



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Education**

Your ref :
Our ref : D20/0078179
Enquiries :

Mr Darren Foster
Director General
Department of the Premier and Cabinet

Email: AboriginalPolicy@dpc.wa.gov.au

Dear Darren

Thank you the invitation to make a submission to the Western Australian Government's Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

Please find attached the Department of Education's feedback on the discussion paper. The Department is seeking confidentiality and therefore requests that its feedback is not published online.

If you have any questions, please contact Ms Paulina Motlop, Director, Aboriginal Education Teaching and Learning at Paulina.Motlop@education.wa.edu.au or on 9402 6495.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'L. Rodgers'.

Lisa Rodgers
Director General

10 MAR 2020

Att.

Western Australian Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy: Submission from the Western Australian Department of Education

The Department of Education is supportive of a strategy that is aimed at improving the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Specific feedback on the draft strategy is provided below.

Q1. Are the main ideas right?

Do you agree with the description of the overall goal, principles, strategic elements and framework? Would you change or add anything?

Overall goal

While the Department supports the intent of the overall goal, "Aboriginal people, families and communities being empowered to live good lives and choose their own futures from a secure foundation", it recommends some changes to the terminology.

- The Department is not supportive of the use of the term "being empowered" as this:
(a) implies that Aboriginal people are disempowered; (b) does not recognise the strengths of Aboriginal people; and (c) infers that government is in a privileged position of giving power to a group of people and may be perceived as paternalistic.
- It is recommended that "being empowered" is replaced with "are empowered". If the word "empowerment" is to be used, it is recommended to define the concept as "to place final decision making in the hands of the (party)".
- It is recommended that the word "secure" be changed to "solid" or "strong" and that consideration be given to incorporating the term "flourishing" to the goal.
- In relation to formatting, it is recommended to place the goal upfront, and the narrative/rationale to sit under the goal.

Supporting description of the goal (pp 8-9)

- The Department supports the use of the phrase, "Aboriginal people must be free to make their own decisions about what makes a 'good life' and how to achieve it" (p 8) and recommends that this is highlighted.
- The Department is not supportive of the use of the phrase, "European settlement" (p 8). The preferred term is "the colonisation process".
- The first paragraph on page 9 regarding equality and racial discrimination could be strengthened by including a clear statement on the effects of racism.
- The Department notes the importance of "healing the wounds of the past" (p 9) and recommends a reference to reconciliation in this paragraph.
- The Department supports the phrase, "...choose their own futures..." (p 9) however, inequality means that some people are unable to do so. It is suggested that this should be acknowledged in the document.

Empowerment: Foundations and Future model (p 9)

- The Department notes that the foundations are universal rights, but questions whose norms these are and if diversity is adequately reflected in the model.
- It is recommended that some of the foundation elements are clarified and developed. This includes "history" (Whose history?); "respect" (From whom?); and "safety" (Physical? Cultural?).
- It is recommended that "mental health and wellbeing" and "spiritual and emotional wellbeing" are added to the base of the model.
- The Department recommends to remove "Respect and inclusion in broader society" from the model as it does not appear to align with the other items or their collective intent.
- It is recommended that "Caring for elders" is changed to "Caring for Elders and family".
- It is recommended that "Being a leader – community, cultural or government" is changed to "Being a leader – community, cultural, family and/or government".
- The Department recommends that consideration is given to cultural authority as a necessary foundation of leadership.

Principles (p 10)

The Department is generally supportive of the principles, however, the following areas require further clarification and review:

- Some principles appear to be targeted at Aboriginal people and others at Government. It is recommended that the audience for the principles is reviewed.
- Consideration could be given to stating what *will* be done rather than what should be done.
- It is recommended that a principle relating to equality and equity is incorporated.
- The strengths of Aboriginal people need to be acknowledged in the principles, as does the history of past wrongs and the subsequent need for truth telling.

Principle 1: Empowerment and self-determination

- “Empowerment” is not the preferred term.
- Suggest “decision making” instead of self-determination. Self-determination has negative connotations for some Aboriginal people due to historical policy. It also implies that all Aboriginal people are not self-determining.
- The Department recommends adding “self-efficacy” and “voice” to this section.
- Suggest adding a dot point regarding Aboriginal people making decisions for the benefit of themselves and their communities. (This supports the definition of empowerment as described earlier; i.e. to place the final decision making in the hands of Aboriginal people).
- The phrase, “solve their own problems” needs to be amended using a strengths-based voice. Suggest adding “opportunity” to this point.
- Recommend including a statement regarding individuals, families and communities strengthening their cultural identity (e.g. through reclaiming land and language).

Principle 2: Culture and country

- Recommend changing “Culture” to “Culture *and family*”.
- That Aboriginal people’s connection to country, “can be further enhanced through agreement-making” requires review as this is not necessarily an aspiration of all Aboriginal people. Recommend adding a statement that agreements can *build on* the strengths of this connection to country.

Principle 3: Diversity of people and places

- That “policies and programs should... be used only where necessary to achieve their objectives” is ambiguous. This dot point should instead highlight that policies and programs should be used to support the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and communities.

Principle 4: Services

This section could be strengthened by the following recommendations.

- Suggest that the title be replaced with “Service Design” or “Co-design” as it suggests reliance.
- The employment of Aboriginal people needs to be highlighted as well as Aboriginal leadership and ways of doing business.
- Add “Opportunities for healing”.
- Replace “culturally appropriate” with “culturally responsive and contextually appropriate”.
- Second dot point, fourth dash: “family-focused, and responsive to the intergenerational impacts of trauma”. Recommend separating out these two points as they are distinct issues; further recommend changing to: “responsive to the impact of intergenerational trauma and be trauma-informed”.

Principle 5: Evidence

- Suggest adding “Data collection and evaluations are best informed and undertaken in partnership with Aboriginal reviewers”.

Strategic elements (p 11)

The Department is generally supportive of the strategic elements.

- It is suggested that these are labelled as the “drivers for change” or “strategic drivers”, rather than “strategic elements”. (The term “drivers for change” is used in the Statement of Intent on Aboriginal Youth Suicide).
- The introductory paragraphs on page 11 infer that all six elements are equal, however, the formatting of the model/design indicates that different elements have greater weighting. Recommend that the goal is placed in the centre of this design.
- The Department recommends an additional strategic element: **“Reshaping institutions to be culturally responsive”**. In this area, organisations would be responsible for examining and evaluating their structures, policies and procedures to ensure that they are inclusive of and responsive to Aboriginal people. The proposed element would include actions such as an audit and plans for change, and require deconstructing historical ways of working.

Strategic Element 1: Putting culture at the centre (pp 12-13)

Putting culture at the centre is critical. This section would benefit from the following amendments.

- It is recommended that an additional paragraph is included outlining the need for government agencies to address the cultural bias and privilege of their policies and practices, and have deep discussions about racism.
- The first paragraph, “Culture is at the heart of a secure foundation for life, and forms the **bridge** between a person’s identity and the futures they might choose” reflects a binary approach rather than a holistic, inclusive approach. It is recommended that the second part of this sentence is removed.
- Paragraph 3: Suggest changing religious beliefs to “beliefs”; consider adding “governance” (p 12).
- Please add “education” to paragraph 4, following the word “health” (p 12).
- Suggest removing the last paragraph on page 13 as it plays down the importance of culture. (i.e. *“Aboriginal cultures are also a vital asset that can provide the foundation...significant driver in the State’s broader tourism and arts sectors”*).
- The concept of cultural safety needs to be raised in this section. This section should be about dismantling current practices that do not ensure cultural safety (system reform) and are no longer working to support improved outcomes.
- The photograph (p 13) does not best represent “culture at the centre”. It is recommended that the photo is placed elsewhere in the document.
- Key idea (b): Recommend adding “negative” in front of “impacts of past”.
- Key idea (f): Recommend adding “healing” after cultural identity.

Strategic Element 2: Bringing decisions closer to communities through empowered engagement and agreement making (pp 14-15)

- Paragraph 2: The phrase – “to solve their own problems” is deficit language. Suggest change to “manage own affairs/interests/business”.
- Consider changing “empowered engagement and agreement making” with “transparent and open agreement making processes”.
- It is recommended that this section should also recognise Aboriginal ways of doing business.
- Key idea (b): Add environmental and land management as an example of subject-matter expertise.
- Key idea (c): The requirement for strong and accountable governance is not limited to “remote communities”, it should be a feature in **all** communities. The concept of community should therefore be defined.

Strategic Element 3: Enabling Aboriginal-led solutions through improved service commissioning and grant making (pp 16-17)

- The word “enabling” is perceived as top-down and deficit. It is recommended that this word is removed.
- The Department supports the use of the phrase, “Aboriginal-led solutions”.
- Recommend that “commissioning” is replaced with “design and delivery”.

Strategic Element 4: Investing more in preventative and early-intervention initiatives (pp 18-19)

- Preventative initiatives may be perceived as having a deficit focus. The Department therefore recommends adding strength-based language such “restorative practices or approaches”.
- Recommend adding “and self-efficacy” after “self-determination” in paragraph 2 (p 19).
- Paragraph 3 (p 19) “placed-based program design” – Add “on country”.

Strategic Element 5: Boosting economic opportunities across all areas of Government activity (pp 20-21)

- The use of the term “boosting” needs review. It is recommended that this statement is broadened beyond Government (for example, when Government awards contracts to external providers).
- Land ownership for future success or increased wealth should be referred to in this section.

Strategic Element 6: Building cultural understanding and respect (p 22-23)

- The Department notes racism as a barrier to improving outcomes, however, the description on page 22 does not describe how to overcome racism. This requires development.
- The Department is supportive of “Schools embedding Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages into classroom practice, and creating learning environments that build respect for the cultures, experiences and worldviews of Aboriginal people” and is progressing work in this area. This aligns with the messaging of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework and the Department’s strategic directions. The Department recognises that this is also about system reform. This text fits better under the “public sector” section rather than “broader society” as this is clearly the responsibility for the education sectors.
- This section could be strengthened by:
 - Adding a sentence to the last paragraph on page 23 (before the “Key ideas” table): “An example of how one agency is seeking to promote understanding is the Department of Education’s Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework”.
 - Adding a paragraph regarding the recognition of cultures and societies pre-colonisation, and learning from the Aboriginal world view/ways of knowing/doing/being when engaging with the Aboriginal community.
 - Adding a paragraph on cultural safety.

Framework (p 24)

- The proposed mapping of the overlay/relationships with other strategies, frameworks and policies is welcomed.
- “Culture at the centre” should be reflected in the design of the framework.
- Identity and culture needs to be embedded in all areas of the document, including the framework.

Accountability

- The Department recommends that accountability measures are reflected more strongly in all areas, particularly the strategic elements, to ensure that the strategy is implemented.
- The measures to address inconsistencies with agencies and legislation need to be stated.

Implementation

- It is important that Aboriginal people/leaders are involved in the leadership of this strategy. It is recommended that leadership teams are established where genuine collaboration is expected and encouraged, and cultural expertise is recognised.
- Agencies will need to work together on the implementation of the strategy in line with the Our Priorities targets.
- The Department looks forward to the development of the proposed supporting State action plan. Regional action plans may present some challenges however, for this agency, the strategy could align to regional education plans and implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework.
- Ways of working with Aboriginal people needs to be embedded in the action plan.

2. Are we using the right words?

- The document would benefit from an introduction. It should start with a welcome/forward from an Aboriginal person(s), ideally WAAAC, to introduce it. This would demonstrate support and partnership. The strategy will also need an Acknowledgement of Country (Statewide). See the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework for an example.
- The purpose of the strategy needs to be explicit and must articulate the State Government's approach to Aboriginal affairs.
- The strategy needs to clearly articulate that it is for State Government agencies providing services for Aboriginal people, and inspire agencies to work towards improving efforts. It is difficult to determine the audience for this document as the voice changes.
- The tone of the strategy presents as if it has been written by non-Aboriginal people talking about Aboriginal people (e.g. by the use of "their" and "they"). Is this the intent? How can the Aboriginal voice, community and perspective be privileged?
- There are several examples of both strengths-based and deficit language used (e.g. "hold back progress", "enable").
- It should be about new ways of understanding and responding to community priorities and solutions and focus on the key drivers for change.
- In relation to the references to Aboriginal people, the Department currently uses "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" but is happy to take the advice from Aboriginal community leaders and/or the members of WAAAC. However, if the word "Aboriginal" is used as a collective to include Torres Strait Islander people, this will need to be noted upfront in the document.
- The title, 'A Path Forward' is deficit. It implies that the Aboriginal people have lived a deficit life. The Department would like to see this removed in the final strategy.
- The Department notes and supports the use of the term "co-design", however a definition or explanation of this concept may need to be provided in the context of this strategy. It needs to be clear that "collaboration" is genuine and expected.
- Throughout the document, there is recognition that Aboriginal people come from rich cultural and linguistic backgrounds and that the strategy must be built around Aboriginal people's views, voices and ways of doing business. However, there are no statements regarding the ways in which non-Aboriginal people should work to both respect and use Aboriginal ways of working.
- The principle of 'diversity' amongst Aboriginal people could be strengthened.

Photographs

- Some of the photographs may be perceived as tokenistic and/or stereotyping. The placement of the photographs is important to address this issue. If photographs are used, they must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal people across the State. It is also recommended that a statement is included advising that the document may contain images of people who are deceased.
- An alternative is to remove the photographs altogether and replace them with graphics or artwork designed by Aboriginal people. Invitations could be sent to Aboriginal artists across the State inviting submissions. The Department of Education recently used this process for its new strategic documents.

3. What else should we be thinking about?

Implementation and good practice

Through the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework and the *Future directions for the WA public school system*, the Department is well placed to progress work in this area. The Department welcomes opportunities to work collaboratively across agencies, and with Aboriginal people, to improve the education and wellbeing of Aboriginal young people. Cultural responsiveness and co-design both underpin and inform the Framework.

Strategic Element 6, “Building cultural understanding and respect” has particular implications for the agency. The key idea, “Schools embedding Aboriginal histories, cultures and languages into classroom practice, and creating environments that build respect for the cultures, experiences and worldviews of Aboriginal people” (p 23) is where the Department sees it has the greatest capacity to influence change.

In 2020, the Department has committed to developing and using knowledge of Aboriginal histories and experiences, cultures and languages, and family relationships to positively impact student wellbeing and achievement. The Department is committed to increasing its focus on creating culturally responsive classrooms that build on the strengths of Aboriginal students, engages them in their learning and enables them to thrive academically and socially. The responsibility of schools to provide meaningful pathways for Aboriginal students and support them in their transitions into further training, education and/or employment could be added to this element.