



Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

Response to the Systemic Inquiry into the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Living in Out-of-Home Care

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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.

INTRODUCTION

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 support positive engagement and outcomes in education. This submission draws on VACCA's experience delivering OOHC support as well as early childhood and education support.

VACCA hosted a series of 'community yarns' from May-July this year 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 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. Feedback from the nine yarning circles informs this submission, alongside broader research and input from VACCA staff working in the education and OOHC sectors.



VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Commission for Children and Young People's (CCYP) systemic inquiry into the educational experiences of children and young people living in OOHC. Our submission outlines the following observations and recommendations, in response to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference as they pertain to the children, young people and families with whom we work.

NOTE 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.

KEY POINTS

- Aboriginal children and young people living in OOHC can face a number of compounding challenges and barriers in their lives, including both intergenerational and childhood trauma, disconnection from family, culture, community and Country, social and emotional wellbeing concerns, and often instability and uncertainty in their placements.
- It is widely known that children living in OOHC are at a greater risk of poor educational outcomes than their peers. Furthermore, Aboriginal children and young people remain vulnerable to poorer educational outcomes when compared to non-Aboriginal peers. Closing the Gap data shows that whilst some progress is being made regarding commitments to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, overall educational outcomes remain lower than those of non-Aboriginal children.
- The Education and Child Protection systems have a responsibility to provide culturally safe, trauma-informed structures and supports for children in OOHC, to allow them the best possible chance of strong educational engagement and a safe and supported experience at school.
- In VACCA's experience, Aboriginal children in OOHC are not experiencing school or education as positive, culturally safe or inclusive. Key factors and challenges impacting the experience of education for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC include:
 - Racism and lack of cultural safety and representation
 - Lack of trauma-informed practice across teacher workforces
 - Lack of access to culturally safe early help and early education
 - Disengagement and school refusal
 - Lack of appropriate support to make successful transitions across education settings
 - Lack of early identification and support for disability and developmental delays
- The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021 made education experience more difficult and inaccessible for Aboriginal children in OOHC, with disengagement numbers increasing and difficulty reengaging children and young people in face-to-face learning post-lockdown.
- Currently Victoria is not on track to meet the five specific targets relating to education for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.
- Another key concern for VACCA is the degree to which educational policies and practices for Aboriginal children support them to engage and stay in school. Ongoing failures of DFFH and DET to ensure that Aboriginal children in OOHC have the best possible chance of educational success are well documented. The educational policy landscape is complicated, with responsibilities sitting across federal and state governments, and a lack of funding and resourcing means that needs of the most vulnerable children are not met.



VACCA RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Ensure the right to self-determination is upheld and voices of Aboriginal children and young people are listened to and respected in education settings**
 - Ensure Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Career Action Plans, and Transition Plans are completed in a timely manner and revisited frequently for every Aboriginal student.
 - Hold regular community yarns that centre the voices of Aboriginal children, families and carers in education reform.
 - Establish 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.

- 2) Ensure availability of accessible, high quality early childhood services that are culturally inclusive for Aboriginal families**
 - Allocate government funding for dedicated Aboriginal early childhood services, programs and kindergartens. Services should be voluntary and non-stigmatising.
 - At least five of the 50 new centres announced under the recent Victorian government \$9 billion investment in early childhood education should be owned and operated by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, including two Aboriginal led long day care and kindergarten centres in the population growth corridors of the West (Melton or Werribee) and in Bayside Peninsula (Frankston).

- 3) Increase cultural safety of schools and early childhood services**
 - Ensure all schools are upholding curriculum and legislative requirements as outlined in the Marrung strategy, through monitoring, evaluation and accountability KPIs.
 - Utilise and disseminate the existing available expertise, support and resources designed to promote cultural safety and representation of Aboriginal children, young people, and their connection to community, Country, culture in schools.
 - Support and encourage peer learning between schools who are succeeding in creating culturally safe and inclusive spaces and those who are trying to establish these.
 - Resource an ACCO to establish a specific Aboriginal Navigator Program.

- 4) Schools to receive more supports to become trauma-informed environments**
 - Mandate teachers, school support staff, and leadership receive regular culturally informed training in understanding trauma and working with children in trauma-informed ways.
 - Resource schools to develop a trauma-informed environment and systems to support all children.
 - Resource teachers and support staff with the time necessary to invest in relationship building, feedback loops and re-engagement efforts.

- 5) Prepare for and provide intensive support through transition periods**
 - Ensure 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.
 - Resource 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.



- Invest 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.
- 6) Ensure students of all abilities are supported to access culturally safe education and support services**
- Fund development, dissemination of resources for special schools to promote Aboriginal culture and inclusion for all abilities.
 - Develop a guide for children, carers, and families for transition into independent living from Special schools.
 - Work 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.
- 7) Evaluation of the implementation of the Out-of-Home Care Education commitment**
- VACCA would like to see the intent of this agreement realised, and to do that we believe there needs to be stronger accountability mechanisms with regular reporting to keep all parties accountable for implementation.
- 8) Increased financial and education supports for kinship carers**
- Kinship carer payments must be raised to align with Foster Carer payments.
- 9) Improve LGBTIQ+ inclusivity and safety in schools**
- Need to ensure the right of all students to be protected from discrimination and to feel safe and respected in their educational environments.
 - VACCA encourages the Inquiry to consider putting forward recommendations to Government as to how they can ensure that the legislative protection Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021 are applied across all schools, so all students are protected, supported and feel safe.
 - Funding for ACCOs to design and deliver culturally safe training, resources and consultation to schools.
- 10) VACCA recommends the Inquiry put forward recommendations that hold government accountable for its responsibility to:**
- Implement all recommendations from Taskforce 1000 and providing clear timelines for progress; and
 - Progress and meet agreed targets and Priority Reform Areas for Victoria's Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.

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 peoples. Exclusion from education, by whatever means, has implications for wellbeing, health, income, employment and a range of other social benefits.¹ Aboriginal children in OOHC are likely to experience disadvantage in accessing education due to the historical and systemic challenges Aboriginal children and young people face, as well as on account of being in OOHC.

The disadvantage of children in OOHC in accessing education is widely recognised, as evidenced by the need for and development of the [OOHC Education Commitment](#), a compact to improve education and health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people in OOHC.

The data on educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people is also widely documented. Five of the seventeen National Agreement on Closing the Gap relate directly to Aboriginal children and young people and access to education. Data shows that whilst some progress is being made regarding these specific commitments to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, overall educational outcomes for Aboriginal children remain lower than those of non-Aboriginal children.

Outcome 3: Children are engaged in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years

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 96.7 per cent in 2021. However, at the same time, the numbers of children starting formal schooling years assessed as being developmentally on track has decreased markedly. Whilst preschool enrolment is getting close to 100 per cent, long term educational outcomes have not improved at a similar rate. 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.

Outcome 4: Children thrive in their early years

Nationally, the proportion of Aboriginal children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) has decreased from 35.2 per cent in 2018 to 34.3 per cent in 2021. In Victoria, we have seen a slight increase to 35.6 per cent of Aboriginal children on track as compared to 31.9 per cent in 2018. However, this remains far below the proportion of non-Aboriginal children, of whom 57.7 per cent were assessed in 2021 as developmentally on track. The proportion declined for children in regional areas to 32 per cent.

Outcome 5: Students achieve their full learning potential

The most recent available data shows that in 2016, only 69.6% of Aboriginal people aged 20-24 had attained a minimum of Year 12 or equivalent, or a non-school qualification at Certificate III or above. This is far short of the 90 per cent of non-Indigenous students who had done so. In 2015, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at or above the National Minimum Standard ranged from 8.3 percentage points for Year 7 reading and numeracy to 13.6 percentage points for Year 9 reading.²

Outcome 6: Students reach their full potential through further education pathways

¹ AIHW (2021) *Indigenous education and skills*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/indigenous-education-and-skills>

² Victorian Government. (2016). *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf



In 2016, only 56.5 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years had completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above), as compared to 74.9 per cent of non-Indigenous people of the same age.

Outcome 7: Youth are engaged in employment or education

This target is to increase the proportion of Aboriginal young people aged 15-24 years in employment, education or training to 70% by 2031. In 2016, 65.4 per cent of Aboriginal young people aged 15-24 were fully engaged in education, employment or training, as compared to 81.5 per cent of non-Aboriginal young people.

The Closing the Gap data also demonstrates that regarding target 12, a commitment to reduce the rate of overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in OOHC by 45 per cent by 2031, the situation has become worse, rather than improving, at both a national and Victorian level. Aboriginal children and families are overrepresented at every point of the child protection system; and the overrepresentation increases at each stage: notification, investigation, substantiation and placement in OOHC. Victoria has the lowest rate for all children in OOHC (6.4/1000 compared to the national rate of 8.1/1000), but the highest rate for Aboriginal children in OOHC (103.0/1000, compared to a national rate for Aboriginal children of 57.6/1000).

Despite Aboriginal children being 20 times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be in OOHC, Aboriginal families in Victoria have significantly lower access than non-Aboriginal families to Intensive Family Support and other services intended to prevent child removal or minimise time spent in OOHC. Systemic racism is a key driver of over representation in OOHC and under representation in Family Services. Lack of proportionate funding to Aboriginal services is another. Data from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) shows that of \$91M directed towards Early Help in 2020-21 only \$2m was directed to Aboriginal Community Organisations working with families. Currently, Aboriginal children make up 19% of children in the child protection system but Aboriginal families make up only 7% of Family Services Cases.

This data gives a clear indication that further concentrated interventions and funding are needed to support Aboriginal children, young people, parents and carers to avoid placement in OOHC in the first instance, and to improve educational outcomes for those who are in OOHC.

RESPONSE TO THE INQUIRY'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

HOW CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE EXPERIENCE EDUCATION AND BARRIERS FACED

Lack of cultural safety and representation

For Aboriginal children and young 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. 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.³ There are particular protocols that teachers must follow when teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures,⁴ including how to create a culturally safe environment and work respectfully with Aboriginal community

³ VCAA, 2020. Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

<https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/static/docs/Learning%20about%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20histories%20and%20cultures.pdf>

⁴ VAEAI, 2016. Protocols for Koorie education in Victorian primary and secondary schools. <<http://www.vaeai.org.au/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2020/01/Protocols-for-Koorie-Education-in-Victorian-Primary-and-Secondary-Schools-2019.pdf>>



members. The combined approach contributes to creating a positive climate where Koorie learners are able to feel proud and strong in their cultural identity.⁵

‘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’ - Parent⁶

Ensuring that schools are culturally safe spaces is important for all Aboriginal children, but it is absolutely vital for Aboriginal children in OOHC who as a result of being removed from family, particularly for those children placed with non-Aboriginal carers, may have lost their primary connection to Culture and Community. Unfortunately, as has historically been the case, for many Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC today, racism and lack of cultural safety feature heavily in their experience of the education system. Recently VACCA held a series of community yarns focused on education with participants including primary and secondary students, some of whom were in OOHC, as well as parents, carers, elders and VACCA staff. The experience of lack of cultural safety and/or representation at school was prevalent in all the community yarns.

“There are too many opinions about what it means to be Aboriginal by non-Aboriginal people. They say we’re not black enough.” - Young person 17 years of age

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.

Aboriginal students are highly dispersed across Victoria.⁷ Aboriginal carers who may wish to 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 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 OOHC.

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.

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. For children in

⁵ Victorian Government. (2016). *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*.

⁶ Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council 2022 (yet to be published)

⁷ Department of Education and Training (2016)

https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/aboriginal/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf



OOHC, the sense of being acknowledged and seen for both Aboriginality and experience in OOHC is very important. One primary school aged child in OOHC noted how meaningful it was to them when a teacher took the time to ask after their wellbeing, the simple question of 'how are you' asked with real care and intent created a sense of being seen, and safety, as did questions around mob and culture which supported a sense of belonging and pride. 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 utmost priority that teachers in all schools have the skills and resources to support all students to learn, understand and engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and so on through a culturally safe and informed approach. There is a wealth of freely available expertise, support and resources designed to promote culturally 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.⁸ 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.

Lack of trauma-informed practice

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 behavioural challenges, social and emotional wellbeing concerns, and difficulties with healthy relationships.⁹ 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 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

⁸ Reconciliation Australia [Narragunnawali: Curriculum Resources](#). Retrieved July 2022 from: <https://www.narragunnawali.org.au/curriculum-resources>; VAEAI Resources. Retrieved from: <https://www.vaeai.org.au/documents/>

⁹ State of Victoria (DET and DHHS) (2018) Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/health/PartneringAgreement.pdf>



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 behaviours 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 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 children in OOHC, both children 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 also 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.¹⁰ 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 needed 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.

¹⁰ Child Safety Commissioner (2009). From isolation to connection: A guide to understanding and working with traumatized children and young people. Retrieved from <https://earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/files/isolation-to-connection-september-2009.pdf>

Not only does a lack of a trauma-informed environment impact children and young people, but this also has negative impacts for teachers and school staff. Teachers need the training and opportunity for critical reflection through supervision on their own emotional regulation and capacity. Staff need to be in tune with their own emotional triggers and capacity in order to respond appropriately and effectively to a child or young person dealing with the impacts of trauma and experiencing emotional dysregulation. In a school that is trauma-informed, staff should feel supported to learn the best practice ways to manage the behavioural needs of the children in their classrooms, and the confidence to make safe decisions in the moment.

Lack of access to early help and early education

A child's education experience starts much earlier than primary school and even kindergarten. Evidence demonstrates that participation in quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), particularly for children experiencing vulnerabilities, can support a child's development, improves their readiness for school, and promotes social and emotional wellbeing across the lifespan.¹¹ In effect, ensuring that Aboriginal children in OOHC have access to ECEC can help prepare them for primary and secondary school, potentially mitigating challenges in attendance, engagement, and completion that many young people in OOHC experience in their later years.¹²

Maternal Child Health Services

Maternal Child Health (MCH) services are designed to ensure parents and carers are supported with advice and information about child and family issues, and supported to monitor growth, behaviour and development. Interaction with services such as Maternal Child Health increase the likelihood of any potential developmental concerns being identified and assessed early which in turn improves the likelihood of appropriate interventions to support the child access school.

However, Aboriginal participation in Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service visits is up to 18 percentage points lower than it is for all children.¹³ This is concerning as non-attendance at the three-and-a-half-year MCH check correlates with a 30 per cent higher risk of poor educational outcomes.¹⁴

VACCA staff report that many Aboriginal carers and families are more likely to approach trusted community members or family than professionals such as MCH nurse or doctor if they hold concerns about child development, given fear or previous experiences of insensitive or offensive communication and treatment from these services. This means the carer and child miss out on professional advice and intervention, which may then become a barrier to education later in life. There is a clear message from families and ACCOs that early childhood professionals such as MHC service need to learn from community how to deliver information about child and family in a more culturally safe way, through building spaces for carers to talk openly together, without fear of judgement and share their experiences.

Koorie Supported-Playgroups

Culturally safe supported playgroups are often undervalued as a resource to support young children and carers. They provide an opportunity for long term and regular engagement of both parent or carer and child with facilitators trained in early childhood education and who aim to support families with particular needs or vulnerabilities. Facilitators deliver a purposeful program that can educate and

¹¹ The Productivity Commission (2013). *Deep and persistent disadvantage in Australia: Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper*. Melbourne, VIC: Author. Retrieved from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/deep-persistent-disadvantage/deep-persistent-disadvantage.pdf>

¹² Elek, C., et al. (2020). Can early childhood education programs support positive outcomes for Indigenous children? A systematic review of the international literature. *Educational Research Review*, 31. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100363>

¹³ Victorian Government (2016). *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*.

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



support parents and carers, and provide opportunity for professionals to identify any concerns that may warrant further assessment in regard to development, as outlined in the example below – ‘[Koorie Kids supported playgroups](#)’ Playgroups can run from birth right up until school and provide a sense of continuity for children in OOHC. Specialist playgroups can offer specific support for children with developmental delays.

There is evidence these supported playgroups are effective in engaging children and carers, and a need to see these supported to expand into more areas and increase knowledge of and referral to these playgroups in order that all Aboriginal children in OOHC and their carers are able to access them. More so, the playgroups may be a way to support families and prevent children being placed in OOHC in the first instance.

VACCA currently provides a number of facilitated playgroups for Aboriginal families with young children with a particular focus on utilising playgroups as a strategy to engage and support vulnerable Aboriginal families with very young children. See for example Koorie Kids Supported Playgroups¹⁵ and Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder.¹⁶

Preschool (Early childhood education)

Recent data released by the Productivity Commission shows that in 2021, 96.7 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were enrolled in preschool (kindergarten) programs for the year before school.¹⁷ However, at the same time, the numbers of children starting formal schooling years assessed as being developmentally on track has decreased markedly. In fact, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely as other children to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school.¹⁸

Attendance at kindergarten has a significant positive impact on later NAPLAN outcomes, particularly in the domains of Numeracy, Reading and Spelling. It is also critical to ensuring children are school ready and have access to the supports they may need to thrive in school setting. Early education provides opportunity for identification of any developmental, social or learning needs, as well as opportunity for early education teachers to communicate with the school to which the child will be attending, to ensure smooth transition and early supports in place at school.

VACCA encourages the Inquiry to seek clarification as to whether the rate of attendance at preschool matches enrolment. In VACCA’s experience despite government funded access to three- and four-year-old kindergarten for all Aboriginal children and children in OOHC, we are still seeing children starting school without having attended kindergarten.

Experiences of racism, cultural safety and inclusion impact on kindergarten attendance rates. To this end, the Victorian Government has recently announced a commitment to invest \$9 billion over the next decade in pre-school education and support for children and families. Given that lack of physical early years infrastructure in key areas of high Aboriginal population growth is a major inhibitor on the growth of the Aboriginal Community Controlled early years sector, VACCA contends that at least five of the new centres should be owned and operated by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. This would be consistent with State Government policy in support of Aboriginal self-determination and ensure that those services are offered in a culturally safe and engaging manner. Allocating a minimum proportion of the \$9 billion would significantly advance the outcomes and targets under Closing the

¹⁵ SNAICC (2022), *Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency: Koorie Kids Supported Playgroups*, Retrieved from: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/SNAICC-Early-Intervention-Profile-VACCA.pdf>

¹⁶ SNAICC (2022), *Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency: Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder*. Retrieved from <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/SNAICC-Early-Intervention-Profile-VACCA-AC2K.pdf>

¹⁷ Productivity Commission (2022). *Dashboard Update June 22*. Retrieved from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard>

¹⁸ SNAICC <https://www.snaicc.org.au/media-release-mixed-bag-for-children-in-latest-closing-the-gap-data/>



Gap relating to child development and family wellbeing.

Disengagement

A significant problem experienced by children and young people in OOHC is disengagement from school or any educational programs. In VACCA's experience, a large proportion of young people living in Residential Care specifically are completely disengaged from school and education, and engagement continues to be an issue of great concern across all OOHC programs.

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 behavioural 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.

Children and young people in OOHC are often living with a history of trauma, lack of physical, emotional or cultural safety, multiple placements and placement breakdowns, disconnection from family, culture, community and Country, and other compounding difficulties. For these children, schools are far too often unsafe, unwelcoming and isolating experiences. 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, 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 children in OOHC, punishing school refusal or behavioural concerns, and focusing on the difficulties and challenges rather than strengths, protective factors, opportunities for growth and creative approaches to learning and behavioural 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 living in OOHC 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.

Children in OOHC are far more likely to have had experiences that have led them to have difficulty



trusting the adults in their lives and are likely to experience the lack of meaningful follow up and engagement from their teachers or school staff as abandonment or a lack of care; further embedding their feeling that school is not safe or worthwhile. If the school environment is not a safe or trusted space, children and young people in OOHC are far less likely to want to engage, attend or participate meaningfully in their education.

Another significant factor for children in OOHC having trouble with school engagement is shame. Aboriginal children and young people living in OOHC are more likely to be struggling with multiple and complex difficulties, including difficulties with school, relationships and family, and the compounding impact of racism and lack of cultural safety. In mainstream school environments, these children are likely to compare themselves to their peers who may have had significantly less barriers and gaps in their development and opportunities and therefore may find the school environment easier to engage with. For children who have missed a lot of schooling and had difficulty with their education, the barriers to reengagement are significant, including delays in literacy, lack of established social networks and difficulty navigating social and educational norms that their peers have developed an understanding of.

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 in OOHC 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 Centres to provide informed and safe opportunities for reengaging and improving the educational experience of children and young people in OOHC. VACCA has been advocating for an Aboriginal Navigator program to be funded, to better meet the needs of Aboriginal children and young people.

Challenging Transitions

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.¹⁹ 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.

School ready: Kindergarten to primary school

¹⁹ State of Victoria (DET and DHHS) (2018) Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/health/PartneringAgreement.pdf>

Involving significant change, such as new routines, environment and relationships, transition to school can be a stressful experience for any child. For children in OOHC who may have already been required to change home and early childhood education services due to changes in their circumstances or living arrangements, it can be a particularly challenging time. For Aboriginal children in OOHC, the added layer of navigating a space that may not be culturally safe, or facing racism, is an additional challenge.

Access to early learning opportunities and regular attendance at kindergarten is critical to ensuring children are school ready: confident, with the learning skills required to enter primary school.²⁰

'Kinder laid the foundation for us, sort of pointed us in the right direct of services, and gives her the routine... being a kid with autism, gave her that structure. Kinder got her ready for early mornings and stuff like that, and then school was just newer things, more fun stuff to do for bigger kids. When she got there she just took over and did the rest herself.' - Parent of school starter²¹

Carers, families, case managers and early childhood educators all play a key 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:²²

'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'

- KESO²³

VACCA's experience with children we are supporting in OOHC is that there is sometimes a lack of connection between the key stakeholders that can support transition to school. Namely, VACCA case managers, KESOs, LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisors and carers. Lack of deliberate and early connection between key stakeholders can make transition more difficult with critical information not being shared early enough. Training and support of case managers by education specialists through case consults and other means could help address this issue.

Primary school to high school

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

²⁰ VAEAI Protocols 2019

²¹ (2022) Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council (yet to be published)

²² (2022) Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council (yet to be published)

²³ (2002) Quote from a collaborative project VACCA ran with the Aboriginal education workforce, Aboriginal Best Start and Darebin Council (yet to be published)



and expectations, and multiple classrooms throughout the day. This can be experienced as disruptive and confusing. 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.

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. The Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC in Victoria 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'.²⁴ 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, as discussed further in the 'disengagement' section of this submission.

From high school to tertiary education and employment

Every year in Victoria approximately 600 young people aged between 16 and 18 exit out of home care.²⁵ Transition from high school often corresponds to the period in which young people are also preparing to or already transitioning from care, making it a potentially highly volatile period of change. Without adequate planning and support during this transition period, care leavers face poorer outcomes in terms of access to education, risk of homelessness, mental and physical health concerns, exploitation, disconnect from family and culture, contact with the justice system and development of life skills required for independent living. Aboriginal care leavers, who make up around one quarter of all care leavers in Victoria²⁶ face additional challenges of racism, disconnect from culture and the impact of intergenerational trauma.

The 2020 CCYP 'Keep Caring' report found that almost half of young people on the verge of leaving care were no longer studying or in any kind of training.²⁷ The Victorian Better Futures Program is designed to support young people prepare for transition from care, however, as reported in 'Keep Caring', the program is not resourced to meet the needs of young people as it was designed to. Planning often failed to address critical post care needs including physical and mental health, further education or training, and sustainable and culturally safe accommodation. Instead of focusing on these critical elements, worker time and resources were being diverted to young people in crisis.

However, positive experiences arise for Aboriginal young people in care when creative and broad approaches to future planning post school are implemented and show young people what might be possible. For example, the Work Ready Program in Melbourne's North. In partnership with Bridge Darebin, over the past couple of years the Work Ready Program has been run with VACCA's Better Futures and Barreng Moorop programs for 14–18-year-olds. The program was designed to support Aboriginal young people learn skills and information to acquire a part-time job. Skills and training included developing your CV and cover letter and preparing for interviews. Aboriginal employment officers from Coles, Bunnings and Bakers Delight come and speak with the young people as well as one of VACCA's Organisational Development team to discuss VACCA's trainee and internship programs. The

²⁴ 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

²⁵ DHHS (2021) *Better Futures factsheet for providers*. Retrieved from: <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/better-futures-factsheet-providers>

²⁶ Mendes et al. 2020

²⁷ CCYP (2020) *Keep Caring: Systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care*. Retrieved from: <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Uploads/CCYP-Keep-caring.pdf>

program runs over six weeks including one week of undertaking a food handling course and work experience at the social enterprise café run by Bridge Darebin 'Moon Rabbit'. The feedback for this course has been overwhelmingly positive, and this model shows a flexible, local partnership between an ACCO and an employer.

When schools and organisations create opportunities and partnerships like this, young people who are not thriving in mainstream school settings can be supported to identify a passion and be supported to pursue that as part of a community, setting themselves up for future employment and community participation, rather than feeling isolated and disengaged from school with uncertain future.

Effectiveness and utilisation of available tools

Schools are required to have strategies in place to support children in OOHC to engage with school and their learning. There are a number of different tools and plans available and required to be used to support children and young people in OOHC at school. The key tools for supporting Aboriginal children in OOHC are the Student Support Groups (SSG), Individual Education Plans (IEP), Educational Needs Analysis (ENA), Cultural Support Plans (CSP) and Behaviour Support Plan (BSP). The importance and necessity of these plans and tools are outlined in the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment (the Partnering Agreement), which embeds the commitment across the sectors and partners to improve the education, health and wellbeing outcomes of children and young people in OOHC.²⁸

The effective use of these plans is vital for providing these students with an appropriately supportive school environment in which to engage, learn and feel safe. It is the responsibility of schools to meaningfully collaborate with carers, workers and the young people themselves, to commit to the consistent and purposeful development and implementation of these plans throughout the school life of each child or young person who lives in OOHC.

Unfortunately, in VACCA's experience, these plans and tools are often forgotten, misunderstood or poorly utilised, leading to the breakdown of relationships, trust and safety, and to the detriment of the child's educational experience. We see a lack of development, follow up and implementation of IEPs and SSGs, especially in cases where the young person is refusing school or at risk of disengagement. At the secondary school level particularly, we see IEPs and BSPs used ineffectively, too late or not at all, including one example of a young person who had not attended school for at least four months, and who did not even have an IEP in place. This indicates a serious lack of commitment by the school to playing their part in supporting students to remain in, much less thrive in their educational environment. When these plans are not fully understood, embedded and utilised by teachers and schools from early in the student's school life, it is the students who are most disadvantaged. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that teachers and school staff are prepared to navigate the needs and potential challenges of children in OOHC in supportive, culturally safe and trauma-informed ways.

There is a lot of value in the Partnering Agreement, as a guide for supporting students who live in OOHC, but if not properly understood by teachers, fully committed to through the SSG, or actioned with the input and agreement of the student and all key adults, then this agreement and its associated tools and plans are wasted. Data obtained from our internal surveys with our carers (pre-Covid) indicate that while SSG meetings are generally occurring, children are rarely involved in them, and follow up actions are poor. IEPs need to be thoroughly designed, with the student, teachers, key support staff and carers involved and agreeing on all aspects. Plans will be less effective if they don't take into account the strengths, protective factors, cultural needs and preferences of the young person, as well as the barriers, triggers and challenging behaviours. IEPs and BSPs are not being utilised in timely, consistent or creative ways. BSPs should not be used as a last resort when a young person is heightened or disengaged. Schools need to be able to pick up on the signs of difficulty earlier and

²⁸ State of Victoria (DET and DHHS) (2018) Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/health/PartneringAgreement.pdf>

provide a safe environment for the student to express their needs and be met with support and flexibility. In primary schools we see this occur more often in a therapeutic and organic way than in secondary school environments. The children and young people who live in OOHC often do not have the knowledge or skills to self-regulate, build relationships or trust easily – behaviour support plans, learning plans and schools must not place the responsibility of this on these students. Schools must resource their staff with the time and skills to engage in the tools and plans outlined in the Partnering Agreement, to ensure that they are well equipped to support students who live in OOHC, alongside the other students in their care.

Disability

It is widely accepted that children and young people with disability are over-represented within the Child Protection system²⁹ although the prevalence specifically of Aboriginal children with disability is less clear. It was only recently that the annual Child Protection Australia report published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) began disaggregating data on the basis of disability.³⁰ The 2020 report showed 12 per cent of Aboriginal children in OOHC were reported as having disability.³¹ However, this figure only encompassed those with a diagnosed disability and consequently fails to reflect the enormity of the issue. Taskforce 1000,³² a systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC in Victoria, also revealed 14 per cent of Aboriginal children were identified as having a known disability.

In a recent internal data review looking at the rates of diagnosed disability across 35 programs, VACCA found that the combined program areas of OOHC, leaving care and child protection diversion programs had the highest percentage of Aboriginal children with a disability, with 38% of clients across these programs reported to have a diagnosed disability. Learning delays, speech-language delays and mental health conditions were the most prevalent disabilities/difficulties reported. We know from the broader literature that Aboriginal children are around three times more likely to need assistance with learning³³ and the data on ADHD prevalence in the VACCA disability data review (20% of child clients had a diagnosis of ADHD and a further 2% were having ADHD assessed) highlights an additional area of assistance needs in relation to learning, school engagement and educational outcomes, as well as Closing the Gap targets. VACCA contends that if our review encompassed undiagnosed disabilities, including trauma, that these figures would have been much higher.

VACCA have found that Aboriginal children and families in VACCA programs are not accessing NDIS early intervention, for children under the age of seven years old, to its fullest capacity. Instead, family and/or carers are taking the responsibility of caring upon themselves without the necessary supports. Barriers to accessing NDIS, and therefore to any education supports that might be accessible through NDIS, appear to include:

- that parents, carers and the workers who support them are having difficulty in navigating NDIS and the disability sector.
- A lack of choice, cultural safety, support and inclusion in meeting the needs of Aboriginal children and young people with disabilities
- A lack of coordination between the Child Welfare and Disability sectors.

²⁹ Create Foundation, 'Supporting children and young people with a disability living in out-of-home care in Australia,' Brisbane (2012).

³⁰ AIHW, Child Protection Australia 2018-19, Child welfare series no. 72. Cat. no. CWS 74. Canberra: AIHW (2020)

³¹ As above.

³² CCYP (2016) Always was Always will be Koori Children

³³ Australian Bureau of Statistics & Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Community services. The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008. 2008, Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 219-242.



VACCA strongly urges that child protection, education and disability workers supporting Aboriginal children better collaborate to support these children engage well at school with the support they need. There also appears to be a need for staff in OOHC programs to be equipped with training and resources to recognise disability and the need for assessment, referral pathways, and a basic understanding of NDIS early intervention services.

Access to and use of culturally appropriate screening tools

Children in OOHC are a vulnerable group with often complex social, emotional and developmental needs linked to experiences of trauma. Research has demonstrated that children in care have poorer health outcomes than the general population, in particular mental health and developmental outcomes.³⁴ However, developmental or learning challenges for Aboriginal children, including those in OOHC, are too often not identified until a child starts school when the prep teacher identifies the child is not school ready.

For children in OOHC, case managers and carers play a key role in ensuring children are attending early services and also in being aware of any potential development concerns themselves that should be a trigger to seek assessment and further support. This relies on carers and case managers having the tools, knowledge and training to do this. VACCA is working to support upskill case managers in this regard, so that they can be an additional support to children, carers and families they are working with. One example of this is providing access to ASQ-TRAK training for staff in some of VACCA's programs. Trained VACCA workers can then use the family-centred developmental screening tool designed specifically for observing and monitoring the developmental progress of Aboriginal children at 2 months, 6 months, 12 months, 18 months, 24 months, 36 months and 48 months of age. The tool supports professionals and families to increase knowledge on how to look out for early signs of developmental delay, referral pathways for further assessment and supporting applications under NDIS.

The use of this tool more broadly amongst health and early childhood workers could support more Aboriginal children in care with developmental support needs to be identified earlier and access required intervention. Other key early help and early education opportunities include access to culturally safe MCH services, supported playgroups, 3- & 4-year-old kindergarten (pre-school), discussed now.

Access to support at special schools

Carers in the VACCA yarning circles noted that it took a long time for KESOs to be introduced to special schools, despite having been present in mainstream schools for some time. Knowing the benefit of KESOs, these carers felt children with disability were being overlooked and forgotten.

Even with KESOs present in special schools now, there are less resources and teachers to support the needs of Aboriginal students in these schools. Students and families identified lack of resources to allow students of all abilities to engage in Culture and celebration of Culture. However, in the case of one non-verbal student attending a special school, creative resources were developed that allowed the student to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country using flashcards. This was a source of great pride and an indication that more can and should be done to ensure children of all abilities and with diverse needs can access culturally inclusive support at schools.

LGBTIQA+ children and young people

Aboriginal children and young people who live in OOHC and are also a part of the LGBTIQA+ community, are living at the intersection of multiple grounds of identity, all of which are likely to impact their experience of education and school. We know from recent research in Australia that 60%

³⁴ Osborn A and Bromfield L. 2007. Outcomes for children and young people in care. AIFS NCPC Brief No. 3 — October 2007. <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/outcomes-children-and-young-people-care>

of surveyed young people in secondary school report feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in school because of their sexuality or gender identity, and that 27% reported never hearing LGBTIQ+ people mentioned in a supportive or inclusive way in their schooling.³⁵ While there is currently limited research looking further into the intersectional experiencing of these young people (awaiting further Aboriginal-specific analysis of the Writing Themselves in 4 research),³⁶ it can be inferred that, with the challenges already facing Aboriginal children and young people living in OOHC, the added layer of discrimination, harassment or lack of visibility for their LGBTIQ+ identity adds further complexity and barriers to their educational experience.

Lack of systems cohesion

A key barrier to good educational outcomes for children in OOHC is the lack of systems cohesion between the child protection and education systems. There is often a lack of strong communication and collaboration between OOHC or Child Protection workers and school staff. The key adults and workers in the lives of children in OOHC need to have strong, trusting relationships in order to develop good plans and provide consistent support to these children throughout their schooling journey.

Trust and mutual respect and understanding between these systems and professionals is vital, as while OOHC workers and teachers are required to have varied and broad knowledge in their roles, each will bring the specific expertise of their sector and role to the team supporting the child. The SSG needs to see themselves as a team, with aligned goals, approaches and understanding.

Both the education and child protection systems have a responsibility to the children in OOHC to provide them with safety, support and flexibility in engaging them in their education. When these systems don't work together, children and young people are left without consistency and continuity across their networks, which increases their chances of falling through the cracks. There needs to be stronger links between the intersecting sectors that are often involved in the lives of children in OOHC, including child protection, education, disability, health and youth justice.

VACCA welcomes more collaboration between ACCOs and schools to enhance the support provided on both sides. Barriers to this will include resourcing to schools and ACCOs to facilitate the work needed to improve the system, organisation and professional relationships and collaborative opportunities.

Carer capacity to support

For children and young people living in Kinship Care and Foster Care placements, their educational experience can be further impacted by the capacity and engagement of their carers. Carers are often under significant pressure, with the challenges of caring for a child with a trauma background, as well as often with other children in their care as well. Furthermore, there is a significant issue identified with carers living in significant financial stress. Over 50 per cent of VACCA's kinship carers are living below the poverty line. The recent VAGO report into Kinship Care in Victoria indicated that 96 per cent of kinship carers receive the lowest level of care allowance, compared to 32 per cent of foster carers.³⁷ The pandemic also highlighted early on that many families in OOHC did not have access to the technology required for remote learning. The impact of financial strain on these families is far-reaching, including generalised family pressure, inability to provide school required items or pay for school activities, and difficulty providing consistent digital and internet access.

Further to this is the impact of the carers own educational experiences on their perception, value of, engagement with, or feeling of safety engaging in the education system. Many of our kinship carers are

³⁵ ARCSHS, La Trobe University (2021) Writing Themselves in 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ young people in Australia. Retrieved from https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1198945/Writing-Themselves-in-4-National-report.pdf

³⁶ ARCSHS, La Trobe University (2021) Writing Themselves in 4

³⁷ VAGO (2022) Kinship Care. Retrieved from <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/kinship-care?section=>



grandparents or other relatives, some of whom may have not been able to complete or engage with schooling themselves for various reasons. This has the potential to impact how they value or view schools or education, and their ability to support the young people in their care with their learning.

Carers and parents in our education programs have reporting finding school interactions to often be disempowering experiences where their voices are not heard and therefore, they do not feel safe to continue engagement. It is vital that schools are safe and supportive spaces not only for their students, but also for carers who may have complex needs and backgrounds of their own. A strong and effective SSG will provide carers with a safe space to interact and be a part of the team to support their children, even if their capacity is limited. Again, this highlights the importance of the SSG working well, for the team around the child to support the child and each other through whatever difficulties may arise.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND ASSOCIATED LOCKDOWNS ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN OUT OF HOME CARE

During 2020 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to the provision of education in Victoria focused VACCA's attention on the educational needs of the Aboriginal children and young people in our programs. We know there has been high levels of absenteeism and disengagement from school for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria in the past two years.

The number of children that we are supporting in OOH has increased through COVID also, thought to be a result of increased family violence reports and the long-term nature of COVID stress on families.

Due to COVID-19, many Aboriginal children and young people have had significant disruptions to their education and have been physically isolated from their family and community. Early childhood education and support services have been impacted with limited access to services such as playgroups for Koorie children. Families are concerned about sending their children to day care due to fears about COVID-19 transmission, they may not have been employed in a 'permitted workforce' so their child could not attend childcare during stage four lockdown, nor have a babysitter or carer at home. Being unable to access alternative care due to these restrictions meant very limited, if any extended family and community supports during this time. Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and other early years services are under financial pressure and the current funding model coupled with the pandemic impact has placed significant pressure on services. As discussed above, if children and families are not accessing early childhood and kindergarten, this may have harmful implications for their school readiness in the years to come.

School-aged students learning remotely experienced disengagement from education due to limited support being offered by DET and schools in the initial stages of the pandemic. Limited access to resources, appropriate learning stations, devices and reliable internet all have implications for the facilitation of home learning, engagement and quality of the children's home learning experience. COVID-19 has also disrupted supports available for Aboriginal students who are facing complex issues or vulnerabilities, including those with additional learning requirements and/or a disability. Remote learning for students without the adequate supports in place has been challenging with consequences for their social and emotional wellbeing, especially for those who have experienced trauma. In terms of youth engagement with education and support groups, poor access to technology for young people remains a major barrier given that under COVID-19 restrictions, such supports were no longer offered face-to-face. The lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students had a significant impact on potential for early intervention for preventable difficulties and disengagement, with school staff unable to see the signs in advance and intervene with appropriate supports.

Disrupted schooling and potentially ongoing pivoting between remote and school-based learning relating to the level of restrictions in place has been challenging for Aboriginal students. There is a certain level of continuous assistance required by children and young people, including both supporting the capacity of parents, carers and Elders to support young people's education and the



need for links to mentors and tutors to maintain engagement with learning. Looking to recovery, the transition back to school when social distancing restrictions are eased, without targeted supports in place, may risk further school disengagement among Koorie students.

At the tertiary level, the pandemic situation has increased disengagement among Koorie apprentices, and trainees and other VET learners. Some apprentices have been stood down or have had their employment and training significantly disrupted.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequity experienced by children in OOHC, which is vital for schools and organisations to note and learn from. A silver lining of the pandemic and associated restrictions has been the research to come out of it around impacts of the pandemic, including isolation and disruption, on education, wellbeing and increasing inequity. Furthermore, we are noticing a shift in thinking during this time in teachers and schools becoming more aware of the lack of engagement (throughout and post-remote learning) of the students with the most complex needs, including those in OOHC. We are beginning to see more schools approach our service to improve their support for Aboriginal children and young people in and out of OOHC, recognising the need for targeted, culturally safe and trauma-informed ways of supporting students. There is an opportunity in this time for schools to shift their practice for engagement of those students, thinking more creatively and intentionally, as we saw the capacity for throughout lockdowns.

THE EXTENT TO WHICH POLICIES AND PRACTICES RELATING TO OUT OF HOME CARE SUPPORT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO STAY IN SCHOOL

A key concern for VACCA is the degree to which educational policies and practices for Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC support them to engage and stay in school. The educational policy landscape is complicated, with responsibilities sitting across federal and state governments, and a lack of funding and resourcing means that needs of the most vulnerable children are not being met.

At the state-level, ongoing failures of DFFH and DET to ensure that Aboriginal children in OOHC have the best possible chance of educational success are well documented. Notably, the *2016 Taskforce 1000 Inquiry*³⁸ found significant failures of DET and DHHS to comply with protocols and agreements in place to safeguard the cultural rights of Aboriginal children in OOHC. This included “the ability to access Koorie-specific education services, to have ILPs in place and to access mainstream schooling”. Such failures had negatively affected Aboriginal children and young people’s education, cultural safety and wellbeing while in OOHC. The Inquiry made a number of key recommendations, including:

- 8.7 Accountability and performance measures to be incorporated in relevant departmental and school planning documents and in the individual performance plans of DET Deputy Secretaries and school principals including:
 - Demonstrated engagement of a KESO for every child
 - Engagement of every child with an SSG
 - An ILP for every child that is regularly reviewed and monitored
 - Demonstrated improvements for every child’s numeracy, literacy and educational attainment
 - Demonstrated improvement in the child’s school engagement and attendance
- 8.8 DHHS and DET to report on a quarterly basis to the ACF and to the Marrung Central Governance Committee on the number of Aboriginal children in OOHC, by year level attained, that: have been expelled, suspended or disengaged from school attend a special school or special/alternative education program

³⁸ CCYP, 2016. *Always Was Always Will be Koori Children*. Commission for Children and Young People.

<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/assets/Publications-inquiries/always-was-always-will-be-koori-children-inquiry-report-oct16.pdf>



- 8.9 DET to review the KESO program to ensure that all KESO positions are filled on an ongoing basis and that all Aboriginal children in OOHC are engaged with a KESO worker
- 8.11 DET to provide and promote educational support and resources for all Aboriginal children in OOHC that are linked to their ILPs, to help them reach excellence in education potential
- 8.12 DET, DHHS and ACF, to review and refresh the *OOHC education commitment: A partnering agreement* and the complementary *Early Childhood Agreement for Children in OOHC* to ensure that pre-school-aged children in OOHC care who attend kindergarten are also afforded ILPs and SSGs to ensure the best chance of educational engagement, achievement and leaving care.

Many of the above recommendations remain either not implemented or only partially implemented exposing Aboriginal children in care to further adverse impacts. As Victoria's lead Aboriginal child and family welfare organisation, VACCA has a responsibility to advocate for the educational needs of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC. VACCA encourages the Commissioner to hold the government to account and seek clear timelines about when these recommendations will be implemented in full.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap

Through the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* (the 'National Agreement'), all Australian governments have committed to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children on their journey from early childhood education and care through to higher education. The key education targets in the National Agreement are:

- *Target 3: By 2025, increase the proportion of Aboriginal children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education 95%*
- *Target 4: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent.*
- *Target 5: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal people (aged 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96%*
- *Target 6: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above to 70%)*
- *Target 7: By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15-24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 percent.*

The *Victorian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan* outlines the specific actions the government has committed to for achieving the above targets. VACCA notes that Victorian Government actions specified under targets 5 and 6 are predominantly existing commitments, including the continuation of funding for three-year old kinder for Aboriginal children, and for supports programs like LOOKOUT, the Koorie Education Workforce (KEW), cultural safety training, and the subsidisation of TAFE.

Furthermore, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* and the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019* hold a series of principles and priorities which are meant to support improved educational outcomes for children. However, the degree to which such agreements are leading to practical change is debatable. Furthermore, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* makes no specific mention of the needs of Aboriginal children who are involved in the child protection system. Meanwhile, the *Mparntwe Education Declaration 2019* contains predominantly broad commitments to supporting Aboriginal knowledges and identities but lacks detailed commitment and the investment to achieve its goals, particularly for the early childhood education and care.

Access to Early Childhood Education and Care

Whilst Victoria offers universal three and four-year old kindergarten, funding for early childhood

education and care (ECEC) for 0- to 3-year-olds is the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government.

Aboriginal community-controlled early years services, such as Bubup Willam, Lulla's Children and Family Centre, and Yappera Children's Service provide more than just childcare. Whilst there is room for further services such as providing access to early childhood assessments, they are often a one-stop shop of support services for children and families, including kinship carers, and support in building a strong sense of identity, belonging and cultural connection for Aboriginal children.³⁹ VACCA believes that further efforts, including coordination between the commonwealth and state governments, should be directed to addressing administrative burdens for both families and service providers to enable the youngest children in OOHC to have access to culturally safe ECEC.

Families access the ECEC system through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), which determines a child's hours of learning based on their parents' participation in work or study. Vulnerable children, including those in OOHC, can qualify for additional hours through the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS). The ACCS program has been criticized by SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, who have noted that process of applying for ACCS can be “complex and stigmatising” and that Aboriginal-led early years services “have consistently raised challenges to access the ACCS, noting that the need to identify families as vulnerable and make support service or child protection referrals drives fear and disengagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.”⁴⁰ This process still requires the child's carer to apply to access the CCS/ACCS and a letter of support from the child protection confirming the ongoing care arrangements every six months, creating a significant administrative burden for both services and carers. Furthermore, VACCA notes that children in residential care are not considered eligible for either CCS or ACCS because the Commonwealth Government considers responsibility for their care to be that of the state/territory government.⁴¹

At the state-level, the **Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care** aims to increase the involvement of young children in care in ECEC. Unfortunately, this agreement focuses almost exclusively on access to three-and-four-year-old kinder. There is a significant opportunity, through this inquiry, to direct attention toward the importance of strengthening access to ECEC for Aboriginal 0- to 3-year-olds through state-level agreements, and acknowledging, that as the guardian of children in OOHC, the state has a duty of care toward these children to afford them every possibility to succeed in education.

Out-of-Home Care Education Partnering Agreement

In Victoria, the Department of Education and Training partners with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, to support the educational needs of children in OOHC. This includes through the Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment (the 'Commitment') is a partnership agreement between the Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing; the Department of Education and Training; Catholic Education Commission of Victoria; Independent Schools Victoria; VACCA; and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare. The agreement recognises the specific educational needs of Aboriginal children in OOHC, including the importance of culturally inclusive practices for promoting the engagement, *achievement*, and retention of Aboriginal students.⁴²

³⁹ Brathwaite, E., & Horn, C. (2019). *Service integration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood development: Final report*. Retrieved from:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d1563ccaaafe00001ca3d2c/t/5d5a729cb14a650001a3127e/1566208681879/F1000D_A_ServiceIntegrationReport_June2019.pdf?mc_cid=29793e3bad&mc_eid=0fc5b1fa71

⁴⁰ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2020). *SNAICC Federal Budget Proposal 2020*, p. 3. Retrieved from: <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SNAICC-Federal-Budget-Proposals-August-2020.pdf>

⁴¹ Australian Government. (2021). *Guide to Additional Child Care Subsidy: Child Wellbeing*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dese.gov.au/child-care-package/resources/guide-accs-child-wellbeing>

⁴² Victorian Government. (2018). *Out-of-Home Care Education Commitment: A Partnering Agreement 2018*. Retrieved from: <https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/supporting-students-out-home-care/policy>



Under the Commitment, LOOKOUT Centres are presented as a key mechanism for improving educational outcomes for children in OOHC. Whilst LOOKOUT is not an Aboriginal specific initiative it has a Koorie Cultural Advisor. The Centres intersect with the functions and roles of Child Protection Practitioners and with case workers in CSOs and ACCOs. They are designed to improve coordination amongst service providers. LOOKOUT Centres aim to improve educational outcomes by:

- Advocating for the best educational outcomes for students in OOHC
- Providing professional development to school staff regarding the importance of quality IEP, SSGs, Learning Mentors and the impact of trauma on learning and behaviour
- Working with Child Protection Practitioners (CPP), case managers and carers to raise the profile of education and embed education as a priority when decisions are made about a child or young person's care
- Establishing a Designated Teacher in every Victorian school who will be the champion for students in care in their school
- Establishing better data linkage between the DET and DHHS, so that students in care can be more effectively monitored and supported, particularly during transitions in care or school
- Building the capacity of schools, carers, CPP and OOHC services to support students' improved school attendance and education engagement and achievement.

There are four LOOKOUT centres state-wide, and each is led by a school principal, education specialists, allied health professionals and Koorie Cultural Advisors (KCAs). KCAs work with students, community, case workers and schools to ensure that the needs of Aboriginal students are reflected in their CSPs which are embedded in their IEPs. All KCAs are required to be Aboriginal workers with experience in the education system and strong connections to local communities. The KCA works collaboratively with ACCOs, peak agencies and the KECs and KESOs in order to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC.

In 2021, VACCA conducted a survey amongst OOHC case workers, which suggested that LOOKOUT centres have been important in building capability amongst child protection and education systems to support the needs of students living in OOHC. For example, 69 per cent of respondents knew about LOOKOUT Centres, and 62 per cent reported having met with the school's Koorie Education Support Officer. Of the 169 young people whom the case workers supported, 86 per cent had an IEP and 78 per cent of children and family reported having a copy.

Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-26

In addition to the specific commitments contained within the *Out-Of-Home Care Education Partnering Agreement*, DET developed *Marrung* through a formal partnership with VAEAI with contributions from VACCHO and VACCA. *Marrung* is Victoria's education strategy for Aboriginal children and young people.⁴³ Key actions outlined include:

- Improve cultural inclusivity of service providers
- Support sectors to enhance learners' understanding of Koorie culture and history
- Increase opportunities for Koorie people to participate in decision making that affects them
- Develop our leaders in the early childhood, schools and VET sectors
- Support Koorie parents as first educators of their children
- Increasing participation of Koorie families in parenting education and support programs in communities with high rates of children living in OOHC

⁴³ Victorian Government. (2016). *Marrung: Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*. Retrieved from: http://www.vaeai.org.au/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2019/06/Marrung_Aboriginal_Education_Plan_2016-2026.pdf



- Improve access to and participation in early childhood services including Maternal and Child Health, supported playgroups and kindergarten programs
- Support schools to better support their Koorie students
- Provide improved support for all Koorie learners undertaking further education and training.

The partnership between Government, VAEAI and other key stakeholders through the Marrung Central Governance Committee, is a critical structure for developing responses and addressing challenges related to the educational needs of Aboriginal children in OOHC.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGES TO POLICY, PRACTICE LEGISLATION OR THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES TO IMPROVE EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION IN OOHC AND PROTECT AND PROMOTE YOUNG PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION

1) Ensure the right to self-determination is upheld and voices of Aboriginal children and young people are listened to and respected in education settings

- Ensure Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Career Action Plans, and Transition Plans are completed in a timely manner and revisited frequently for every Aboriginal student.
- Hold regular community yarns that centre the voices of Aboriginal children, families and carers in education reform.
- Establish 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.

2) Ensure availability of accessible, high quality early childhood services that are culturally inclusive for Aboriginal families

- Allocate government funding for dedicated Aboriginal early childhood services, programs and kindergartens. Services should be voluntary and non-stigmatising.
- At least five of the 50 new centres announced under the recent Victorian government \$9 billion investment in early childhood education should be owned and operated by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, including two Aboriginal led long day care and kindergarten centres in the population growth corridors of the West (Melton or Werribee) and in Bayside Peninsula (Frankston).

3) Increase cultural safety of schools and early childhood services

- Ensure all schools are upholding curriculum and legislative requirements as outlined in the Marrung strategy, through monitoring, evaluation and accountability KPIs.
- Utilise and disseminate the existing available expertise, support and resources designed to promote cultural safety and representation of Aboriginal children, young people, and their connection to community, Country, culture in schools.
- Support and encourage peer learning between schools who are succeeding in creating culturally safe and inclusive spaces and those who are trying to establish these.
- Resource an ACCO to establish a specific Aboriginal Navigator Program.

4) Schools to receive more supports to become trauma-informed environments

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



5) Prepare for and provide intensive support through transition periods

- Ensure 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.
- Resource 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.
- Invest 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.

6) Ensure students of all abilities are supported to access culturally safe education and support services

- Fund development, dissemination of resources for special schools to promote Aboriginal culture and inclusion for all abilities.
- Develop a guide for children, carers, and families for transition into independent living from Special schools.
- Work 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.

7) Evaluation of the implementation of the Out-of-Home Care Education commitment

- VACCA would like to see the intent of this agreement realised, and to do that we believe there needs to be stronger accountability mechanisms with regular reporting to keep all parties accountable for implementation.

8) Increased financial and education supports for kinship carers

- Kinship carer payments must be raised to align with Foster Carer payments.

9) Improve LGBTIQ+ inclusivity and safety in schools

- Need to ensure the right of all students to be protected from discrimination and to feel safe and respected in their educational environments.
- VACCA encourages the Inquiry to consider putting forward recommendations to Government as to how they can ensure that the legislative protection Equal Opportunity (Religious Exceptions) Amendment Bill 2021 are applied across all schools, so all students are protected, supported and feel safe.
- Funding for ACCOs to design and deliver culturally safe training, resources and consultation to schools.

10) VACCA recommends the Inquiry put forward recommendations that hold government accountable for its responsibility to:

- Implement all recommendations from Taskforce 1000 and providing clear timelines for progress; and
- Progress and meet agreed targets and Priority Reform Areas for Victoria's Closing the Gap Implementation Plan.

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