models being delivered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled RTO sector. This includes:
 - The Department of Education developing its relationships with ACCRTOs to strengthen their role providing VET in schools.
 - Incentivise industry partnerships with the ACCRTO sector to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander apprentices and trainees receive cultural supports.
- Increased funding for schools and employers to incentivise uptake.
- Adding all qualifications in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Primary Health Care and Indigenous Environmental Health training packages to the Australian Apprenticeships Priority List.

NACCHO recommends a specific health-related VET in schools national program is funded and implemented.

VET to higher education

Data on workforce in organisations funded by the Australian Government under its Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP) (the majority of which are ACCHOs) shows that the majority of clinical positions requiring higher education (such as doctors/general practitioners, nurses and midwives, dental care and other medical specialists) are filled by non-Indigenous people. There need to be VET to higher education pathways to allow for Aboriginal Health Workers and Aboriginal Health Practitioners to become nurses and doctors, where the ACCRTOs play a critical role in the student wrap around supports.

⁴⁷ National Centre for Vocational Education Research, DataBuilder: VET Qualification completion rates 2024: Observed completion rates, by Indigenous status, November 2025, <https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/data/databuilder#>.

VET and Higher Education pathways play a crucial role in helping people acquire the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to enter or progress within the workforce. These pathways align a person's interests and aspirations with relevant career opportunities while addressing the needs of employers, and in the case of some occupations, regulators. Workforce development pathways identify and highlight the systematic and holistic approaches available for a person to acquire the necessary skills, education, experience, and support to achieve their career goals. This approach emphasises the importance of personal and professional growth, adaptability, and lifelong learning.

NACCHO recommends funding to develop further VET to higher education pathways for ACCHO workers.

Conclusion

All students deserve to attain an education. In the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, governments committed to targets relating to:

- Increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling early childhood education
- Increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census
- Increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification
- Increasing the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above)
- Increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training
- A sustained increase in the number and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages being spoken.

A number of factors, not all directly related to the education sector, drive educational attainment. These include historical context, health, cultural appropriateness, structural issues, and the measurement of attainment. In order to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the best chance to further their educational attainment, governments need to also address the social determinants affecting education such as health, racism and child protection.