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About APTA

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) is a federation of state and territory joint councils representing teacher associations. These professional teaching associations can represent a network of up to 200,000 teachers from government and non-government schools, early childhood services, universities, technical and further education centres.

The vision of APTA is to provide national leadership that supports and advances the teaching profession. As a voice for teachers, APTA provides an alternative to principal committees or teacher unions, having a classroom practitioner perspective that is connected directly to the students.

Professional teaching associations were established long ago, by teachers, to improve the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of school and college education in their respective disciplines or subject areas. Teachers' associations are state/territory-wide communities of practice. They provide opportunities for teachers to participate in ongoing professional development. This may include attending conferences, workshops and other events, online learning, industry visits, and masterclasses with leading thinkers and practitioners. They also curate and disseminate resources and information about best practices and new developments in their field. These associations are often the only source of teacher professional learning in a specific subject or discipline. They build support networks and often advocate for policy changes to support quality teaching in discipline and knowledge areas.

APTA submission

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission relating to the develop of the First Nations Education Policy.

APTA asserts that the success of the First Nations Education Policy depends on moving beyond high-level frameworks to the "how" of classroom practice. As a practitioner-led body, we provide a unique alternative to principal and industrial voices, offering the pedagogical expertise and professional networks that work at scale to directly engage with the Australian teaching workforce.

Our response here is based on research and observations from teachers with a commitment to First Nations education. We warn that policies fail when they are developed by "outsiders," ignore cumulative local knowledge, or prioritise the act of policy creation over the reality of implementation. To address these risks, any policy should empower teaching associations as essential "insiders" who translate policy aspirations into the everyday teaching and decision-making that enables First Nations learners to thrive.

In our response, APTA identifies three critical areas for transformation in this space: Teacher Quality, Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDSov) and Structural Accountability. Impactful change requires a shift from deficit thinking to strength-based, high-expectation relationships that value the cultural capital of First Nations educators and students. We advocate for a reporting framework grounded in IDSov—prioritising community-defined success over dominant Western metrics—and a commitment to protecting our First Nations workforce from the cultural load and political agitation that threatens the progress of First Nations education.

We believe that by supporting the peer-to-peer professional infrastructure that associations provide, the Government can foster a "better and fairer" schooling system through this policy rather than repeating a history of professional marginalisation and policy failure. federal government can support indigenous teachers by providing funding for PTANT to support the establishment and growth phase of the Indigenous Teachers Association of NT (and possibly a national association?)

We have provided specific feedback in response to the discussion paper but have also made some other comments when relevant. I am able to provide further detail to the comments in this response if this will be of assistance.

We look forward to following the development of this policy.

Karen Yager

President

Australian Professional Teachers Association

1. What changes within education settings (e.g. schools, early learning centres, universities, and other formal and informal learning environments) would have the greatest positive impact on the experiences and outcomes of First Nations learners?

We have no doubt that submissions from other organisations and, most importantly, from First Nations people themselves will provide clear feedback on what is necessary for long-lasting change in this space and on the approaches that will have the greatest impact. In our submission, we will focus on the role of teachers and teaching associations, acknowledging that other changes and impacts will be noted.

We believe that the following changes are vital for education settings in promoting positive impacts:

1. Teacher quality

While also acknowledging the key roles of funding, resourcing and geographic isolation in determinants of success, research tells us that teacher quality is most impactful on the experiences and outcomes of First Nations learners. Connections should be drawn with other policy frameworks, including the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, to ensure that First Nations students have access to high quality, experienced and responsive teachers.

It has always been the case that remote and very remote communities have struggled to recruit high quality teachers, and this has been exacerbated with increasing shortages in urban and regional centres, which often better meet the work/life balance needs of teachers. Remote schools often have to recruit new graduates, early career teachers and international teachers to fill gaps. However, it is acknowledged that many of whom are extremely well suited to remote teaching. Conversely, it is also true that remote communities are required to recruit teachers who are unsuited for the challenges of remote teaching.

The First Nations Education Policy needs to consider workforce needs and ensure that adequate resources and support are provided both to principals and middle leaders responsible for implementing quality teaching, but also to relatively inexperienced teachers who are isolated from the support they might need.

Teaching associations can play a valuable role in providing this support. For example, the Professional Teachers Association of the Northern Territory (PTANT) allocates funds for remote teachers to attend relevant professional learning in Darwin or Alice Springs and facilitates funding for online networking and support. The Federal government should consider supporting indigenous teachers and leaders by providing funding for PTANT to establish and grow an Indigenous Teachers Association of NT and possibly a national association. Supporting the establishment and growth of this association in Northern Territory as a pilot for other states and territories through funds to APTA is a way that the Federal government can make a decisive difference.

2. Culturally responsive teaching

Quality teaching requires cultural responsiveness, which the discussion paper notes. We acknowledge the work of other stakeholders, including AITSL, in providing resources to support educators in implementing culturally responsive practices. It is vital that teachers move from simply being aware of First Nations issues, or from including First Nations' perspectives without care and consultation, to embedding pedagogical practices that incorporate Indigenous values, history and perspectives in daily lessons.

Teaching associations are ideally placed to support teachers in their efforts to embed culturally responsive practices. Associations are leaders in their subject areas, and can engage with First Nations groups, knowledge holders and Traditional Owners to design and develop appropriate support materials that are based on active consultation and engagement. For example, the most recent Australian Geography Teachers Association national conference included two plenary sessions specific to culturally responsive teaching in geography. This approach also ensures that programs are streamlined and can reduce the cultural load on First Nations people if they are overwhelmed with requests for support.

3. Strengths-based, high expectation approaches

Deficit perspectives are common in Australian schools and are frequently reinforced unintentionally. Quality teaching requires educators to be mindful of deficit perspectives, and to counter these with strengths-based, high expectation approaches. Mainstream accountability approaches are frequently unsuited in First Nations schools, where parents and carers deal with unfamiliar and often culturally unsafe systems. When parents feel like they cannot engage, teachers and schools can perpetuate lower expectations, such as “busy work”.

Determining what the basis for strengths and the expectations for students must be done in consultation with families and the community, noting that perspectives vary.

As with support for culturally responsive teaching, teaching associations are well placed to support educators in addressing deficit thinking, particularly in how it relates to subject-specific teaching. For example, there is a risk in a Civics program that discussions on civic engagement by First Nations people can be framed as a weakness, and not a response to structural barriers.

4. School/community partnerships

The discussion paper centres the relationship between education settings and the community, because we know that these are vital for success. This does require care, particularly for teachers who are new to a school or community, or who have limited previous experience in Indigenous education. Induction processes that include the community are vital for new teachers. It is also important that these procedures not be “owned” by particular members of the school community, such as the Principal or the Liaison Officer, because effective partnerships rely on relationships, and teachers need to be visible, active and engaged.

Experienced teachers need to be involved in developing and supporting induction processes. At times, these can be externally directed, such as through centralised or regional officers, and so are not contextualised. As in other areas, teaching associations provide a valuable means of identifying experienced, quality teachers who can support induction processes.

It is also important that non-Indigenous teachers understand that the values and aspirations for First Nations families and communities often differ to those of non-Indigenous people. For instance, a teacher may value Year 12 completion as being highly significant, whereas for parents, engagement in learning language and culture is deemed more important. The research of John Guenther and colleagues is helpful here and can assist non-Indigenous students to better understand what communities value and expect from their children’s schools¹.

5. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators

Increasing the number of First Nations educators is essential. These staff members provide continuity, speak community languages, and bring unique “cultural capital” that supports student engagement and academic achievement.

Care is needed here. Many policies, procedures and training materials are written for a non-Indigenous audience, and so a First Nations educator reading about culturally responsive teaching may struggle to find relevance or feel excluded from the conversation. Very often the starting assumption is that the audience will not be First Nations, which reinforces deficit perspectives. Actively engaging First Nations educators will

¹ See: Guenther, J., Disbray, S., & Osborne, S. (2015). Building on ‘Red Dirt’ Perspectives: What Counts as Important for Remote Education? *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 44(2), 194–206. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2015.20>; Guenther, J., & Osborne, S. (2020). Red Dirt Education Leaders ‘Caught in the Middle’: Priorities for Local and Nonlocal Leaders in Remote Schools. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 49(1), 57–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jie.2018.17>

ensure that materials written for teachers are not exclusionary. Teaching associations can play a role here. For example, an informal network of First Nations school teachers and educators has been established by the First Nations Hub at Charles Darwin University, and this group is exploring incorporation as a teaching association.

6. Eliminating racism and punitive discipline

Effective classroom management is a key skill for a quality teacher. Managing challenging behaviours is testing for highly experienced teachers, and so it is particularly difficult for early career teachers. These teachers need support in managing what can be very challenging classroom environments. Teachers developing classroom management skills and accessing support is often more successful at the peer-to-peer level, and this is another area where associations can play a role.

However, even with individual teachers possessing strong classroom management skills, the wider system can present significant barriers to First Nations student success. Punitive approaches are common, with higher rates of suspension and exclusion for Indigenous students. We acknowledge that sometimes these approaches are necessary, but it is particularly problematic when Indigenous students are singled out for behaviours and are punished for relatively minor infringements. In some states we also see punitive approaches through programs that fine parents for student non-attendance, a shortsighted approach that could reinforce deficit thinking and trigger trauma.

These punitive approaches are not always a result of personal prejudices. However, efforts do need to be made so that teachers and educators are familiar with issues of structural racism and how intergenerational trauma and the ongoing negative impacts of colonisation affect First Nations students. This may see a switch from punitive approaches towards a strengths-based approach that directly counters deficit thinking.

2. Do you think the initial four focus areas identified by the department reflect the most important things that the Policy should address?

The four focus areas included in the discussion paper are important, and we will respond in more depth on these later in our response.

However, there are some other key elements that should be emphasised in the policy. Although we are confident that many of these will be familiar to policy makers, we would like to highlight their importance.

1. Indigenous Data Sovereignty and data privacy

While the discussion paper refers to sovereignty, it is vital that the specific elements of Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDSov) are considered in policy approaches. Since colonisation, First Nations Australians have had limited control over their own data and have had Western concepts of data imposed upon them. Data is frequently framed in ways that promote deficit thinking, which includes Closing the Gap data which drives policy for First Nations Australians, and often does so with a deficit lens. Data sovereignty is also an essential element in First Nations Australians protecting their cultural capital, which is an essential underpinning of culturally responsive teaching.

Classroom teachers also need to have a greater awareness of IDSov and how it impacts on their work with First Nations students and how it impacts on First Nations colleagues. This is particularly true regarding countering deficit narratives that provide major barriers to successful engagement in education.

Allied with this is an emphasis on data privacy. Data on First Nations students, staff and stakeholders frequently includes valuable cultural data that requires additional care with regard to privacy. First Nations people need to have greater ownership and control of their data.

We strongly encourage policy makers to seek out the research and perspectives of Palawa academic Professor Maggie Walter in ensuring that IDSov principles can strengthen this policy. Teachers frequently

deal with data that can reinforce deficit thinking – NAPLAN data, attendance statistics, behaviour reports and so on. Walter’s research can be used to guide teachers on how their use of student data can reflect IDSoV principles. In addition, her research can assist teachers to expand their focus from mandated data (such as NAPLAN) to local, contextualised and Indigenous derived data.

2. Infrastructure and resource equity

The discussion paper includes a focus on improving access, but it is vital that any policy includes a focus on the infrastructure and resources available to students when they are accessing education. We can certainly allude to this issue being part of the discussion paper, particularly in regard to ensuring that culturally responsive resources are included, but there needs to be specific focus on the physical and technological infrastructure that are required for remote and very remote communities, such as reliable internet, hardware, and school facilities that are fit-for-purpose in a First Nations context.

Teaching associations can provide valuable information in this space. Many associations have reach into remote and very remote schools, where teachers face daily challenges in developing responsive teaching and learning programs with inadequate resources.

One key aspect of resource equity is to ensure that teachers understand when and how to use digital data, and to know if it is appropriate and applicable in particular contexts. It is not uncommon for teachers to purchase resources on sites such as Twinkl and use them without checking them for appropriateness.

3. Supporting the wellbeing of First Nations educators in a culturally responsive way

The discussion paper correctly acknowledges the central role of First Nations educators as part of a successful education system in Australia, and notes that this is a priority of other policies including the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement. However, it is very important that any First Nations policy recognise and respond to the unique pressures placed on the wellbeing of First Nations educators, particularly with regard to cultural load, racism in the workplace, and the uncompensated and often invisible work that First Nations educators undertake in their schools.

First Nations educators are also impacted differently to non-Indigenous educators through discourses that are commonly applied in policy. For example, Closing the Gap targets consistently underpin policy discussion in Australia, and yet these discussions frequently promote deficit views and reflect a lack of sovereignty for First Nations people.

4. Stronger connection to the role of families and adult learning

The discussion paper has a strong focus on institutional elements of First Nations education and that the focus is on educational settings. We are confident that policy makers understand the vital role of parents, extended family and mob in supporting the education of First Nations children. The focus of post-school and re-engagement for adult learnings should not focus solely on career progressions, but also on the benefits that adult education can have in ensuring parents and families can actively support their children.

5. Consideration of the impacts of climate change on country-based education

Culturally responsive teaching cannot be untied from Country. First Nations people know that Country is not static and is ever changing, and that this change is being rapidly impacted by climate change. First Nations communities, particularly in remote locations, are at the forefront of climate change and this brings increased risks of natural hazards, changes to the way in which traditional practices occur and may result in trauma as cultural places and practices are put at risk.

Any policy that includes a strong reference to culturally responsive practices should consider how the education system will support First Nations learners to engage with climate adaptation and the impacts on environmental stewardship, which are central to many communities' future aspirations.

3. What should be done to ensure the Policy creates long-lasting change?

While First Nations people, having borne the brunt of repeated policy failure, are best positioned to critique and transform these systems, the APTA board offers the following insights from our perspective as non-Indigenous educators with an extensive history in Australian education.

Since colonisation, virtually all policies regarding Indigenous education have failed. Given this consistent failure, policy makers must engage in genuine reflection on the nature of policy development and the research regarding why such failures occur. Of particular value is Hirschman's (1963) research on *fracasomania*, as examined by Walter and Carroll (2021)², which identifies four central elements of policy failure:

- 1) Outsider implementation: policies are largely developed and implemented by outsiders.
- 2) Lack of continuity: policies fail to build on cumulative knowledge of the policy issue.
- 3) Rapid volatility: policies change rapidly, often swinging from one extreme to another without proper evaluation.
- 4) Symbolic success: the mere act of creating a policy is viewed as a success in itself, leading to little institutional 'shock' when the policy fails to achieve real-world outcomes.

We see this pattern repeated in almost all Indigenous policies. These are often developed and imposed externally, and even if consultation occurs the issues and principles undermining the policy are often externally pre-determined, based on views of what is deemed to be important. They are frequently based on incomplete data, or with an overreliance on quantitative data over qualitative data. Hirschman's final point reflects to the need for a strengths-based, high expectation for First Nations students to also apply to policy makers. There is a view that simply writing a policy is enough. Should this policy ultimately fail to achieve what it sets out to achieve, the policy writers must be genuinely shocked that it has not worked and not simply shrug their shoulders and move on to the next policy.

Elsewhere in this response we have referred to systemic racism. It is also important for policy makers to reflect on how existing systems and structures can reinforce power imbalances, and how policies continue to exist as a form of control. The discussion paper refers to sovereignty, and consideration must also be given to how policies are often structured to deliberately deny greater self-determination for First Nations people.

Based on the information provided in the discussion paper, it appears that this policy approach aims to include First Nations Australians through all stages of the policy's development. However, it is also important that the policy be given time to work and to be properly evaluated, not thrown away when the political winds change. In addition, considerations should be given to the role that teachers – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – can play as “insiders” in policy development, and how teaching associations can connect decision makers with those with daily expertise.

Prompting questions for other stakeholders with an interest in First Nations education outcomes

Some of the questions in this section have been addressed in our comments on the overarching questions, but we have chosen to address some other questions that best reflect our experiences as active members of teaching associations.

Q18: How can we ensure curriculum implementation and teaching practices better reflect First Nations learners' culture, voices, needs and goals? and,

Q.24: What approaches or practices have proven effective in strengthening cultural safety across education settings?

- *Peer to peer support:* Culturally unsafe practices are often unintended and result from a lack of knowledge, understanding and experience. From APTA's perspective, teachers can be better supported to engage in

² Walter, M., & Carroll, S. R. (2021). Indigenous Data Sovereignty, governance and the link to Indigenous policy. In M. Walter, S. R. Carroll, T. Kukutai, & D. Rodriguez-Lonebear (Eds.), *Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Policy* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 1–20). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429273957-1>

culturally safe ways when this support is provided by a peer. Without a power imbalance, or concerns about compliance, teachers are more able to respond to new approaches. These discussions need to occur without the fear of administrative reprisal. As independent organisations separate from government, teaching associations are well placed to provide practical and safe support.

- *Discipline specific engagement:* Cultural safety looks very different in a science lab compared with a humanities classroom, and culturally responsive teaching will apply differently in Health as it will in Maths. As discipline specialists, we know that teachers need an opportunity to work with others in their field to apply these vitally important approaches in ways that suit their specific teaching contexts.
- *Elevating First Nations voices:* Culturally responsive teaching and strengthening cultural safety requires that First Nations peoples determine if a program is appropriate or an environment is safe. We see this work well when associations provide a platform for First Nations educators to lead the conversation, ensuring their cultural capital is the foundation of professional approaches.
- *First Nations mentors:* authentic mentoring by First Nations individuals with first-hand experience and understanding of what is needed.

Q19: What programs or other initiatives have you seen that effectively support First Nations learners and what elements of these were most impactful? What additional supports are needed?

Programs work most effectively when they are tailored to specific contexts, and where First Nations perspectives are central to their development. Some programs are widely used, such as Stronger Smarter (which works to address deficit thinking) and Berry Street (which is being adapted for use in many remote Indigenous schools). Regardless of source, almost all programs reflect particular ideologies, even within First Nations developed programs (for instance, Noel Pearson's *Good to Great Schools* differs significantly in approach and methodology to Chris Sarra's *Stronger Smarter*).

However, any policy should allow for localised programs which may be community-led. Examples may include the Nawardekken Academy which centres on-country learning and the Groote Eylandt-based "Our Country Our Culture" which focuses on language and culture. These local programs benefit from local engagement and community commitment, though a research base may not (yet) have been established. While a research basis is important, it should not prevent local communities from exploring options that they value and will commit to.

Q22. How can we support First Nations students to access education and support them to transition into early learning, primary, secondary, and post-school pathways?

Transitions between stages of schooling are an extremely important, and sometimes overlooked, challenge to First Nations education. Programs such as *Connected Beginnings* and *Families as First Teachers* are showing strong benefits for students transitioning into school; however, we do see challenges in the transition from primary schooling into secondary schooling. In many remote communities, this transition period aligns with important ceremonial events which reflect a dramatic change in role and outlook. A child suddenly moves into adulthood, and yet schooling systems do not acknowledge this and so students can disengage. This has flow on effects for transitions into senior secondary and into post-school pathways.

Addressing the four focus areas in the policy should help to address the cultural barriers that can limit student transitions in the adolescent years. Consideration should also be given to how young adults can re-engage in formal learning.

Q25: What supports or resources would help you contribute to a culturally safe environment?

We have addressed resourcing more broadly earlier in our response, and in our response to general question 4, we talk about how additional resources for professional teaching associations can provide genuine benefit in supporting the implementation of the First Nations Education Policy.

Q26: How can education better reflect and integrate First Nations cultures, needs and aspirations: from a whole of school perspective? from an education system perspective?

We have addressed this question elsewhere but also want to reinforce that it is essential that teachers are actively engaged in discussions regarding the implementation of any future policy, with a particular emphasis on engagement with First Nations educators.

On matters of educational policy at the federal or state/territory level, engagement is frequently sought from educational authorities, unions and principals' associations. The teacher voice is often overlooked or marginalised, with an expectation that principals can speak on behalf of teachers. While not undermining the valuable perspectives of principals and school leaders, it is teachers who deal most specifically with the impacts of policies.

Q28: How can education systems and organisations be accountable to First Nations peoples and responsive to their cultures, voices, needs and aspirations?

Considering the history of policy failure regarding First Nation's education policies, systems and organisations should be held to a much higher level of accountability. Referring again to Hirschman's research, where the expectation that failure is inevitable exists, there is often a disincentive to try. However – and this is vitally important – accountability measures cannot be enforced until the enhancers of success are implemented and the barriers for failure are removed. This requires unequivocal support to building quality teachers, addressing disparity in resourcing and infrastructure and a commitment from decision makers that they will give an appropriate amount of time, and will apply appropriate monitoring and evaluation tools to the policy before declaring it a failure (and, in the process, often blaming teachers for this failure).

It is not sufficient for decision makers to make unilateral decisions, such as occurred in the Northern Territory, to privilege Direct Instruction. It is also insufficient to take a successful program or approach in one context and insist on its applicability elsewhere. Respect for the diversity of First Nations voices, and an acknowledgement that different communities have different needs is vital.

4. Anything else you want to share?

Many First Nations students undertake their education in geographically isolated communities, with teachers who cannot easily access quality professional learning. As quality teaching is the driving factor for the success of First Nations students, we strongly encourage policy makers to consider how they can better support these teachers in their vital work.

The provision of funding for teaching associations provides a mechanism to support these aims in way that provides maximum impact while ensuring value for money. Teachers who are engaged in teaching associations are highly skilled, experienced and professional – but they almost always engage as volunteers. Teachers give their time freely to support their peers because they believe in collegiality.

When governments provide adequate funding for associations, then quality professional learning expands rapidly. For example, the Northern Territory government provides approximately \$120,000 per year in grants for associations to provide professional learning. These funds allow for travel for remote members, event management, the provision of guest speakers and so on. For the cost of mid-level management wage, over 600 teachers engage in over 50 unique professional learning events.

We encourage all policy makers to consider how teaching associations can support the development of a better and fairer schooling system, especially for those who have historically been marginalised.

This policy must reflect best practice, and there must be strong commitment by governments to be guided by the research. Key elements such as cultural safety and the removal of systemic barriers are essential for professional best practice and should be shielded from external political polarisation. If the policy's core objectives are compromised to satisfy ideological pressures, we risk undermining the very evidence-based strategies required to achieve equity for First Nations learners. In addition, ensuring that educators feel supported to implement this policy without fear of external controversy is a vital component of teacher retention and safety. For this policy to succeed,

it must provide a stable, protected framework that allows educators to focus on their primary mission: delivering high-quality, inclusive education. The policy cannot be watered down. It is essential that policy makers hold firm.

Finally, we want to reinforce our earlier point that care and consideration for First Nations teachers and educators must be a priority for policy makers. Their commitment and care must be valued, and we urgently need to grow, support and honour them.