

# INQUIRY INTO THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN VICTORIA

Select Committee

November 2025



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## Acknowledgement

SNAICC shows respect by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, waters and communities. The SNAICC head office is located on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, and SNAICC operates nationally. SNAICC acknowledges Traditional Owners of all lands and waters across this continent, and pays respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge and respect their continued connection to Country, care for community and practice of culture for generations uncounted.

We also acknowledge and thank our community partners who provided input into this submission, including: Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA), Victorian Aboriginal Children & Young People's Alliance (VACYPA) and SNAICC Early Years Support (EYS) service.

We encourage the Select Committee to consider closely VACCA's Submission to the *Inquiry into the Early Education and Child Care Sector*. In particular, we draw attention to their emphasis on investment in culturally safe, Aboriginal-led Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services as a crucial prevention strategy that can reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out of home care system, as well as reduce contact with the justice system. We also encourage the committee to pay close attention to the recommendations made by VACYPA in their submission to this Inquiry.

## About SNAICC

SNAICC is the national non-government peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We work for the fulfilment of the rights of our children, to ensure their safety, development, and wellbeing.

SNAICC has an active membership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-based child care agencies, multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Services, crèches, long day care childcare services, pre-schools, early childhood education services, early childhood support organisations, family support services, foster care agencies, family reunification services, family group homes, services for young people at risk, community groups and voluntary associations, government agencies and individual supporters.

Since 1981, SNAICC has been a passionate national voice representing the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. SNAICC champions the principles of community control and self-determination as the means for sustained improvements for children and families, which has been at the heart of SNAICC's work — whether on child protection and wellbeing or early childhood education and development. Our work comprises policy, advocacy, and sector development. We also work with non-Indigenous services alongside Australian, State and Territory Governments to improve how agencies design and deliver supports and services for

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

As the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, SNAICC consults with and is informed by its member organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to ensure the experiences, needs and aspirations of our leaders, our sector and ultimately, our children and families are the foundation for our submissions and recommendations.

# Executive Summary

SNAICC welcomes Victoria's *Inquiry into the Early Education and Child Care Sector* and the opportunity it presents to improve early education, development and safety outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and broader communities.

The early years are a critical period in a child's development, creating the foundations for lifelong learning and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Participation in quality early learning environments positively impacts a child's life outcomes and supports them to realise their full potential.<sup>2</sup> Evidence indicates that the experiences and environments which children encounter in their earliest years have life-long impacts, affecting educational engagement along with health, social and wellbeing outcomes over their life course.<sup>3</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have cared for and educated their children on these lands for millennia, leading the way in the delivery of quality early education through innovative practices such as storytelling, cultural education and pedagogies, supporting lifelong learning, holistic child development approaches, and collective education with multiple caregivers and kin.<sup>4</sup> This approach to raising children not only reflects deep cultural knowledge but also aligns with best practice in child development. Victoria's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system would benefit immeasurably by reflecting, building on and celebrating these quality, culturally safe forms of early education.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's right to access high-quality, culturally strong ECEC services which give them the best possible start in life is affirmed under Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a right to education that includes "respect for the child's own cultural identity, language, and values."<sup>5</sup> Additionally, under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Indigenous peoples have the right to:

- all levels and forms of education without discrimination (Article 17); and

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, F., Conti, G., Heckman, J., Moon, S. H., Pinto, R., Pungello, E., & Pan, Y. (2014). Early childhood investments substantially boost adult health. *Science*, 343(6178), 1478-1485. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science>

<sup>2</sup> Moore, T., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The first thousand days: An evidence paper*. Parkville, Vic.: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/CCCH-The-First-Thousand-Days-An-Evidence-Paper-September-2017.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Heckman J. and Mosso, S. (2014). The economics of human development and social mobility. *Annual Review of Economics*, 6(1), 689-733., <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080213-040753>

<sup>4</sup> Dandolopartners. (2023). *Evidence on optimal hours of ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: Literature review*. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/240715-Evidence-review-on-optimal-hours-of-ECEC.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

- establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages and in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning (Article 14).<sup>6</sup>

In Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's rights to education, culture and safety are also affirmed under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, Child Safe Standards and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Victoria has made important commitments through *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016–2026*,<sup>7</sup> *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement*<sup>8</sup>, and *Best Start, Best Life*.<sup>9</sup> However, as this submission highlights, for Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children there are inequities in access to culturally appropriate services, participation and outcomes.

**Sensible regulation can contribute to a quality and safe ECEC system, but it is not sufficient on its own**

It is SNAICC's firm view that regulatory responses, while important, will not on their own produce a high-quality and safe ECEC system. We note that, the Victorian Government "accepts and will implement all 22 recommendations of the recent Rapid Child Safety Review to strengthen safety standards in early childhood education and care."<sup>10</sup> We further acknowledge the Victorian Government for committing to establishing a new and strengthened independent authority, enabled by a new standalone Act, with responsibility for regulating early childhood services under the National Law.<sup>11</sup>

However, to achieve high-quality and culturally safe ECEC services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, much deeper structural change is required. Therefore, this submission advocates for reform across four priority areas:

1. Funding reform – enabling funding models that allow for self-determination of Aboriginal peoples and communities to provide culturally appropriate ECEC services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that improve developmental outcomes;

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education and Training. (2016). *Marrung: Aboriginal education plan 2016-2026*. State of Victoria.

[https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung\\_Aboriginal\\_Education\\_Plan\\_2016-2026.pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services. (2018). *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal children and families agreement*.

<https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202201/Wungurilwil%20Gapgapduir%20Aboriginal%20Children%20and%20Families%20Agreement%202018.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> State Government of Victoria. (2025, August 14). *The Best Start, Best Life reforms*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/best-start-best-life-reforms>

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> State Government of Victoria. (2025, October 2). *Reforms led by the Victorian Government*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-response-rapid-child-safety-review/reforms-led-victorian-government>

2. Workforce and training – valuing early education professionals, improving pay and career pathways, and building a strong pipeline of future professionals;
3. Cultural safety – this requires greater resourcing and further system-wide measures to effectively embed culturally safe practice across all aspects of the ECEC system; and
4. Data sovereignty – ensuring the data practices of Victoria’s ECEC system uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s right to data sovereignty.

We recognise Australia’s federal division of responsibilities means that to create the systemic change required for our children, reform must be undertaken by the Commonwealth as well as state and territory governments, in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Nevertheless, SNAICC contends that now more than ever, the Victorian Government must take on a leadership role in relation to the ECEC system. We note that forums such as the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECCDPP) and the Early Childhood Policy Group (ECPG) provide important opportunities to showcase reform occurring at the state level.

SNAICC advocates for the full enactment of self-determination in all legislation, policies, and strategies. Self-determination describes the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to autonomy and self-governance.<sup>12</sup> The United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People under UNDRIP connects the capacity of Indigenous peoples to meet their children’s needs with their ability to exercise self-determination.<sup>13</sup> For too long, governments have decided what does and doesn’t work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, without delivering meaningful and tangible positive change for our children and families. Enacting self-determination is critical to designing and implementing effective policies that achieve the best possible outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

We commend the Victorian Government for taking important steps towards recognising the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to self-determination through Australia’s-first treaty legislation which recently passed in Victoria’s parliament. The Statewide Treaty Bill enshrines a democratically elected body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, *Gellung Warl*, to be consulted on laws and policies affecting Indigenous communities. All of Australia will be looking closely at the Victorian context to see how this is implemented. While the details are being refined, this context will necessitate the Victorian Government working even more closely in formal partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including in ECEC reform.

We look forward to engaging further with the Inquiry, and encourage the Victorian Government to work in partnership with Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative bodies and peaks including *Gellung Warl*, VACCA, VACYPA and Victorian Aboriginal Education Association

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<sup>12</sup> SNAICC. (2022). *Family Matters report 2022: Measuring trends to turn the tide on the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care* (p. 90). <https://www.familymatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/20221123-Family-Matters-Report-2022-1.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council 2021, ‘Rights of the Indigenous child under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’.

Incorporated (VAEAI) to consider and progress the actions contained in this submission that are aimed at driving reforms that put children's developmental outcomes and wellbeing at the centre, while strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services as a core part of the solution.

SNAICC makes recommendations to the Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria with the expectation that all actions and new legislation arising from this Inquiry are aligned to, and consistent with, the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and that design and implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations are done through shared decision-making and strong partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) are best placed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's early education**

1. The Victorian Government should embed procurement, commissioning and grant settings that prioritise ACCOs, ensuring a meaningful proportion of all early years funding is allocated to ACCO-led ECEC services, aligned to clause 55 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
2. We call on the Victorian Government to work with all Australian governments, the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECCDPP) and in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peaks to develop and implement a dedicated supply-side, needs-based and sustainable funding model for early years ACCOs, building on the ECCDPP's foundational work.
3. The Victorian Government should prioritise ACCO-led ECEC services in all Victorian allocations under the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF), supported by a measurable target for growth in ACCO early years infrastructure in Victoria, and accompanying funding for service viability.
4. We call upon the Victorian Government to invest in comprehensive sector scaffolding and backbone support, so ACCOs have the necessary support for business, practice, policy and workforce development.

### **A strong, skilled, supported and fairly-paid Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is essential for high quality ECEC for our children**

5. Develop an early childhood Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development strategy co-designed with stakeholders and peaks, including VAEAI to provide dedicated workforce funding, culturally safe training pathways, and to grow and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led training and workforce development.

**Victoria's ECEC system must provide culturally safe early education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

6. Develop a statewide Victorian ECEC cultural safety framework, co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and communities, setting measurable standards and guiding implementation across curriculum, workforce, environment design and governance, aligned with *Marrung* and the Child Safe Standards.
7. Integrate cultural safety indicators into Victoria's Quality Assessment and Rating System, with joint monitoring by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks. The Victorian Government should also resource cultural capability training for DET Assessment and Rating staff, and provide dedicated support and training for ACCO staff responding to assessments and audits.
8. The role of the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People must be legislated, fully empowered and adequately resourced, informed by good-practice models such as the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.
9. Undertake comprehensive, good-faith consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to shape reforms, supported by a transparent and culturally appropriate communications plan, and ensure all additional regulatory-compliance costs are covered by government.

**The data practices of the ECEC system must uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's right to data sovereignty**

10. Develop a Victorian ECEC data governance framework co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and stakeholders to uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty, ensuring Aboriginal leadership and control over the collection, interpretation and reporting of early childhood data.

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) are best placed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's early education**

Investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in a way that prioritises the child and family-centred practice, relationships and trust, and holistic child development approaches that characterise ACCOs practice is essential to building quality and safety into Victoria's ECEC system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. ACCOs know what contributes to keeping children safe and families confident: early childhood services that are governed by and embedded in communities, with skilled staff who are connected to families and communities.

We recognise the Victorian Government's efforts to ensure improvements in access and participation in ECEC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria. We recognise that the Victorian government's investment in 3- and 4-year-old kindergarten is having a positive, meaningful impact on the enrolment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children: approximately 100% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were enrolled in 3- and 4-year old kindergarten in 2023, reflecting strong progress against Target 3 of Closing the Gap.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, we are encouraged that all four-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children statewide will, from 2026, have access to up to 25 hours a week of Pre-Prep, and the further increase to 30 hours a week from 2028.<sup>15</sup>

However, we caution that enrolment statistics do not tell the full story. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not able to access their full entitlement of hours due to a range of barriers to service access. While enrolment rates and expanded entitlements to early learning is a positive development, to grow and learn in a culturally safe and trauma informed context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must have access to ACCO-led ECEC services. The significance of and the critical need for improved access to ACCO ECEC services is reflected in the ongoing gap in early development statistics like the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). Closing the Gap Target 4 aims to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the AEDC to 55 per cent by 2031.<sup>16</sup> The latest AEDC data shows that only 35.8 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria

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<sup>14</sup> Australian Government. (n.d.). 7B. Table B: Outcome 3 — Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years (National Agreement on Closing the Gap).

<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/7-difference/b-targets/b3>

<sup>15</sup> State Government of Victoria. (2025). Goal 4: Aboriginal children thrive in the early years,

<https://www.firstpeoplesrelations.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-aboriginal-affairs-report-2024/learning-and-skills/goal-4-aboriginal-children-thrive-early-years>

<sup>16</sup> National Agreement on Closing the Gap, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/national-agreement-closing-the-gap/7-difference/b-targets/b4>

commencing school were assessed as being developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains in 2024.<sup>17</sup> While this is slightly above the national average (33.9 for 2024),<sup>18</sup> it shows limited improvement based on progress from the baseline, and there remains significant work to do.

In this context, ACCOs play a critical role in providing culturally strong, holistic early years approaches that underpin children's developmental progress and are essential to ensuring children are developmentally on track in their early years. This is further demonstrated in the emerging evidence base, which indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience stronger developmental gains in high-quality ECEC, particularly when programs are designed or led in partnership with local communities.<sup>19</sup> This underscores the importance of continual investment in culturally safe, community-led care, and wraparound support for families delivered by ACCO ECEC services.

While ACCOs lead in, providing culturally safe, holistic early years support for children and families, they contend with a market-based model which favours competition and profitability over equitable access and quality. These inequitable settings require substantial reform to enable ACCOs' growth and impact, and to build a system that places children's cultural safety, developmental outcomes and wellbeing at its centre. Funding reform is required to fully enable ACCO-led integrated early years services to meet the diverse needs of their communities, children and families. ACCOs demonstrate best practice in delivering culturally safe, trauma-informed and integrated early years services, but they are continually hampered by inadequate, fragmented and short-term funding cycles. Funding reforms must also reflect the realities of remote and regional communities, where services are limited and community-controlled models are already demonstrating best practice. A dedicated, long-term funding approach is essential to sustain ACCO early years services and meet community demand. The Building Early Education Fund (BEEF), for example, is a significant initiative aimed at expanding access to ECEC services, particularly in underserved areas. However, it is essential that funds such as BEEF give priority to ACCOs, and that the Victorian government provides short- to mid-term funding to ensure ongoing business viability of new community-controlled ECEC services in Victoria.

There is also a need to invest in backbone supports. For example, SNAICC's Early Years Support (EYS) program, which operates in eight sites in Victoria, provides tailored support through needs-driven resource development, quality uplift projects, a community of practice and policy advocacy for the ACCO early years sector. EYS was recently confirmed in an independent evaluation by Deloitte to be a highly effective and trusted model that is strengthening the ACCO ECEC sector.<sup>20</sup> A great

<sup>17</sup> Productivity Commission. (2024). *Closing the Gap information repository: Outcome area 4 – Children thrive in their early years*. Australian Government. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/outcome-area/children-thriving/>

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Dandolopartners. (2023). *Evidence on optimal hours of early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Literature review*. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/240715-Evidence-review-on-optimal-hours-of-ECEC.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Deloitte Access Economics. (2025). *SNAICC Early Years Support evaluation – Final report*. SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/SNAICC-Early-Years-Support-Evaluation-August-2025-UPDATE.pdf>

strength of the EYS program is its focus on improving service quality and confidence in meeting and exceeding the National Quality Standard.

#### **Recommendation 1**

The Victorian Government should embed procurement, commissioning and grant settings that prioritise ACCOs, ensuring a meaningful proportion of all early years funding is allocated to ACCO-led ECEC services, aligned to clause 55 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

#### **Recommendation 2**

We call on the Victorian Government to work with all Australian governments, the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership (ECCDPP) and in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled peaks to develop and implement a dedicated supply-side, needs-based and sustainable funding model for early years ACCOs, building on the ECCDPP's foundational work.

#### **Recommendation 3**

The Victorian Government should prioritise ACCO-led ECEC services in all Victorian allocations under the Building Early Education Fund (BEEF), supported by a measurable target for growth in ACCO early years infrastructure in Victoria, and accompanying funding for service viability.

#### **Recommendation 4**

We call upon the Victorian Government to invest in comprehensive sector scaffolding and backbone support, so ACCOs have the necessary support for business, practice, policy and workforce development.

### **A strong, skilled, supported and fairly-paid Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce is essential for high quality ECEC for our children**

Investment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early educator workforce is an essential pillar of quality and safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Victoria's ECEC sector. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators play a critical role in fostering children's identity, cultural safety and wellbeing; outcomes which can sustain positive wellbeing and developmental trajectories throughout their lives. ECEC staff in ACCO ECEC services are closely connected to the children and families around them because they are community. They are accountable to their

communities and to lifting the educational and developmental outcomes of their children in ways that contributes to child safety generally. Because of this, they understand, recognise and support children and families' strengths, and know how to respond to distress or trauma when it is present.

Despite their central role, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are underrepresented in Victoria's ECEC workforce, particularly in leadership roles. Existing initiatives such as free TAFE and scholarships have improved access to training but do not address systemic barriers to retention and progression. Previous research by SNAICC which explored innovative study and placement supports that strengthen the sustainability and quality of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ECEC workforce found that non-Indigenous Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) are frequently experienced as inflexible, culturally unsafe, and poorly equipped to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.<sup>21</sup> Bubup Wilam in Victoria is one of the leading Aboriginal Community Controlled RTOs delivering ECEC qualifications. However, it receives no dedicated funding despite providing culturally grounded, holistic training that supports strong student engagement.<sup>22</sup> A further gap is the lack of funded, culturally grounded mentoring, which is shown to be essential for educator retention, qualification completion and career progression.<sup>23</sup> ACCOs provide this informally, but without targeted investment it cannot be sustained or scaled.<sup>24</sup>

A comprehensive and actionable strategy is needed to support recruitment, training and career pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood professionals, developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks, such as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI) and SNAICC.

### **Recommendation 5**

Develop an early childhood Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce development strategy co-designed with stakeholders and peaks, including VAEAI to provide dedicated workforce funding, culturally safe training pathways, and to grow and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led training and workforce development.

<sup>21</sup> SNAICC. (2023). *Shaping our future workforce project FA2-1 final Report*. SNAICC – National Voice for our Children

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## **Victoria's ECEC system must provide culturally safe early education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

Victoria's ECEC system must provide culturally safe early education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. A quality ECEC system must ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children feel safe, valued and affirmed in their cultural identities. Culturally safe early childhood environments, which recognise and embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's identities and connections as a core practice, support stronger wellbeing, engagement and learning outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

Cultural safety is a critical determinant of wellbeing and an essential practice standard. While *Marrung* and the Child Safe Standards recognise this principle, there is no statewide framework to guide how cultural safety is implemented in early learning environments. Cultural safety requires whole-of-system reform across curriculum, workforce, environment design and governance. The NSW *Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework for Early Childhood Education*, developed with SNAICC, provides an evidence-based example for a Victorian framework, both in the process of its design and the important policy outcomes created. All Victorian ECEC services should undertake accredited cultural awareness training co-designed and co-delivered with Aboriginal early years leaders and ACCOs. Embedding cultural safety will strengthen belonging, engagement and learning outcomes for all children.

Ensuring cultural safety within assessment and regulatory processes is also critical to enabling ACCOs to demonstrate the quality of their practice and to reduce unnecessary administrative burden. The assessment and rating process can be unnecessarily complicated for ACCO staff who must translate culturally strong, holistic approaches into regulatory terms that were not designed with community-controlled models in mind, creating additional and avoidable burdens. Building the cultural capacity of Department of Education (DET) staff who are authorised to undertake the assessment and rating process is essential to ensuring they recognise the unique ways ACCOs deliver services.

Practices in other sectors reinforce this need; in the health sector, assessors who accredit services against the National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) Standards must undertake cultural safety training as part of their credentialling requirements, establishing a clear precedent for culturally competent regulatory practice. It is also important that ACCO staff who respond to audits are provided with training and tailored supports that strengthen their capability to articulate how they meet the quality areas of the NQS. Such work is already being undertaken by SNAICC through our EYS program. For example, in New South Wales, services were supported through the development of an NQS Toolkit designed to guide them through Assessment and Rating preparation. This was later

<sup>25</sup> Dandolopartners.(2023). *Evidence on optimal hours of early childhood education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Literature review*. <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/240715-Evidence-review-on-optimal-hours-of-ECEC.pdf>

Elek, C., Gibberd, A., Gubhaju, L., Lennox, J., Highfold, R., Goldfeld, S., & Eades, S. (2022). An opportunity for our little ones: findings from an evaluation of an aboriginal early childhood learning Centre in Central Australia. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(4), 579-591.

Webb, G. (2022). Cultural connections in early childhood: Learning through conversations between educators and children. *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education (Online)*, 51(2), 1-22.

expanded into a series of three quality-improvement webinars. Services also reported that practical resources such as an ACCO Early Years Services Review Checklist and the use of mock audits made a direct contribution to improving their ratings.<sup>26</sup> These initiatives highlight how culturally informed, context-specific supports delivered through trusted relationships can strengthen cultural safety within assessment processes.

In terms of the broader context of ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's rights are upheld, we note that role of the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People is not enshrined in legislation, and its functions and powers are not clearly defined. By contrast, the role of the Victorian Principal Commissioner for Children and Young People is enshrined in legislation and reasonably clear. This disparity in legislative authority and the functions of the role represents a significant structural gap in Victoria's oversight arrangements for Aboriginal children and young people. Drawing on established models such as the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, we ask the Victorian Government to fully legislate, empower and properly resource its Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People to deliver independent oversight and advocacy.

A final note, in its implementation of the 22 recommendations made in the rapid review, we urge the Victorian Government to hold comprehensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks, communities and organisations for their input on how regulatory changes will be undertaken, ensuring they have a role in shaping the design and implementation of regulatory reforms, so that cultural safety is a priority. A clear and accessible communications plan about the changes is essential so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks, communities and organisations are informed and aware of implementation timelines and their implications.

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<sup>26</sup> Deloitte Access Economics. (2025). SNAICC Early Years Support evaluation – Final report.

### **Recommendation 6**

Develop a statewide Victorian ECEC cultural safety framework, co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and communities, setting measurable standards and guiding implementation across curriculum, workforce, environment design and governance, aligned with *Marrung* and the Child Safe Standards.

### **Recommendation 7**

Integrate cultural safety indicators into Victoria's Quality Assessment and Rating System, with joint monitoring by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks. The Victorian Government should also resource cultural capability training for DET Assessment and Rating staff, and provide dedicated support and training for ACCO staff responding to assessments and audits.

### **Recommendation 8**

The role of the Victorian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People must be legislated, fully empowered and adequately resourced, informed by good-practice models such as the South Australian Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People.

### **Recommendation 9**

Undertake comprehensive, good-faith consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to shape reforms, supported by a transparent and culturally appropriate communications plan, and ensure all additional regulatory-compliance costs are covered by government.

## **The data practices of Victoria's ECEC system must uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's right to data sovereignty**

The data practices of Victoria's ECEC system must uphold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's sovereignty over their data. Indigenous Data Sovereignty affirms the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to govern the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of their data in ways that reflect their cultural values, community priorities, and lived experiences. It is a cornerstone of self-determination and a critical mechanism for restoring trust in data systems that have historically excluded, marginalised, or misrepresented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, and crafted narratives that paint Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a negative light. It is therefore essential for ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to maintain control and ownership over their data in the ECEC system.

Victoria's Koorie Outcomes Division and the new Aboriginal Data Agency provide a foundation for reform, but there is a need for a dedicated ECEC data governance framework. Aboriginal leadership in how data are collected, interpreted and reported is essential to accountability and self-determination. Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles must guide all collection, analysis and reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's ECEC data. Partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks will ensure that data reflects community priorities and measure outcomes that matter to families. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led data capability development will improve transparency and service planning across the sector.

#### **Recommendation 10**

Develop a Victorian ECEC data governance framework co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peaks and stakeholders to uphold Indigenous Data Sovereignty, ensuring Aboriginal leadership and control over the collection, interpretation and reporting of early childhood data.