

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

September 2023



VACCA
Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL
CHILD CARE AGENCY

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the many Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land.

Notes on Language

- We use the term **Aboriginal** to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.
- We use the term **Indigenous** as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.
- The terms **First Peoples and First Nations** are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

About VACCA

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence and youth justice services in Victoria. We work holistically with children, young people, women, men, and families to ensure they have the necessary supports to heal and thrive. Formed in the mid 1970's, VACCA is Australia's oldest and now largest independent Aboriginal child and family welfare agency. The agency emerged in response to the Stolen Generations and an escalation in the placement of Aboriginal children in foster care homes disconnected from their Aboriginal family, culture and Country. VACCA works to ensure that every Aboriginal child in Victoria will always be "connected by culture" and have their right to their Indigenous identity protected.

Over the past decade VACCA has broadened its services, programs and advocacy to encompass a range of early childhood programs. VACCA's early years support services strengthen the environment around young Aboriginal children, including their families, communities and connection to culture, so that they grow up strong and proud. VACCA has historically played an important role in the design and implementation of education policy and programs for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria. This includes working closely with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) on the development of the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan (2016-2026) and participating in key advisory bodies to help lead and oversee state-wide initiatives. VACCA's work also includes



the delivery of a small number of targeted education programs including supporting families as first educators in the early years, programs designed to foster positive home-school-community partnerships for primary school aged children and their families and case management education programs to support the re-engagement of secondary school aged young people.

VACCA is guided by Cultural Therapeutic Ways, our whole of agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, Community members and Carers who come into contact with our services, and a safe and supportive workplace for staff. It is the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The aim of Cultural Therapeutic Ways is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices with trauma theories to guide an approach that is healing, protective and connective.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. That the Department of Education ensure the right of Aboriginal people to attain an education free from racism and vilification, including:**
 - Requiring all schools to develop and register a Reconciliation Plan, that is publicly available on their website by 2027;
 - All schools must conduct an Acknowledgement of Country at all school assemblies and staff and Council meetings;
 - That each school develop and publish a racism and vilification policy that is signed by all students and parents at the start of the year, outlining the consequences of racism and vilifying behaviors;

- 2. That the Department of Education ensure the right to self-determination is upheld and voices of Aboriginal children and young people are listened to and respected in education settings, including:**
 - Ensuring Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Career Action Plans, and Transition Plans are completed in a timely manner and revisited annually for every Aboriginal student; and that compliance is reported in annual data.
 - Holding regular community forums that center the voices of Aboriginal children, families and carers in education reform.
 - Establishing a joint planning forum with other key stakeholders from the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to share decision making on new early years investments for the Aboriginal community.

- 3. That the state government undertake a review of zoning restrictions, introducing exceptions for young people in out-of-home care who may be subject to multiple**

placement changes and challenges.

4. That the Department of Education provide schools with more supports, ideally Aboriginal led, to become trauma-informed environments, including:

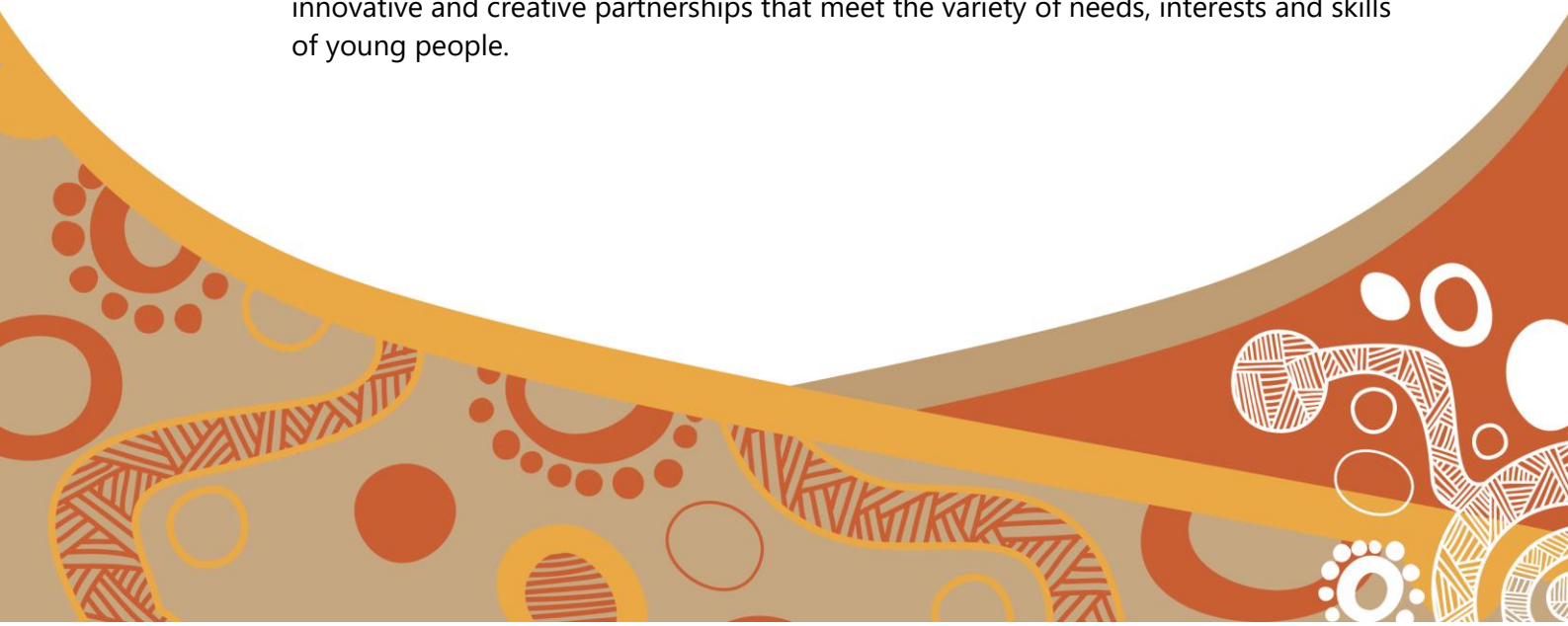
- Mandating teachers, school support staff, and leadership receive regular culturally informed training in understanding trauma and working with children in trauma-informed ways and publicly reporting progress to the Marrung Central Governance Committee; with compliance against this reported on the school's website by 2027.
- Resourcing schools to develop a trauma-informed environment and systems to support all children, with a focus on Aboriginal children.
- Resourcing teachers and support staff with the time necessary to invest in relationship building, feedback loops and re-engagement efforts.
- Resourcing ACCOs to develop trauma informed mental health training modules and professional development opportunities such as student workshops to be added to the School's mental health menu.

5. That the state government increase the capacity of culturally safe early intervention and prevention programs for both primary and secondary students showing early signs of disengagement with education, including:

- Commit to developing an Aboriginal specific Navigator stream.
- Mandate as part of the Departments contracting provisions that all mainstream providers of the Navigator program undertake cultural awareness training provided by an ACCO.

6. That the Department of Education provide resourcing for intensive support to prepare Aboriginal children for school transition periods, including:

- Ensuring key ACCOs, Aboriginal and other stakeholders, including parents, carers, case managers, KESOs, LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisors and Learning Advisors connect early to collaborate and share information around support needed for school to support smoother transitions.
- Resourcing Aboriginal or culturally safe education specialist positions to provide consultation to OOHHC, Family Violence and Better Futures case managers to more effectively support education pathways and outcomes for children and young people.
- Investing in Aboriginal specific programs, career planning and other supports to ensure successful transition from school to work and/or further study, including encouraging innovative and creative partnerships that meet the variety of needs, interests and skills of young people.



7. That the state government ensure students of all abilities are supported to access culturally safe education and support services, including:

- Funding the development, dissemination of resources for special schools to promote Aboriginal culture and inclusion for all abilities.
- Developing a guide for children, carers, and families for transition into independent living from Special schools.
- Working with schools to identify, support and refer Aboriginal children with learning difficulties, developmental concerns and disability to appropriate, culturally safe disability and allied health services and education supports.

8. That the state government ensure students of all genders are supported to access culturally safe education and support services, including:

- Funding schools to redevelop bathroom facilities to be gender inclusive;

Introduction

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into the state education system in Victoria. VACCA's feedback is based on our unique position as a Victorian ACCO providing a suite of services across the state supporting children, young people, families and community members. VACCA currently supports approximately 600 children and young people in Out-Of-Home-Care (OOHC) and has a dedicated education team with supporting structures in place to assist with positive engagement and outcomes in education. This submission draws on VACCA's experience delivering early childhood and education support, as well as OOHC support. It is VACCA's contention that the state education system in Victoria requires reform surrounding cultural safety and representation, trauma informed practice and resourcing to improve student engagement and outcomes. This submission will respond to the relevant terms of reference and make recommendations for reform in Victoria's state schooling system.

Background

Higher levels of education attainment have been linked with positive life outcomes, and accordingly education is a major focus in efforts to improve health outcomes of Aboriginal people.¹ Exclusion from education, by whatever means, has implications for wellbeing, health, income,

¹ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023), *Education of First Nations People*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

employment and a range of other social benefits.² The data on educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people is widely documented, and five of the seventeen targets under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG) relate directly to Aboriginal children and young people's access to education. Recent CtG data shows that although some areas have seen positive change, there are still several areas related to education which are declining. For example, nationally in 2021 68.1 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 20-24 had attained year 12 or equivalent, an increase from 63.2 per cent in 2016 (the baseline year).³ In Victoria the percentage sat at 72.6 per cent, compared to 91.1 per cent of non-Aboriginal students. Despite this being an improvement, it is still nowhere near the national target of 96 per cent. Recent data released by the Productivity Commission shows that the number of Aboriginal children enrolled in preschool programs the year before school (kindergarten) increased from 76.7 per cent in 2016 to 99.2 per cent in 2022.⁴ In Victoria, the data suggests that enrolment rates for Aboriginal children have reached 125 per cent, due to issues with the data set.⁵ Whilst preschool enrolment is getting close to 100 per cent, long term educational outcomes have not improved at a similar rate. Moreover, at the same time, the numbers of children starting formal schooling years assessed as being developmentally on track has decreased markedly.⁶ This suggests that enrolment in preschool is not enough and does not speak to the level of engagement. Other factors that need to be considered include, though are not limited to, regular attendance, the quality of service provided, whether that service is culturally appropriate, and opportunities for early intervention and education engagement well before preschool.

In 2022, VACCA hosted a series of 'community yarns' from May-July as part of the Self-Determination in Education Reform initiative led by the Koorie Outcomes Division (KOD), to look at how we can improve our Victorian schools for Aboriginal children. The yarns provided an opportunity for the voice of children, young people, parents, carers and VACCA staff to be documented and influence change in how schools celebrate, value and respect Aboriginal communities and culture. The groups were consulted on a range of topics that affect students, such as poor student engagement and feelings of disconnect, cultural safety, and inaccessibility of cultural resources for students with disability and their carers. In addition, the groups were asked to

² AIHW (2021) *Indigenous education and skills*. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

³ Australian Government, Productivity Commission (July 2023), *Closing the Gap Annual Data Compilation Report*. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.



identify personal and school strengths, barriers/challenges to education, and recommendations for changes to protect Aboriginal children's right to education and improve student engagement. Overall, the results identified the need for trauma-informed and culturally aware education staff, more cultural connection, and greater resources for schools. The importance of culture as protective factor was also a consistent and recurring theme across all conversations. Feedback from the nine yarning circles informs this submission, alongside broader research and input from VACCA staff working in the education and OOHC sectors.

**Trends in student learning, outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to –
The factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;**

A myriad of factors have contributed to the disparity in student learning for Aboriginal students compared to the mainstream population in prep to Year 12, including differences in school attendance rates, a lack of cultural safety and representation in Victorian schools and a lack of trauma informed practice. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021 made access education more difficult and unequal, with disengagement numbers increasing.⁷ Data from the National Schools Statistics Collection shows that in 2022, 49.9 per cent of Australian students in year 1 – 10 attended school for at least 90 per cent of school days, falling significantly from 71.2 per cent in 2021, with a decline seen across all states and territories.⁸ Data from Victoria shows that in 2022 53.9 per cent of all students form years 1 to 10 attended 90 per cent or more of school, while for Aboriginal students this was 23.8 per cent, a significant gap of 19.4 per cent.⁹

Lack of cultural safety and representation

Reasons for low rates of school attendance are complicated, and consist of several contributing factors. It is evident the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting remote learning had a large impact on school students, which will be discussed later in this submission. However, a lack of cultural safety and representation has been a longstanding issue in Victorian schools, and contributes to Aboriginal students having a more challenging experience of schooling compared with their peers. This can result in increased disengagement from learning. For Aboriginal children and young

⁷ Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (May 2022). Mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic, The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

⁸ Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, (2022), *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁹ Ibid.



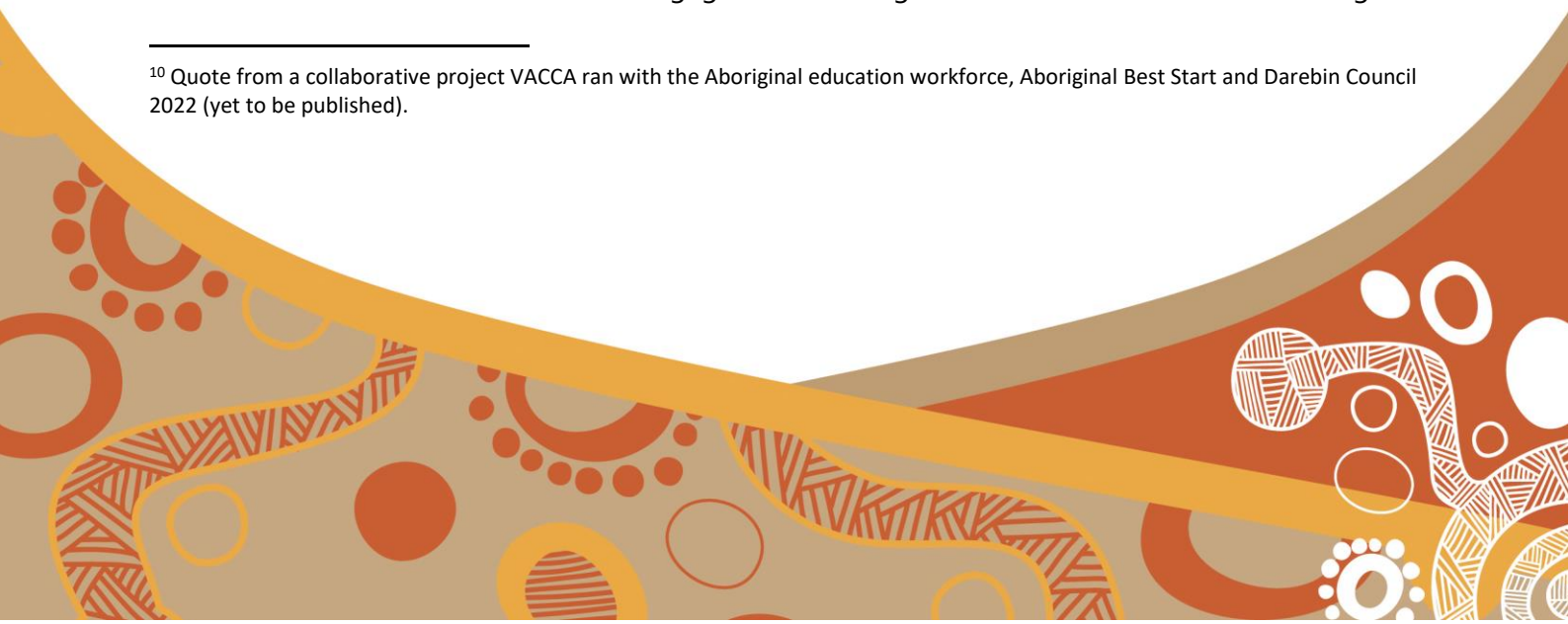
people, connection to culture is essential for building a strong social and emotional wellbeing. It allows young people to know where they come from, who they are and to be proud and strong in their cultural identity. During community yarns held with primary and secondary students, parents, carers, elders and VACCA staff, participants noted that the experience of cultural safety and/or representation at school was a key issue. Some students experienced bullying based on their Aboriginal identity, and reported not trusting, or feeling comfortable around other students. Some had their identity undermined, told they were 'not black enough'. Many participants noted that schools were slow to include and teach Aboriginal perspectives and culture in the curriculum, and that some teachers were seen to be sharing false information about Aboriginal perspectives, or a white version of Aboriginal history. These experiences contributed to a feeling of lack of safety at school, and a reluctance to attend.

'School environment is important to Aboriginal kids because it just makes their all-round education journey just much more pleasant, and it will make a significant difference to their education' - Parent¹⁰

Conversely, when schools cultivate a space that is experienced as culturally safe and representative of Aboriginal people and culture, young people report feeling safe and comfortable to engage in education. Some of the young people spoke of positive experiences when seeing culture acknowledged taught and celebrated, through visibility of the Aboriginal flag, Acknowledgment of Country in assembly, and school excursions to Aboriginal places of cultural significance. Presence and visibility of Aboriginal staff at school, both KESO workers and teachers, were seen to be important, as were visits from Aboriginal Elders, and creating Indigenous native gardens – one child reported pride in a garden featuring Bunjil at their school. Other suggestions made across the community yarns revolved around ensuring Aboriginal culture was seen and celebrated by all at school. For example, by holding Aboriginal ceremonies such as smoking ceremonies, flying the Aboriginal flag, visibly celebrating Aboriginal art and culture through workshops and presence and visibility of Aboriginal art, running Aboriginal programs, allowing students to wear Aboriginal designed clothes, and providing a greater focus on Aboriginal history and culture for all students, not only Aboriginal students. Walking into a school flying an Aboriginal flag or displaying artwork reassured Aboriginal young people that others 'knew' about them and recognised their people.

It is of upmost priority that teachers in all schools have the skills and resources to support all students to learn, understand and engage with Aboriginal cultures and histories through a

¹⁰ Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council 2022 (yet to be published).



culturally safe and informed approach. There is a wealth of freely available expertise, support and resources designed to promote cultural safety and representation of Aboriginal children and young people in the education system that can and should be used by schools to create cultural safety and ensure representation and visibility in school settings.¹¹ Recognising that all Victorians need to understand, respect and learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is a cross-curriculum priority and embedded in all areas across the Victorian Curriculum.¹² There are particular protocols that teachers must follow when teaching Aboriginal histories and cultures,¹³ including how to create a culturally safe environment and work respectfully with Aboriginal community members. The combined approach contributes to creating a positive climate where Koorie learners are able to feel proud and strong in their cultural identity.¹⁴ VACCA education staff have also highlighted the importance of including culture as a whole of school initiative. For example, although an Aboriginal student may have an Individual Learning Plan (IEP) which has culture embedded in it, this individualistic approach does not contribute to cultural safety for the school more broadly. It is important that including culture and embedding cultural safety is a whole-of-school initiative which engages all students.

Participants of the yarning circles had clear and concrete suggestions about what could be done to make schools more welcoming for and respectful of Aboriginal students and families. Recommendations included the following:

1. Role Models Programs

- **Invite Aboriginal community members into the school** to inspire aspirational thinking (e.g., artists, sports people, and musicians)
- **Invite Elders** to come into schools

2. Cultural Connection

- Create **culture learning opportunities** that allows Aboriginal children and young people to learn more about their culture (e.g., return to country trips)
- Have **physical representation of culture** around the school (e.g., fly the flags, artwork on walls, books by Aboriginal authors in the library)

¹¹ Reconciliation Australia [Narragunnawali](https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/curriculum-resources): Curriculum Resources. Retrieved July 2022 from:

<https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/curriculum-resources>; VAEAI Resources. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

¹² VCAA, 2020. Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

¹³ VAEAI, 2016. Protocols for Koorie education in Victorian primary and secondary schools. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

¹⁴ Victorian Government. (2016). *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*.

- **Celebrate significant days with all the students** at the school so everyone learns about Aboriginal culture.

3. Cultural Awareness Training

- Teacher and education staff training about the **importance of respect** and conversations about **racism**
- Training that is **meaningful and tailored to local areas**

4. More Aboriginal Staff in schools (particularly in regional areas)

5. That the Department of Education ensure the right to self-determination is upheld and voices of Aboriginal children and young people are listened to and respected in education settings, including:

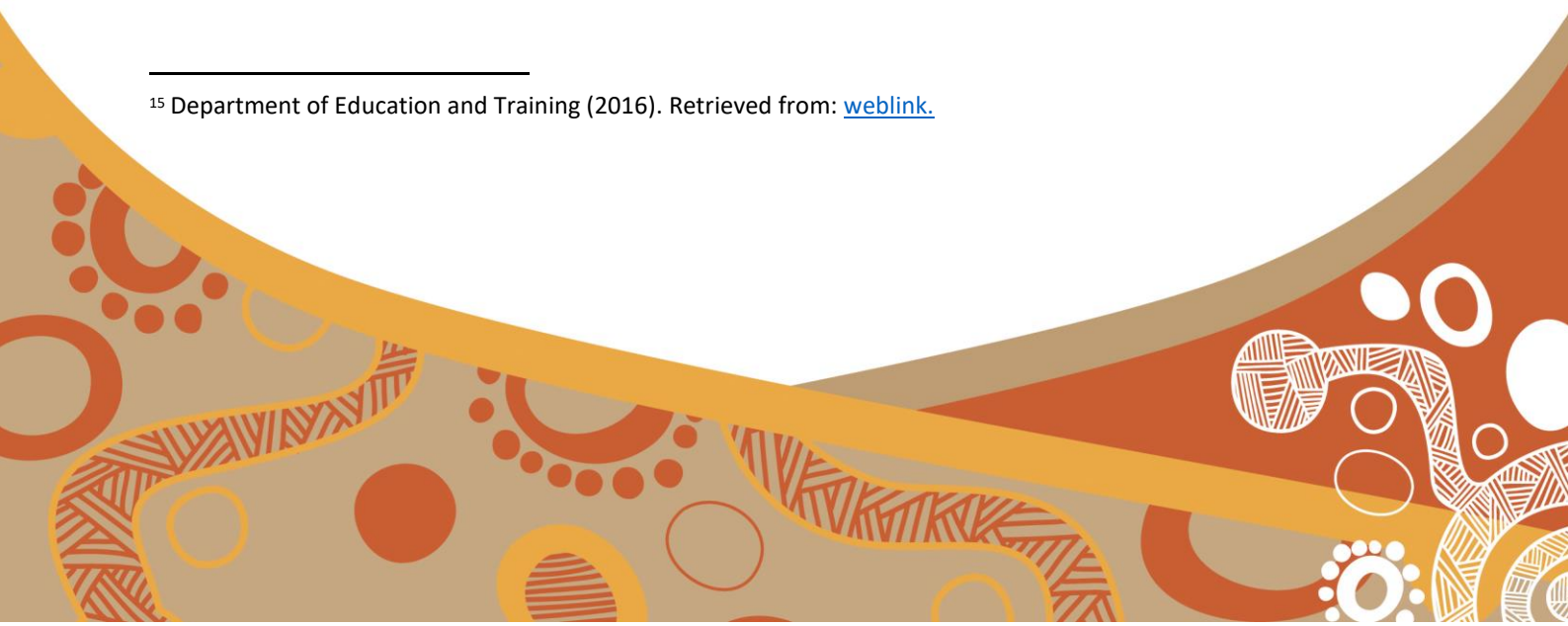
- Ensuring Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Career Action Plans, and Transition Plans are completed in a timely manner and revisited frequently for every Aboriginal student.
- Holding regular community yarns that center the voices of Aboriginal children, families and carers in education reform.
- Establishing a joint planning forum with other key stakeholders from the Aboriginal community-controlled sector to share decision making on new early years investments for the Aboriginal community.

Zoning restrictions

Aboriginal students are highly dispersed across Victoria.¹⁵ Aboriginal carers who may wish for their children to attend a school with a larger Aboriginal student population and/or dedicated Aboriginal Programs and support may find that they are prevented from doing so due to zoning restrictions. Applying for exemption is arduous and fraught with no guaranteed outcome and can deny the child and family access to the support of other Aboriginal families at school, or the availability of staff who they trust to talk honestly with about any concerns. Families and carers report that DET will argue all schools are set up to support Aboriginal students, however this has not been the experience of many families VACCA support, including for children in OOH.

"Zoning of schools is a big issue as Koorie kids often want to go to a school where other Koorie kids go, and this can be difficult if not in their zone." -Elder

¹⁵ Department of Education and Training (2016). Retrieved from: [weblink](#).



In addition, VACCA education workers report that school zoning issues are preventing some students in OOHC from attending their school of choice, which is impacting on their engagement in education. Students in OOHC care often face multiple placement changes and instability, which impacts their schooling immensely. Students have reported not feeling culturally safe at certain schools and being prevented from attending a safer choice due to zoning issues. VACCA workers also report that when a student is rejected from a school, they must be assisted to work through a complex administrative process to reapply, this rejection and arduous process often contributes to feelings of contemptibility for the student and leads to further disengagement in education. It is critical that students who already face multiple barriers and risk factors for disengagement are allowed to attend their school of choice, and VACCA believes that for children and young people in OOHC this should be a priority.

Recommendation:

That the state government undertake a review of zoning restrictions, with a particular focus on the impacts of zoning restrictions for young people in OOHC who may be subject to multiple placement changes.

Lack of trauma informed practice – OOHC and education

For many children at school, past exposure to trauma can influence their behavior, experience of schooling and engagement in education. In particular, Aboriginal children and young people living in OOHC are significantly more likely to have experienced or been exposed to trauma, including abuse, family violence and neglect. Further to this, Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC are carrying intergenerational trauma resulting from the impacts of colonisation, genocide and dispossession, as well as experiencing the impacts of removal and disconnection from family, community, Country and culture. The added burden of racism and discrimination experienced within many elements of life, means that many Aboriginal children and young people carry the enormous weight of trauma and grief in their daily lives.

For Aboriginal children in OOHC, this trauma may present as significant behavioral challenges, social and emotional wellbeing concerns, and difficulties with healthy relationships.¹⁶ Trauma can also impact sleep, memory, cognitive capacity and create difficulties or delays in ability or capacity for learning. These concerns create significant academic and social challenges for children and young people trying to engage in education and schooling. Children in OOHC require trauma-informed responses from the supports and services in their lives, for approaches that take their

¹⁶ State of Victoria (DET and DHHS) (2018) Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).



trauma background into account and develop systems and tools to safely support them to manage these challenges in all settings.

VACCA's Cultural Therapeutic Ways framework has guided our understanding about how theories of trauma need to underpin educational approaches, because they facilitate understanding and culturally appropriate responses. A trauma-informed approach centralises intergenerational trauma in the context of the specific challenges faced by Aboriginal families, and how this can manifest in the behaviors and difficulties of children and young people in school. A trauma informed approach applied in a school setting involves understanding, recognising and responding appropriately to the effects of all types of trauma, and celebrating the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people.

In VACCA's experience, most school environments are not operating with a trauma-informed approach, prepared for and able to respond appropriately to the varied challenges that children with a trauma background may display at school. Children in OOHC are often labelled as difficult and disruptive, experiencing schools as alienating, unsafe and unable to meet their needs. One child recently expressed through community yarns that they just wanted school staff to ask them how they were – indicating that Aboriginal children in OOHC are experiencing schools as a place where their wellbeing is not a priority.

Schools and teachers appear to have limited knowledge, capacity, skills or resources to provide appropriate trauma-informed teaching, learning supports and environments for children and young people who have experienced trauma. Without schools providing their teachers with the appropriate training, resources and tools to effectively work with the specific needs of students, both students and teachers are left in unsafe and inadequate situations, which has damaging consequences for the social and emotional wellbeing and educational outcomes of those children. While trauma training is available to schools, delivered by a number of sources, such as Berry Street and LOOKOUT, these options are not through a cultural lens which is vital for the experience of Aboriginal children and young people.

For Aboriginal children living in OOHC, they have already had to experience the trauma of removal from their family and potential placement breakdown/s, and the associated disruption of their attachments and ability to trust the adults in their lives and feel heard. When schools are unable to appropriately support them through difficulties they experience in that environment, these children are likely to experience this as another failure of the adults in their lives to protect and understand them, further alienating them from the systems and structures that other children grow up a part of. What happens for these children is that they disengage from their learning and schools, not seeing their emotional needs prioritised in these environments.



Children and young people living with the impacts of trauma generally have more difficulty regulating their emotions than their peers. This often leads to impulsivity, becoming easily heightened and being unable to navigate many of the requirements of the school environment, such as concentration, quiet, focus and engagement.¹⁷ No learning can happen when a child or young person is dysregulated. It is vital for schools and teachers to have the training and knowledge to manage moments of emotional dysregulation in trauma-informed and individualised ways. A whole-of-school approach that is trauma-informed is required so that the needs of children with trauma backgrounds are inbuilt to the policies and structures of the school environment, and knowledge of how to safely and successfully work with these children and improve their learning outcomes and experiences is widespread. Trauma-informed practices benefit everyone – staff, leaders, students, parents and the school community will be better supported through a trauma-informed lens that understands that we all have experiences that impact our ability to feel safe, regulated or achieve optimal learning. When schools have a trauma-informed approach, children living in OOHC are less stigmatised for their needs, and all children and teachers have a shared knowledge and language for speaking about their needs and difficulties.

Recommendations:

That the Department of Education provide schools with more supports to become trauma-informed environments, including:

- Mandating teachers, school support staff, and leadership receive regular culturally informed training in understanding trauma and working with children in trauma-informed ways.
- Resourcing schools to develop a trauma-informed environment and systems to support all children.
- Resourcing teachers and support staff with the time necessary to invest in relationship building, feedback loops and re-engagement efforts.

Lack of early intervention and prevention

At present, there is a lack of targeted early intervention and prevention supports for both primary and secondary students who are at risk of, or already, disengaged in school. Programs which do exist, for example the Navigator program, are under resourced to meet the demand facing schools

¹⁷ Child Safety Commissioner (2009). From isolation to connection: A guide to understanding and working with traumatized children and young people. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

– particularly since the COVID-19 Pandemic and resulting disengagement following remote learning. A 2022 report by VAGO into the effectiveness of the Navigator Program found that schools have inconsistent practice in referrals across the state.¹⁸ Before referral to Navigator DET expects that schools will have already given students specialist support, which is presumed to increase as a student's absence increases, this support consists of social workers, visiting teachers, psychologists, and other allied health professionals.¹⁹ However, VAGO found that of students referred to Navigator in 2019, three-quarters had not received individualised support from DET's student support services, this lack of early intervention is likely to have reduced the effectiveness of Navigator intervention.²⁰ Once referred to Navigator, students must be engaged in less than 30 per cent of school.²¹ This is a very high threshold for non-attendance, and it is extremely difficult to build back attendance once it has reached this point. In addition, the report found that demand for Navigator exceeds the number of available places, and students face different wait times for services depending on where they live.²² It can take up to six weeks for a referral to Navigator to be finalised, and once a service provider receives a referral, students who are in areas of high demand can face an 'active hold' for four to six months.²³ VAGO also found that very few students engaged with Navigator achieve the program target of a return to education at 70 per cent attendance for two terms.²⁴ Though VACCA's education programs we engage with students who are disengaged from school, and often these students require more support than what programs like Navigator can provide, for example counselling or cultural support. We therefore believe that an Aboriginal Navigator stream should be created to ensure that Aboriginal students receive tailored supports relevant to their needs.

What VACCA sees as a major inhibitor to preventing disengagement before the point of referral to Navigator is the large class sizes and under-resourcing of teaching staff within schools. Teachers are expected to support a classroom of an average of 23 students, and often do not have sufficient time and supports for students who have behavioural issues or different needs.²⁵ This lack of support can lead to students with behavioural difficulties disengaging from school or being referred to special schools, because mainstream schools do not have the resources to support

¹⁸ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2022), *Effectiveness of the Navigator Program*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, Victorian Auditor-General's Office.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Zyngier, David (2019), *2019 Report Card for Australia's National Efforts in Education*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).



them. However, the majority of these students do not have a diagnosed disability, instead conditions such as mild intellectual disability, behavioral problems and learning difficulties. The Australian Human Rights Commission outlines that funding is unavailable for students with these conditions, leaving them without adequate supports, unable to participate in the mainstream school environment but also unable to qualify for special schools.²⁶ Teachers report that if students who fit these categories had even a small amount of disability support funded they would have the ability to prosper in their education, however this is prohibited by the strict funding structures and categories which currently exist.²⁷ Furthermore, when students are diagnosed with disability and referred to special schools the stigma surrounding attending a special school can create barriers to attendance and engagement. VACCA believes that further work needs to be undertaken to integrate special schools into the mainstream and ensure that the mainstream schooling environment can meet the needs of all students, including a more holistic response to students with different behavioral needs so students may stay on the same site and maintain social connections.

Recommendation:

That the state government increase the capacity of culturally safe early intervention and prevention programs for both primary and secondary students showing early signs of disengagement with education.

- Increasing the capacity of the Navigator program and develop an Aboriginal specific stream.

Transition to high school

Coping well and adjusting to changes during the transition to school has been found to be associated with future academic achievement, stable peer relationships and better school attendance and completion.²⁸ How children and young people are prepared for and experience transitions between education stages and settings impacts heavily on their experience of education, particularly when these transitions coincide with move into or out of OOHc, or between carers. One of the roles of Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESO) is to work with students and families to support Aboriginal students through transitions across all learning stages – into early years, primary, secondary and further education. However, KESOs have a large caseload of students and often cannot provide the level of support required for each and every student due to resourcing limitations. Carers, families, case managers and early childhood educators all play a key

²⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Access to Education for Students with a Disability*, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ State of Victoria (DET and DHHS) (2018) Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

role in school readiness, by ensuring that any developmental or other support needed has been identified, and that children have access to any services and funding they may need to thrive in a school setting. Schools need to be aware of any support needed in order to be able to prepare and apply for any funding required. KESOs and other Aboriginal families also play a key role in the transition to school, as described by one parent:²⁹

'We were preparing for it (school) when they started kinder – mostly it just started out as a discussion with family and community members, of their experiences at school you know what worked for them, what didn't work for them....They (a KESO) can direct you in the right way, schools in your area, something that will tailor to your child's individual needs and education that is really going to suit them'

KESOs prioritise building the relationship, connection and information flow between families and schools, and cultural safety:

'For the transition we look at two parts, it is around the Education needs of the student and also the cultural needs of student as well. Before we can move forward on anything we need to make sure relationships are built, and from there we can focus on their education. Historically schools haven't been a safe place for our children, so providing that allows them to get the best education possible'

- KESO³⁰

Primary school to high school

VACCA staff have highlighted that the transition between primary school and high school is a particularly stressful time for students, where the likelihood for disengagement is much higher. In primary school, children are likely to have one key teacher as a focal point to support and monitor progress each year. By high school, young people need to manage multiple teachers with varying styles and expectations, and multiple classrooms throughout the day. This can be experienced as disruptive and confusing, in particular for children in OOHC. The VACCA education team reports that children in OOHC may not be ready to operate at a year seven level when they start high school, setting them up for struggle, shame and disengagement. This places them at risk of early disengagement from school, particularly when combined with any challenges associated with the circumstances that have led to them being in OOHC.

²⁹ (2022) Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council (yet to be published)

³⁰ (2002) Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council (yet to be published)

To identify any issues with literacy, maths and science skills are addressed as early as possible, the Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026 for Koorie students requires all government schools to prepare Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Career Action Plans, and Transition Plans for every Koorie student in their school. Unfortunately, for many Aboriginal students in OOHC, these are not being completed in a timely manner, not being used or followed up on adequately. In 2016, the Commission for Children and Young People led *Always, Was Always Will Be Koorie Children*, the systemic inquiry into services for children and young people in out-of-home care. They found that 'DHHS and DET do not fully comply with policy requirements relating to Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care system; this impacts negatively on Aboriginal children's education, cultural safety and wellbeing'.³¹ VACCA education workers shared experience of young people in residential care, with an IEP, not being followed on for 4-5 months, despite not having attended or engaged with school at all during that period.

Recommendations:

That the Department of Education provide resourcing for intensive support to prepare children for school transition periods, including:

- Ensuring key stakeholders, including parents, carers, case managers, KESOs, LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisors and Learning Advisors connect early to collaborate and share information around support needed for school to support smoother transitions.
- Resourcing education specialist positions to provide consultation to OOHC and Better Futures case managers to more effectively support education pathways and outcomes for children and young people.
- Investing in Aboriginal specific programs and supports to ensure successful transition from school to work and/or further study, including encouraging innovative and creative partnerships that meet the variety of needs, interests and skills of young people.

The state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to – Training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;

³¹ CCYP (2016) *Always was Always will be Koorie children: Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC in Victoria*, p.85

The education system can be difficult to navigate for children and young people who experience developmental delays, disabilities, neurodivergence, or the cognitive impacts of trauma. Schools and teachers are not often resourced with the time or knowledge to develop creative or individualised responses to the children in their classrooms, leaving many children without meaningful or effective ways of engaging with educational content. There also appears to be a lack of opportunity or willingness from school supports for creative and flexible responses to the needs of children who are disengaged. It is vital that responses are multi-faceted and highly flexible to allow for the varying and complex needs of these children. Outreach capacity is crucial in these situations, and many mainstream schools are not equipped to manage this need.

Schools, workers, care teams and Student Support Groups (SSG) need to consider what they need to put in place to reengage children who have become disengaged from school and education. Far too often it is considered the responsibility of the child to manage the changes required to fit back into the school environment and system, when the onus for change should be on the educators and the system to assess how they can adapt to the needs of the child and make the school a safe and supportive environment for these children to return to. Schools need to be meaningfully engaged with programs such as Navigator and the LOOKOUT Centers to provide informed and safe opportunities for reengaging and improving the educational experience of students facing adversities.

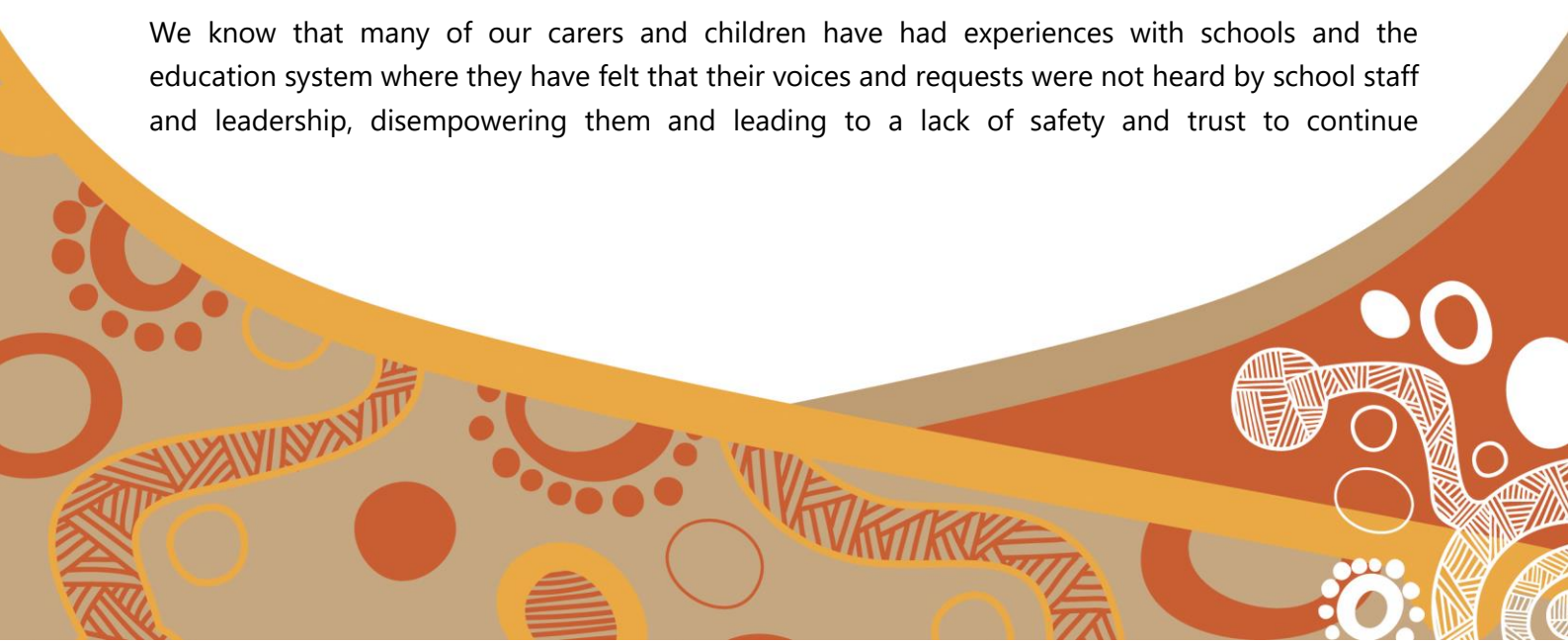
Recommendations:

That the state government ensure students of all abilities are supported to access culturally safe education and support services

- Funding development, dissemination of resources for special schools to promote Aboriginal culture and inclusion for all abilities.
- Developing a guide for children, carers, and families for transition into independent living from Special schools.
- Working with schools to identify, support and refer Aboriginal children with learning difficulties, developmental concerns and disability to appropriate, culturally safe disability and allied health services and education supports.

The impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture

We know that many of our carers and children have had experiences with schools and the education system where they have felt that their voices and requests were not heard by school staff and leadership, disempowering them and leading to a lack of safety and trust to continue



engaging with the system. Our experience also tells us that schools are often punitive and deficit-based in their approaches to students, punishing school refusal or behavioral concerns, and focusing on the difficulties and challenges rather than strengths, protective factors, opportunities for growth and creative approaches to learning and behavioral support. One of the biggest gaps we see is that schools are not culturally safe, engaging or representative spaces, and we understand that this lack of cultural engagement and relevance is a significant barrier to Aboriginal children feeling safe and welcomed in the school environment.

For children who are at risk of or have disengaged from school, the lack of active response from schools to meaningfully reengage them leaves many children feeling that teachers and school staff don't have their interests, wellbeing or needs in mind – that they don't care how or where the children are when they are not attending school. Most mainstream schools and education environments are not resourced with time or capacity for meaningful outreach and reengagement plans to prevent disengagement or to work with the young people to transition them back into the education environment. Schools are often not effectively utilising the systems put in place to support children who are at risk of disengagement, and thus are missing opportunities to intervene early and support these children to have enjoyable and successful educational experiences. VACCA is aware of cases where children have been disengaged from school for months, without even an IEP in place to support them. Early intervention is vital to wrap support around these young people and work with them to develop plans to help them navigate the difficulties they are facing.

Once children have disengaged completely from school and education, the challenge to reengage them is much greater, and is one that schools are currently often not well enough resourced to manage. Without the time, understanding and capacity to engage in meaningful and consistent outreach with children who are school refusing, reengagement is extremely difficult. Furthermore, caseworkers are often not trained or experienced in working with school refusal and disengagement, leaving carers often faced with the task of navigating this complex problem, amongst the many other difficulties they may be facing at home.

The current state of student wellbeing in in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal and broader student disengagement

School refusal and disengagement



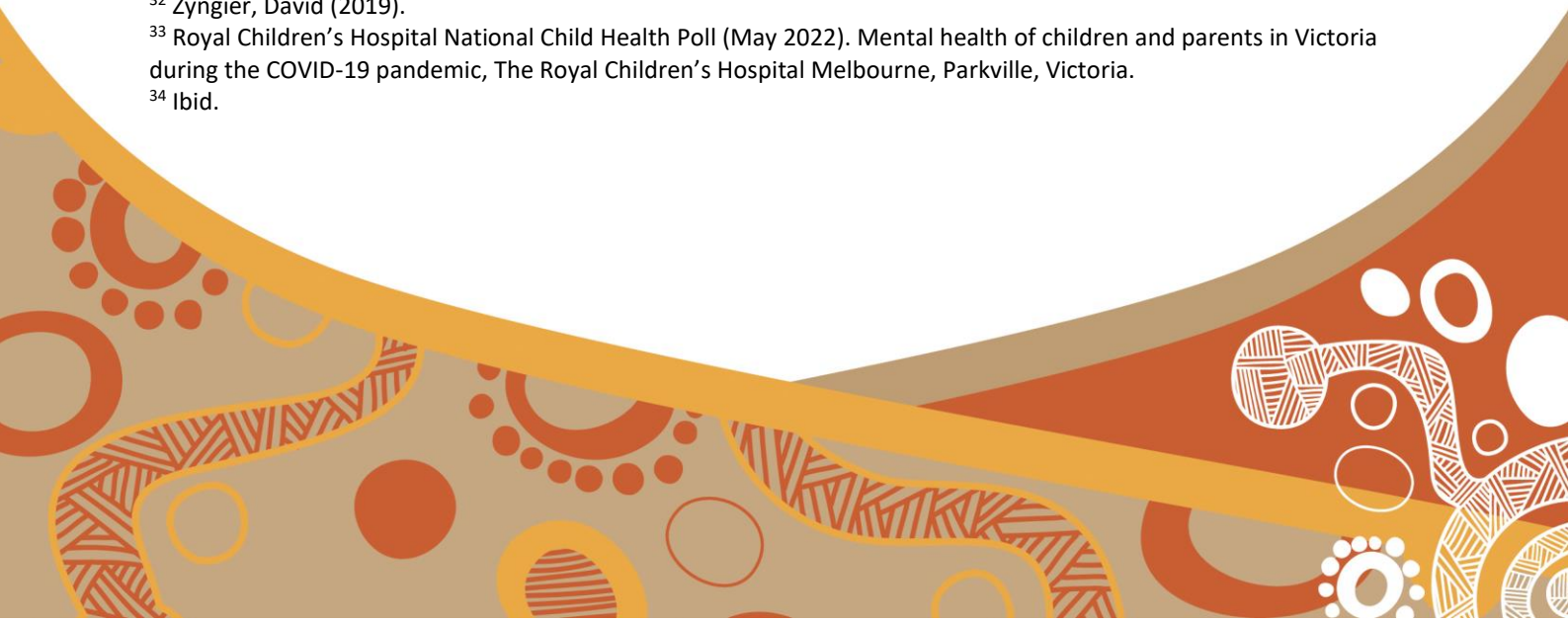
School attendance saw a decline nationally in 2022, with the attendance rate for students in Year 1-10 declining from 90.9 per cent in 2021 to 86.5 per cent in 2022.³² Research indicates this decline was due to the affects of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning, with extended periods of lockdown and remote learning contributing to school refusal and disengagement. Research into the mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne found that remote learning had a significantly negative effect on children in Victoria, who experienced loneliness and social isolation during lockdowns.³³ The research highlighted that in December 2021, '50 per cent of children were still experiencing negative effects of remote learning on their mental health, 53 per cent had negative impacts on friendships and connectedness and 52 per cent required extra help with their learning because of a lack of face-to-face learning in throughout the pandemic'.³⁴

Education or school disengagement can take many forms and has many causal and contributing factors. For many children and young people in OOHC, education disengagement is most likely to look like school refusal. However, school refusal is often the outcome of a process of disengagement that has gone unacknowledged or unmanaged as challenges have arisen for the student across various aspects of their lives. In VACCA's experience, disengagement from schooling often begins appearing as other behavioral concerns, which, when left without appropriate, trauma-informed and culturally safe responses, leads to children and young people disengaging from their learning and refusing to attend school. VACCA education staff report that due to under resourcing, it is often difficult to intervene early enough to assist with student disengagement. As aforementioned, even in programs such as 'Navigator' which support disengaged young people to return to education and learning often lack the resources to be able to assist all students at risk of disengagement. For VACCA staff, the lack of resourcing results in workers having to make choices about who they support, which will most likely be the most disengaged students, and therefore allows others showing early warning signs slip further. VACCA workers note that when students are facing adversity at home, education is usually the first thing they struggle to retain, and it is very challenging to build this engagement back once they have missed a lot schooling. VACCA has been advocating for an Aboriginal Navigator program to be funded, to better meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people.

³² Zyngier, David (2019).

³³ Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (May 2022). Mental health of children and parents in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic, The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

³⁴ Ibid.



Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing

With one of the largest concentrations of Aboriginal students in Melbourne Metro area, [Thornbury Primary School](#) provides an example of a primary school delivering a strong language and culture program across the school, to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike. In 2018, an attitudinal survey found that Aboriginal students 'outperformed non-Koorie students in all areas, including classroom behaviour, respect and connection to school. NAPLAN results for Aboriginal students have reportedly also significantly improved since the introduction of this school wide approach. Reservoir East Primary School is another strong example reported by VACCA workers, with Aboriginal parents and carers highly engaged and active at the school, including in the literacy program, providing great opportunities and role models for children. We recommend the committee look more closely at the work undertaken within these schools and identify how these approaches can be replicated on a statewide scale, to ensure that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students have the opportunity to engage in language, culture and history.

