



**Submission to the Education and Training  
Committee Inquiry into:**

**Dress Codes and School Uniforms  
in Victorian Schools**

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## **WHO WE ARE:**

- VAEAI is a state-wide Koorie community controlled organisation.
- 30 Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, located across the State, 5 Office Bearers and 8 Koorie Education Specialist Representatives make up our Committee of Management.
- Our main functions are to:
  1. Represent the Victorian Koorie community in relation to education policy development and strategic programming at the local, state and national levels.
  2. Support the provision of education and training that reinforces our community's cultural identity, and
  3. Increase the awareness of the wider community about Koorie culture and aspirations in education and training.
- Since 1990 we have held a formal partnership with the Victorian State Government titled: *'Yalca: A Partnership in Education and Training for the New Millennium'*
- This submission has been developed following consultation with our Schools Specialist Representative and Schools Unit.

## **Koorie Population in Victoria**

There are 25,000 Koories living in Victoria.

There are 7,210 Koorie students enrolled in Government schools.

The most recent ABS figures tell us that the gap between Koorie and non-Koorie peoples' incomes in Victoria remains substantial. In 2002, Koorie people (aged 18 and over) earned 64% of the income of non-Koorie people. This works out at \$423 per week compared to \$657 per week after adjusting for household size and composition

## **ISSUES:**

### **Benefits of School Uniforms**

- VAEAI believes that mandatory school uniforms provide the following benefits to Koorie students and families:
  - i) They can reduce unhealthy competition among students wanting to wear fashionable and expensive clothing styles and brands. This elimination of

economic and social divisions is particularly important for the high number of Koorie families on low-incomes.

Reducing negative competition and arguments over dress styles may also lower rates of truancy and raise rates of attendance.

- ii) Uniforms can improve school safety and reduce absenteeism by identifying students who should be on campus

## **Costs**

The cost of school uniforms is of great concern to many Koorie families, however.

Some schools insist on uniforms which cost a lot more than the normal clothes a child could get everyday use out of it.

Schools also require parents to buy a wide variety of clothing items for different occasions such as physical education.

The cost of the uniform also increases considerably when it is only available from exclusive outlets.

## **Financial Assistance**

The Australian Government provides assistance with the expenses associated with commencement of school for some Koorie students through the ABSTUDY School Term Allowance.

This allowance is granted to the parents or care givers of students who are aged less than 16 years old and who are in receipt of an income support payment or are holders of a Health Care Card or Low Income Card.

The annual entitlement of School Term Allowance is \$540.80 and this is paid in quarterly amounts.

Recent changes made to the ABSTUDY arrangements by the Australian Government now require a student to have attended school for at least 85% of the proceeding term for them to be eligible to receive their next payment.

Since research by our organisation has found that 20% of Koorie student absences are already due to income-related reasons, VAEAI is very concerned that these new arrangements will further disenfranchise Koorie families who are already struggling with the cost of sending their children to school.

It is our belief that this punitive use of financial measures will impact greatly on a Koorie family's ability to buy essential items such as books and uniforms.

Additional financial assistance also used to be available for Koorie families through the Australian Government's now abolished Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness program (ASSPA).

ASSPA was a per capita scheme which provided universally accessible funds for schools with Koorie students. ASSPA committees comprised of Koorie parents and school personnel who were able to determine if the funding should be used for essential purposes such as uniforms.

ASSPA has now been replaced by the Whole of School Intervention (WOSI) initiative. The competitive, submission based nature of this program means that the Koorie communities most in need are now no longer assured of any funding assistance for the costs associated with sending their children to school.

### **Enforcement**

The low socio-economic status of many Koorie families, high rates of ill health and domestic instability means that even being in school can be a challenge for some students.

VAEAI strongly believes that schools must therefore take into account a wide-range of considerations when developing measures for non-compliance with dress codes and must recognise that for some students, it is an achievement for them to be attending school.

Schools should use positive incentives to encourage students to comply with school uniform policies. This means refraining from, as much as possible, punishing students for failing to wear uniforms as it can be counterproductive to raising their academic performance.

### **RECOMENDATIONS:**

Schools should be required to consult their Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECGs) on all aspects of their uniform policies. First and foremost this consultation should establish what Koorie parents can afford to pay for a uniform. It should also examine what constitutes an appropriate dress code and appropriate enforcement measures.

The Education Department must evaluate the forms of assistance available for students from low income families and expand and improve these where necessary. This should involve lobbying the Australian Government to ensure that changes to the ABSTUDY scheme will not disadvantage already struggling Koorie families.

The Education Department should require all schools to establish a support system to assist needy families. Each school should have a uniform closet and a store for selling and or recycling second hand uniforms in good condition.

The Education Department should advise schools not to suspend students for non-compliance with uniform policies. Any disciplinary actions taken against students should be determined on a case by case basis and should be taken in full consultation with parents.

The Education Department should develop and issue procurement guidelines for schools that encourage the selection of uniforms which are readily available from large, inexpensive retail outlets. Schools should also be asked to sell uniforms on a non-profit making basis with the provision that payments can be made over a period of time for low-income families.