

MEDIA RELEASE**28 June 2018****Five public schools' engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community**

ACT Auditor-General Dr Maxine Cooper's report on **Five public schools' engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community** was released today.

The Audit Report found that the Education Directorate is focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in terms of progress, strengths and improvements to build cultural integrity and that it is working to increase the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community with the education system.

Dr Cooper says 'while all audited schools are engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and community and are exhibiting cultural sensitivity a significant issue affecting engagement is the fear of mandatory reporting if a person identifies that they need any help'.

The Audit Report acknowledged that, while mandatory reporting is not solely about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, the high rate of removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, locally and nationally, is of note. Addressing the fear of mandatory reporting is beyond the remit of just the Education Directorate.

'There is an opportunity for the Directorate, in partnership with Community Services Directorate, to train and support all school staff in how to have a child protection system focused on a culture of support while meeting reporting obligations' said Dr Cooper.

The Audit Report acknowledges the significant achievement made by the Education Directorate in increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed under the *ACT Education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Action Plan 2014-17*. A new plan is being developed.

Dr Cooper says 'in the new plan there needs to be a focus on increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and school staff and providing them with professional support'.

The Audit Report notes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers (Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs)) have an important role in supporting teachers and staff in engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community. However, it was found that more has been expected of them in providing direct support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community. This is outside their role.

'Ways of providing direct support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community need to be identified. It may be appropriate to build capacity in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to provide the direct support' said Dr Cooper.

The summary of the **Five public schools' engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community** audit, with audit conclusions, key findings and the six recommendations is attached to this media release.

Copies of **Five public schools' engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community: Report No. 7/2018**, are available from the ACT Audit Office's website www.audit.act.gov.au . If you need assistance accessing the report please phone 6207 0833 or go to 11 Moore Street, Canberra City.

EXTRACT OF SUMMARY CHAPTER

SUMMARY

In February 2018 there were 1,887 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attending 87 public schools in the ACT.¹ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people account for two percent of the ACT population and four percent of ACT public school enrolments. While Canberra is on Ngunnawal Country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT come from across Australia, representing many different country and language groups.

The Education Directorate, through the implementation of Cultural Integrity, is working to increase the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community with the education system. This occurs in the context of a history in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may have felt disengaged from the education system, and from government agencies more broadly; intergenerational trauma, unconscious bias, shame, identity and dislocation add to the complexity.

Conclusions

ASPECTS OF GOVERNANCE

The Education Directorate is focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in terms of progress, strengths and improvements to build cultural integrity. This is a move to positive discourse away from centring on deficit discourse or mindsets: ‘When all the thinking, all the conversations and all the approaches are framed in a discourse that sees Aboriginality as a problem, very little positive movement is possible’.²

The Education Directorate has modified its strategic indicators in its budget papers to focus on a positive discourse. Furthermore, there are strategies and actions relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ education in the Directorate’s strategic plan and action plans that have moved to a strengths based focus on growth and achievement.

While most of the audited schools’ strategic and action plans mirrored those of the Directorate, not all did. This can be achieved by including, in each school’s strategic and action plans, explicit strategies and objectives for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community; these should be accompanied by performance measures to monitor the effectiveness of the engagement.

¹ This includes Jervis Bay Primary School and ACT public preschools.

² Scott Goringe, for Indigenous X, Aboriginal culture is not a problem. The way we talk about it is, 15 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/15/aboriginal-culture-is-not-a-problem-the-way-we-talk-about-it-is> Accessed 9 April 2018

ENGAGEMENT WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

All audited schools are engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and community and are exhibiting cultural sensitivity. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and community perceptions of engagement varied; many positive, some negative. A significant issue affecting engagement is the fear of mandatory reporting if a person identifies that they need any help. This occurs in the context of experiences of unconscious bias, intergenerational trauma, and deficit discourse.

While mandatory reporting is not solely about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, the high rate of removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, locally and nationally, is of note. Addressing the fear of mandatory reporting is beyond the remit of just the Education Directorate. However, there is an opportunity for the Directorate, in partnership with Community Services Directorate, to train and support all school staff in how 'to have a child protection system focused on a culture of support while meeting reporting obligations'.³

Furthermore, there is currently a review, *Our Booris, Our Way*, into the high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in contact with the child protection system in the ACT where ways to mitigate the fear of mandatory report might best be examined.

SUPPORT FOR STAFF TO ENGAGE WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed in the Education Directorate (which includes schools) under the *ACT Education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Action Plan 2014-17* is a significant achievement. In the new plan being developed, given the pivotal role of teachers and school leaders in engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community, and their ability to increase cultural awareness, there needs to be a focus on increasing their numbers and providing them with professional support.

The additional professional training support provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is having an effect and its continuation is important. Also important is continuing cultural awareness training for all staff. Training, however, needs to be guided by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training strategy covering all staff and supported by a system that records data, at a system level, on cultural awareness training. Without this strategy, and an employment and support action plan, gauging the effectiveness of these measures will depend on anecdotal evidence only.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officers (Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs)) have an important role in supporting teachers and staff in engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait

³ Refer to key finding paragraph 3.36, as advised by the Community Services Directorate.

Islander students, families and community. However, more has been expected of them in providing direct support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community. Ways of providing direct support need to be identified by asking Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community to provide direction on what would assist them and how this could be achieved. It may be appropriate to build capacity in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to provide the direct support.

Key findings

ASPECTS OF GOVERNANCE	Paragraph
<p>A feature of the 2018-19 Budget Papers was the removal of mean NAPLAN scores (for all students) as strategic indicators, with a focus instead on students' gain in NAPLAN scores. This accords with the Education Directorate's focus on a positive discourse.</p>	2.9
<p>The Education Directorate's <i>Strategic Plan 2014-17 Education Capital: Leading the Nation</i>, and its annual Action Plans from 2014 to 2017, include actions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational outcomes. From 2016 the language in the annual Action Plans changed from 'closing the achievement gap'; the Directorate's <i>2016-17 Annual Report</i> articulated this change, noting that '<i>our vision is for schools that meet the needs and aspirations of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and we are working towards achieving this through building cultural integrity. Cultural integrity represents a break from past approaches which have focussed on deficit mindsets. It engages a strengths-based attitude to growth and achievement. It is positive and constructive, and benefits the whole school community</i>'. The Directorate's 2016 and 2017 Action Plans reflect the Directorate's change of focus from 'deficit mindsets' and instead focus on 'a strengths-based attitude to growth and achievement' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Its draft 2018 strategic plan is 'out for comment'.</p>	2.17
<p>Analysis of the five audited schools' Strategic Plans shows that, while all of the plans identified strategies or priorities relating to enhancing relationships with students, families and communities generally, there was a mixed approach to specifically identifying and articulating strategies or actions relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community. Three schools' Strategic Plans refer to specific strategies or priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • two schools' plans to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' educational achievements or goals; and • one school's plan to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' attendance at school and participation in school based programs. 	2.25

Analysis of the five audited schools' 2018 Action Plans showed that, in line with the Strategic Plans' identified strategies or priorities relating to enhancing relationships with students, families and communities, all Action Plans identified activities and associated indicators relating to these strategies or priorities. Two of the Action Plans identified specific actions or indicators relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These schools' annual Action Plans also identified and articulated the role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officer.

2.26

The Education Directorate has developed guidance for ACT public schools on engaging with parents and community, including specific guidance for engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community. The guidance includes the *ACT Engaging Schools Framework (2015)*; *Education Capital: Progressing Parental Engagement in the ACT*; and the *Progressing Parental Engagement School Fact Sheet: Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian Families*, which has been available since 2015. The guidance was not consistently referred to or consistently used in the five schools selected for audit.

2.39

The *Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools* initiative is the Education Directorate's new approach for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and engaging with their families and community; *Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools* is being implemented during 2018. The *Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools* Google+ Community has been developed by the Education Directorate to provide resources and best practices from other jurisdictions to support schools implement the *Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools*. To date, there has been limited evidence of regular discussion by, or questions from, schools via the Google+ Community about engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, although the Education Directorate advised that it is a source of information and ideas and 'while staff may post discussion points and questions, these generally take place in other forums'.

2.47

Complaints regarding education services are generally managed at the local level by schools, however, complainants may contact the Education Directorate directly. The Education Directorate does not collect, automatically, information on whether complaints received by the Directorate relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students although this may be included in free text. The Education Directorate's Complaints and Liaison Unit has provided information about the complaint process to the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body's Education Representative.

2.52

The Education Directorate provided information in its *2016-17 Annual Report* in the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Outcomes' section. This section describes programs and projects and particular school initiatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that have been implemented during 2016-17. While the

2.55

projects and initiatives do not specifically state that their focus is on engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community, it may be inferred from some that they involve engagement. The projects and initiatives include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre for Excellence – Campbell High School, a centre that provides programs and initiatives to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- Melrose High School Indigenous Studies Centre, a centre that provides support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and Big Picture Academy, a learning program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in year 9 and 10 to study subject areas they are passionate about; and
- Wanniasa School – Ganbra Program, the program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to learn more about their culture and fostering parental engagement by encouraging families to participate in Ganbra activities.

The Education Directorate reports annually to the Legislative Assembly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. These annual reports are published on the Directorate’s website, however, there is no direct link to these publications from the Directorate’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education webpage; it would be helpful to provide a link.

2.64

ENGAGEMENT WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

Paragraph

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who spoke with the audit team described deeply felt experiences, including inter-generational trauma, shame, unconscious bias and deficit discourse, which can impact on the daily lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their interaction and engagement with government agencies. Ms Katrina Fanning, Chair, ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, advised that:

3.22

- *The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination in addressing these experiences’ impact is fundamental ... [the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community] know the answers but have little opportunity to do anything about it. Self-determination through measures such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled organisations provide the means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in identifying appropriate responses.*

The Community Services Directorate, in response to the draft proposed audit report, on 19 June 2018 advised:

3.23

- *The ACT Government is privileged to have a formally elected body to represent the views and wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT. The Community Services Directorate*

has also advised that The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body is currently undertaking consultations in the community for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, which will hold the ACT Government accountable for the outcomes outlined in the Agreement. All aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences of engagement with government might best be considered within the context of the Elected Body consultations and accountability framework.

The fear of mandatory reporting for children and young people at harm or risk of harm in the ACT affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement with ACT public schools and other ACT Government services. Feedback about the fear of mandatory reporting was received from different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stakeholders. A stakeholder commented: 3.34

- *There is fear in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community regarding care and protection and students being taken away from families and mandatory reporting by schools feeds into this fear. Families struggle with trusting the schools and the teachers and some of this is caused by mandatory reporting requirements where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families fear that they will lose their children. The trust deficit is also exacerbated at times because families do not understand the processes around child Care and Protection.*

Ms Katrina Fanning, Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, advised:

- *If I place myself in a teacher's position, how do I have a relationship with an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and family if every time they speak to me they're filtering the experience through their understanding of 'my mandatory reporting responsibilities'?*

The Community Services Directorate, in response to the draft proposed report, on 19 June 2018 advised: 3.35

- *In June 2017, the ACT Government announced a review into the high numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in contact with the child protection system in the ACT. The Our Booris, Our Way review is guided by a wholly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Steering Committee and is being conducted in accordance with the principles of self-determination. This review will investigate the circumstances of approximately 350 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children currently engaging with the child protection system, to understand their experience and to advise how best Aboriginal Child Placement Principles might be realised in the ACT community.*
- *The Our Booris, Our Way review will make recommendations to the ACT Government on the best way to fully implement the SNAICC Aboriginal Child Placement Principles, including development of*

advice about how best to move towards self-determination in the child protection system. Our Booris, Our Way will deliver an interim report later in 2018 focussing on early learnings and initial improvements to the system. The final report will be delivered in August 2019 and will focus on major systemic improvements.

The Community Services Directorate, in response to the draft proposed report, on 19 June 2018 further advised:

3.36

- *Data collected by Children, Youth and Families highlight that school personnel provide the largest number of reports to CYPS raising concerns for the wellbeing of children and young people. This is not unusual given that teachers and school personnel are the adults outside of a family unit that engage mostly with children, young people and their families. For many children, the relationship between them and their teacher will be the closest outside their family.*
- *The Children and Young People Act 2008 allows for some discretion around reporting not fully utilised by school personnel. This may highlight that school personnel require additional support in determining what response is required when deciding if they should make a report to child protection. This may include better and more timely advice on what is the appropriate response to concerns so that the most appropriate support is available to the child and their family.*
- *Across Government, non-government and the community sector, both voluntary and mandatory reporters need to have a child protection system focused on a culture of support while meeting reporting obligations. This is not to diminish the importance of reporting when children are experiencing severe abuse and neglect and have no parent willing and able to protect them. A culture of support, however, does acknowledge that a family may feel more comfortable and thus be more open to receiving support and referrals from school personnel that they have an existing relationship with, rather than through the statutory system.*
- *It also must be acknowledged that a report to child protection may be received more adversely for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in light of their experiences with the Stolen Generation and history of dispossession.*

The Education Directorate sought to understand the views and wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Group (the Consultative Group). The Consultative Group ceased to operate on 30 November 2017 and will be replaced by the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group (the Advisory Group). The Advisory Group is expected to meet four times per year and provide advice to the ACT Government on education matters that affect Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, parents and communities. Information about the Advisory Group is available on the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Group's 'betteroutcomestogether' website but not on the

3.46

ACT Education Directorate's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education webpage.

ACT public schools use various ways to seek the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Of the five schools selected for audit, all had established ways to discuss and record a student's goals, interests and specific needs; the schools reported their processes involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' families and community. One method that schools may choose to use, in agreement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, is a *Personalised Learning Plan*, or something similar, to record the student's goals and aspirations. Representatives from one school provided positive feedback about the usefulness of *Personalised Learning Plans* in facilitating communication with families and carers:

- *[Personalised Learning Plan] meetings are an excellent way to build strong relationships with families and carers. They are an opportunity for families to share their hopes and dreams for their children and set aspirational goals for the year ahead. Previously there was negative stuff like children not doing homework- now we keep it simple – baseline is that all children are capable and competent – teachers are empowered to feel they are making a difference and know that they can make a change for any child at any point of time in their classes.*

However, representatives from other schools' comments about *Personalised Learning Plans* were more cautious, noting that the use of a *Personalised Learning Plan* for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may not be needed and 'can look like a deficit as well as lumping students together in one cohort'.

There were mixed views from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community about how schools engage them. However, the majority of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who contributed to the audit were positive about the schools selected for audit engagement, e.g.

- *At [this school] we get more support and understanding.*
- *More encouragement towards us all.*

Professor Chris Sarra of the University of Canberra and head of Queensland Government's Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships said:

- *Relationships with Community – all students and families must be connected to the work of schools - how can we address together - start with connecting with the student.*
- *Connectedness is key regardless of how dishevelled or stressed a student might be – they have a human right to be embraced and nurtured by us – in the ACT we should be able to do that.*
- *Students will come with different needs and it is about ensuring that the teacher and student are enabled to be the best they can be in class. Part of this means ensuring the student is confident,*

capable and connected. Part of this also means they are not sitting in class hungry or having hearing difficulties.

- *School leadership has to be better equipped with people deeply committed to reaching out to the margins. It's about Heart, Head, Hand and doing all three.*

Professor Sarra suggested one way to nurture students would be to allocate every teacher in a school the responsibility to focus on one or two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from the total number that attend the school to enable the teacher to build a relationship with the student, starting with saying 'good morning' and asking how things are going.

The five schools selected for audit described the ways that they have tailored their communication with families, such as meeting families on neutral ground and in places they feel comfortable until the families feel comfortable to meet in the school, meeting families in school over something to eat, and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations or members of the community to engage more or assist with engaging with families. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stakeholder suggested that to enhance a school's engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, schools should tailor their information; the community stakeholder said:

- *If schools want to enhance engagement with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community the key to achieving this is to provide tailored information specific to the community needs and concerns.*

This community stakeholder also advised that:

- *Effective engagement is dependent on the accessibility of schools teachers and leaders.*

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stakeholder and a school principal also noted that providing support to families as well as the students is important for more improvement to engagement; the community stakeholder advised:

- *There are a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents who do not understand the school curriculum or school administrative processes and should be provided help in this regard by empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families;*

and the principal stated:

- *Key to improving engagement is to support families just as much as students.*

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is well connected and will share information about schools; this may affect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

community's view of a school. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stakeholder advised:

- *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is connected in the ACT and due to this information about various schools and their reputation quickly spreads within the community. This can result in parents avoiding certain schools while schools with a good reputation attracting more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.*

The Education Directorate and ACT public schools regularly communicate with all students and families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families, via electronic communications. However, the audit team heard mixed views about whether all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community had internet access; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stakeholders' comments included: 3.102

- *Not a lot of families have internet connection; reasons may be affordability; and*
- *The internet is a luxury and not necessarily for everyone.*

ACT public schools selected for audit comments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' home internet access included: 3.103

- *Email is difficult because of access to the internet and literacy can be a problem so it is far better to phone families. [I]do not set homework instead [I]set research tasks in class when the students can access the school's internet; and*
- *Most people have phones that have 3G connectivity and so they have access when in free Wi-Fi even if they don't have access at home. The provision by the ACT Government of a Chrome notebook to all year 7 – 10 students this year has contributed to increasing access for some families.*

In the Australian National University working paper, *Dynamic of the Digital Divide*, it was stated that internet access in 2016 in the ACT in Indigenous households was at 88.1 percent and in other ACT households internet access was at 91.9 percent. 3.104

Initiatives like the Inner North School Cluster's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Partnership Agreement provide on-going opportunities for ACT public schools to communicate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community on matters related to the cluster schools and demonstrate the schools' inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community. School cluster events also provide opportunities: 3.110

- for younger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to connect with older students at the high schools or college in their cluster and to see the pathways to those high schools and college for themselves; and
- to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture with other schools' students and staff.

The five schools selected for audit demonstrated various ways in which they are progressing their connections to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, such as using an Aboriginal language at school assemblies, plans to co-name areas of the school in different languages and creating a space to try new things. One school principal advised

3.116

- *We have to create space so we can have a go; like getting our kids to give acknowledgment to country; and*
- *seek more opportunities to strive for successful things. [Schools] sharing experiences [with one another].*

The Education Directorate has activated a Google+ Community website as part of its Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools initiative. The Google+ Community provides a mechanism for schools to share information and experiences.

3.117

Visible representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in schools was observed by the audit team. This included the use of art, artefacts, school resources (books etc) and furniture; outdoor features and activities such students' hand paintings; and making coolamons from the bark of local trees.

3.120

The Audit Office team member, Mr Ben Mitchell, who is of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, reported that he observed sensitivity to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture during audit fieldwork at a Koori Preschool, a Centre of Excellence and a variety of other settings including specific rooms, areas and activities. Mr Mitchell considered that approaches used at an ACT public school's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre of Excellence can provide a model for other schools, including the incorporation of teaching pedagogies such as '8 ways of learning'. The audit team observed different approaches at different schools; a teacher suggested that there should be an evaluation of what schools are doing.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders expressed a range of opinions regarding engagement by schools including the need for teachers to have more cultural competency; the challenge for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to afford extracurricular activities; and the challenges for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in communicating with schools. Some of the schools selected for audit considered the school's cultural competency 'patchy' and engagement, in general, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 'piecemeal'. Feedback from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community stakeholders included:

3.140

- *Although teachers should demonstrate empathy for the situation some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families are in, this should not be mixed with pity or 'oh poor you' attitude;*

- *There is a high staff turnover in the public schools and this means that it is hard to retain staff who are culturally competent and to build a whole of organisation ethos that is culturally safe;*
- *Schools need to be affordable for all families as there are expenses such as excursions, after school care, which some of our families cannot afford; and*
- *There are a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents who do not understand the school curriculum or school administrative processes and should be provided help in this regard by empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families’.*

The Education Directorate conducts an annual online school satisfaction survey of parents and carers, students and staff. While information may be collected through this survey from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents, families and caregivers there is no option to identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and responses to the survey are anonymous; therefore, it is not possible to differentiate information that corresponds to the levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. 3.143

SUPPORT FOR STAFF TO ENGAGE WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

Paragraph

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff employed by the Education Directorate, which includes schools, has increased from 56 to 101 between March 2013 and April 2018 (an 88 percent increase). This is a significant advancement, although it is six fewer than the Education Directorate’s June 2017 target of 107. 4.14

While around 41 percent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are employed as teachers and school leaders they only comprise 1 percent of the total number of teachers and school leaders in the Education Directorate. Teachers are particularly important role models and, on a daily basis, are central in engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Increasing teacher numbers will not only support engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but also contribute to non-Indigenous children gaining a cultural understanding. An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander not-for-profit organisation stakeholder consulted during audit fieldwork advised that: 4.15

- *ACT Education Directorate employs one of the highest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees ... this is largely due to the positive image of the Directorate in the Community.*

The Education Directorate advised that no monitoring or evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mentoring Program has been done or is planned; however, the Education Directorate expects that the program will be reviewed as part of the evaluation of the employment action plan which is currently underway. 4.25

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, in addition to support available for all staff, are offered other support: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff Network; Our Mob: Our Voices survey; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mentoring Program; Garma Festival participation; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Scholarships (for prospective staff); and Public Education Awards. The additional support is having an effect. 4.37

- *The Staff Network meeting minutes shows that the Network felt that meeting with Senior Executives was having a significant impact and that it is seen as a valuable voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and in a leadership role across the Directorate. Furthermore it had been discussed in national Australian Education Union forums as a prominent and leadership voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and over the previous 18 months the Staff Network had contributed to key activities on education.*
- *A recipient of an ACT Public Education Award in 2017 for Leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education was a young Aboriginal woman who grew up in the Canberra region. Acknowledging outstanding performance by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching staff signals to all staff the importance of the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in increasing cultural awareness.*

The Education Directorate's focus on increasing employment and the provision of professional development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is having effect. This was guided by several initiatives including the *ACT Education Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Action Plan 2014-17*. The Education Directorate advised it is currently developing the next Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Support Action Plan. This plan needs to incorporate targets and actions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people become teachers and school leaders. 4.38

The number of ACT public school teachers having cultural awareness training through attending accredited ACT Teacher Quality Institute programs referencing Standards 1.4 (Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) and 2.4 (Understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians) decreased between 2015 and 2017 (2155 to 571). The figures to date (268 at 31 May 2018) are in line with 2017 figures. (As of June 2017 there were 4,375 teachers employed in ACT public schools.) Although the Education Directorate provides other training for cultural awareness, as data on attendance, at a systems level, are not available it is not possible to assess if the shortfall is being met through alternative training. 4.47

The Education Directorate has provided cultural awareness training, delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, since 2009 which has, necessarily, focused on school principals and the Education Support Office leadership group. 4.52

One hundred and twenty three staff participated in a 90 minute cultural integrity training session held across the four School Networks, Belconnen, Tuggeranong, North Gungahlin and South Weston, in September 2017 in preparation for the *Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools* initiative. The response by 78 participants was positive with some expressing interest in participating in further training. 4.55

One hundred and twenty four school leaders and Education Support Office staff were invited to a three day Cultural Integrity Training session held in October-November 2017. Attendance varied from 84 to 94 (67 percent to 76 percent of those invited). Seventy four percent of attendees responded in a survey that it was professionally relevant and rewarding, and 75 percent of attendees identified that it was personally relevant. As the training was targeted at, and offered to, 124 school leaders and Education Support Office staff it covers two percent of the Education Directorate staff. 4.59

Although the Education Directorate has advised that it has a Professional Learning 2018 Calendar there is no cultural awareness training strategy with training targets and timeframes, quality control principles to guide the training, and a supporting monitoring and evaluation method. A strategy and a system that records data, at a system level, on cultural awareness training is needed. 4.65

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and representatives of community groups provided a range of views on Indigenous Education Officers (IEOs') and their role. While all are important the following are emphasised: 4.74

- *[IEOs] say they have a conflict of interest by getting involved ... but why are they there if they cannot get involved?*
- *[IEOs] are public servants with reporting lines and managers to answer to;*
- *[IEOs'] role should be redefined to that of case managers where they can work directly with families. Also, there is a need to increase their numbers;*
- *Some [IEOs] are very good with dealing with children and families while others are not so. The ones who are good are generally locals who have lived in the area for several years and know the families;*
- *[IEOs] need flexibility and not reminding that they work for the Education Directorate when they should be advocating for the child, not the Directorate – this would create a shift in the thinking of the [IEO]; and*
- *[IEOs] do good work with students but it's site specific, inconsistent and sporadic.*

IEOs provided many insights into how they see their role. While all are important the following are emphasised:

4.77

- *[providing] advice about appropriate communication with students and families to bring the kids into school;*
- *Cultural Integrity is everyone’s business; there should be a movement away from teachers asking IEOs do things like advise students and families on particular key dates in schools - teachers should be doing this;*
- *some students are happier to speak with IEOs; this may be because they are a bit scared as to how information will be used by the school;*
- *new teachers can be scared to engage [with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families];*
- *IEOs are seen as part of the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] community and are seen as someone who students, families and community can yarn with; IEOs can help to take the stigma away and engagement can grow organically; and*
- *[the biggest challenge] is people understanding what an Education Officer’s job is; people includes teachers and school office staff.*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Directorate stakeholders and education peak bodies indicated that the role of IEOs in schools was valued, if not always available:

4.81

- *Every school, whether governmental or non-government, needs Indigenous Education Officers [IEOs] to work one to two days a week in the school to work beside teachers and to help them engage;*
- *IEOs are critical to improvement because schools have transitory workforces – teachers and principals come and go – however IEOs, when they are locally engaged Aboriginal people, are stable and passionate about what they do;*
- *In general, IEOs are contracted by Education Departments, are not full time and are not in every school – it is rare [in Australia] to have funding for IEOs’ professional development; and*
- *Principals can fund the position or not – if there is no KPI for Indigenous educational outcomes and a principal doesn’t see that it is an issue for a school’s discretionary funding then they probably won’t fund or top up a salary.*

There is an expectation gap with respect to the role of IEOs. The role of the IEO is to support teachers to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community. This is different from directly supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community yet Aboriginal students, families and community have a need to be directly supported and expect IEOs to fill this vacuum. This expectation gap indicates that there is a need to examine how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community can be provided with direct support.

4.84

<p>The Education Directorate needs to identify a means of providing culturally appropriate direct support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community at schools. This may involve calling on members within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community or building capacity in the Aboriginal community to provide support rather than this being provided directly by Education Directorate staff. Direction from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community on this matter is needed regarding what would assist them and how this could be done.</p>	4.85
<p>The current allocation of IEOs to ACT public schools does not reflect the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the schools. There was no documentation as to the contribution of other factors as the basis for allocation, including: cultural safety in the school/school readiness; school need; student need; and community. Reasons for allocating IEOs need to be documented.</p>	4.91
<p>Information on allocation of IEOs to schools, and the basis for the allocation, needs to be provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community and placed on the Directorate’s website. This would contribute to facilitating engagement through providing an understanding of the Directorate’s decision-making; it also increases transparency.</p>	4.93
<p>The <i>Draft Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officer Program Guidelines – January 2018</i> need to be finalised and, in so doing, clarify ‘...what: ‘default allocation’; ‘adjustment’; ‘priority’ and ‘general’ support by IEOs means. Information is needed on: how schools are to assess each ‘School’s commitment to Cultural Integrity’; what IEOs will not be doing; how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Section will combine and apply information on ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment numbers’ and how to apply ‘Flexibility for community links, relationships, school need and cultural factors’ in the allocation of IEOs. It would be useful to: specify a target date for finalising, and subsequently updating, the Guidelines; outline how and when the use of the Draft Guidelines is to be monitored, and how these are to be evaluated and updated; and state how the role of IEOs might change, e.g. as the <i>Cultural Integrity in ACT Public Schools</i> initiative matures.</p>	4.107
<p>The <i>Draft Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officer Program Guidelines – January 2018</i> need to be supported by a succinct, easily readable summary document (say one page). The summary document needs to be shared widely via the website and also off-line.</p>	4.108

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1 SCHOOL STRATEGIC PLANS AND ANNUAL ACTION PLANS

The Education Directorate should improve the quality and comprehensiveness of ACT public schools' Strategic Plans and annual Action Plans with respect to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community by requiring:

- a) an explicit strategy and objective for a school's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community; and
- b) performance measures to monitor and evaluate the school's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community.

RECOMMENDATION 2 EXPERIENCES THAT CAN AFFECT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

The ACT Government should continue with the process it has adopted for developing the next Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, and note the concerns expressed during the audit about intergenerational trauma, unconscious bias and deficit discourse.

RECOMMENDATION 3 MANDATORY REPORTING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FOR HARM OR RISK OF HARM IN THE ACT

The ACT Government should continue to progress the work of the review into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people known to the child protection system, *Our Booris, Our Way*, and note the concerns expressed during the audit about the fear of mandatory reporting when help is sought.

RECOMMENDATION 4 MANDATORY REPORTING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FOR HARM OR RISK OF HARM IN THE ACT

The Education Directorate and the Community Services Directorate (including the Office for Family Safety) should, within the context of the *Children and Young People Act 2008*, develop training that emphasises the provision of support for children and families based on 'a child protection system focused on a culture of support while meeting reporting obligations'.

RECOMMENDATION 5 SHARING SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES AMONG SCHOOLS

The Education Directorate should request all schools to share information about their engagement methods, successful or not, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community by posting the information on the ACT Education's Google Community website. The ACT Education Directorate should monitor and analyse this information to inform engagement strategies.

RECOMMENDATION 6 PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FAMILIES

The Education Directorate should develop, in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait families and community, a range of information, in different formats and in ways that are easily accessible, including information on:

- a) the ACT school curriculum; and
- b) support funding for Aboriginal and Torres Islander students, how it is accessed and in what circumstances.

RECOMMENDATION 7 ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EMPLOYMENT ACTION PLAN

The Education Directorate should finalise and implement the next Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and support action plan and, in so doing, give particular emphasis to increasing the number of, and support provided for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and school leaders.

RECOMMENDATION 8 CULTURAL AWARENESS

The Education Directorate should develop an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander development and cultural awareness training strategy for staff that:

- a) covers all staff;
- b) sets targets and timeframes for staff to complete training;
- c) has quality control principles for guiding the training;
- d) guides how to monitor and evaluate training; and

This strategy should be supported by a system that records data, at a system level, on cultural awareness training.

RECOMMENDATION 9 SUPPORT FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY

The Education Directorate should identify a means of providing culturally appropriate direct support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community at schools. In doing so, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community should be requested to provide direction on what would assist them and how this could be done.

RECOMMENDATION 10 ALLOCATION OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION OFFICERS TO SCHOOLS

The Education Directorate should place information on its website to inform families about the IEO support provided for students, including where this is available. This information should also be provided through other formats to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community.

RECOMMENDATION 11 DRAFT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION OFFICER PROGRAM GUIDELINES – JANUARY 2018

The Education Directorate should review and finalise its *Draft Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officer Program Guidelines – January 2018* and, in so doing, provide greater clarity on the roles and responsibilities of the IEOs and outline how and when the Guidelines are to be monitored, evaluated and updated.

RECOMMENDATION 12 SUMMARY DOCUMENT OF THE DRAFT GUIDELINES

The Education Directorate should produce a summary document from its *Draft Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officer Program Guidelines – January 2018* and share widely via the website and off-line.

Agency responses

In accordance with subsection 18(2) of the *Auditor-General Act 1996*, the Education Directorate, Community Services Directorate and the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, were provided with:

- a draft proposed report for comment. All comments were considered and required changes were reflected in the final proposed report; and
- a final proposed report for further comment. As part of this process, the Directorates were offered the opportunity to provide a statement for inclusion in the final report in the Summary Chapter.

The Education Directorate provided comments for inclusion in the Summary Chapter. The Community Services Directorate and the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate did not provide comments.

Education Directorate response

The Education Directorate appreciates the efforts of the ACT Auditor-General and her team in acknowledging and recognising the Directorate's aim to create an environment of cultural integrity which describes the environment a school creates to support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and community.

The Directorate's approach recognises that the whole school community benefits from higher cultural integrity, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives embedded throughout teaching and learning and the physical environment.

The development of the ACT Government's Cultural Integrity Policy and the Directorate's Cultural Integrity Continuum demonstrates the commitment to a strengths-based, non-deficit approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.