



## Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission on Education and Schooling

### Overview of WDAC Submission on Education and Schooling

*“WDAC is our western division’s self-determination in action, changing the way we do business. We will call others to us and work on our own terms.”*

**The Western District ACCO Collective** (WDAC) are a strategic representative body of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) across the western districts of Victoria. WDAC are accountable to and prioritise the self-determined needs and aspirations of our western districts’ families, Communities and ACCOs. WDAC

- Is a powerful voice advocating at regional, state, and national forums for our families, communities and ACCOs.
- Use Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing to lead, design and facilitate the solutions to achieve equity and beyond for our communities.
- Holds government and partners to account at local and regional levels, to ensure that all Aboriginal funding is self-determined and led by Aboriginal families, communities and ACCOs.
- Supports whole of community approaches to address the ongoing harm of systemic racism that disproportionately impacts Aboriginal communities.
- Advocates for ongoing, equitable and significant funding for our ACCOs’ infrastructure, workforce, community strengthening, and services that we deliver ‘our way’.



L-R: Jason Walker (Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation), Karen Heap (Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative), Simon Flagg (WDAC Chair, Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative), Tony Craig (Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative), Tamika Holt (Dhauwurd-Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service). Absent: Tim Chatfield (Budja Budja Aboriginal Cooperative), Danny Chatfield (Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative), Nonnie Harradine (Kirrae Health Service Inc).

**WDAC’s submission recommendations focus** on the systemic remedies and accountability of the State to First Peoples justice by committing to leadership and transformative to remedy educational injustices. WDAC’s key recommendations include that

- 1. The Department of Education and Independent must facilitate self-determination and meaningful systemic change by honouring the sovereignty, self-determination, rights**



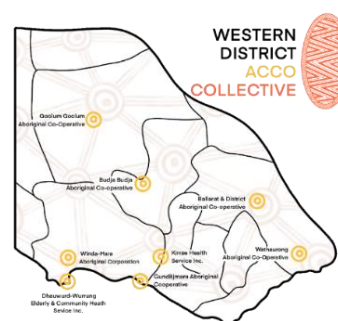
and authority of local Community leaders, organisations, and governance structures at regional, local, and school system levels.

2. The Victorian Government must embed and be accountable for truth-telling and anti-racism praxis across its own department and all pre-schools, public and independent schools.
3. The Victorian Government and independent schools must fund comprehensive wraparound supports for ACCOs and schools for all Aboriginal children, young people and their families to provide the highest cultural and school educational outcomes possible.

### About the Western District ACCO Collective

The Western District ACCO Collective (WDAC) is a representative body of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in the western districts of Victoria. WDAC is accountable to the self-determined needs and aspirations of our western districts' families, communities and ACCOs, with the backing of and funding from our government and regional partners. Our membership includes:

- ◇ Ballarat & District Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Budja Budja Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Dhauwurd Wurrung Elderly & Community Health Service
- ◇ Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Gunditjmara Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Kirrae Health Service
- ◇ Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative
- ◇ Winda-Mara Aboriginal Co-operative



ACCOs are critical for community and cultural strengthening. Our ACCOs all run specialist wraparound health and wellbeing support services for our families and communities from pregnancy through to the Dreaming. Our services are run by community, for community. Our services include cultural and community engagement, primary and allied health, social and emotional wellbeing and recovery, maternity services, early childhood, youth programs, family services, homelessness and housing, NDIS, and Aged Care services.



## WDAC Advocacy Principles

### **1. Regional governance and accountability to Community**

WDAC's advocacy is accountable to the self-determined needs and aspirations of our western districts' families, communities and ACCOs. Each of our Community Controlled organisations are governed by Community-elected Boards and have enduring and trusted relationships with our Communities that we serve. WDAC continues the longstanding solidarity and advocacy of Communities across the western districts of Victoria.

### **2. Systemic change for Self-determination and sovereignty**

WDAC's advocacy aims to transform relationships in support of the western districts Communities' and ACCOs' sovereignty, self-determination, and rights as Aboriginal people. Self-determination is defined by *UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as our collective right to freely determine our political status and freely pursue our economic, social, and cultural development, including rights to

- ◇ Autonomy and self-government.
- ◇ Maintain and strengthen our distinct political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions.
- ◇ Participate in decision-making.
- ◇ Give free, prior, and informed consent to legislative and administrative measures that may affect us.
- ◇ Maintain and develop our political, economic, and social systems or institutions.

WDAC understand self-determination to be a dynamic practice of exercising First Peoples sovereignty (Jack Forbes, Powhatan-Renapé / Delaware-Lenápe, 1998).

### **3. Celebrating and honouring our Communities and ACCO ways of working**

WDAC's advocacy is centred in honouring our Communities' strengths and connections to Country, Community and Culture. WDAC honours the foundational vision and movement led by our Elders who established our Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector, to holistically serve and strengthen our families and communities. In recognition of ongoing colonisation, racism, and deficit discourse, WDAC upholds and celebrates our Communities and ACCO ways of working towards an equitable and aspirational present and future.

### **4. Culturally centred**

WDAC view our advocacy through our cultural lenses, centred in respect, collaboration, leadership, and accountability. WDAC advocates for the honouring of the ownership of materials, traditions and knowledges that originate from each community and culture. WDAC advocates for the recognition, protection and continued advancement of the inherent rights, and traditions of cultures across the Western districts.



## Education – Schooling Submission

For decades, our families, Communities and ACCO sector have been advocating for systemic accountability and justice in the schooling and tertiary education systems. WDAC is encouraged by Yoorrook’s inclusion of previous truth telling about the injustice and inequitable opportunities that our children, young people, families, and Communities have and continue to experience in the schooling system across generations.

Our Communities and ACCOs have endless examples of the everyday and systemic racism, discrimination and deficit discourses that impact on pride in cultural identity, wellbeing and belonging, access to quality education, trust, attendance, and engagement. WDAC’s recommendations focus on the systemic remedies and accountability of the State to commit to leadership of First Nations justice across all systems, including Schooling. We also call for greater resources for the work the critical work that ACCOs continue to do in supporting our children, young people and families in their cultural learning and in support of their success in educational institutions.

### **1. The Department of Education and Independent Schools must facilitate self-determination and meaningful systemic change by honouring the sovereignty, self-determination, rights and authority of local Community leaders, organisations, and governance structures at regional, local, and school system levels.**

In support of the self-determination of First Peoples within the school system, *Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)* states

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.*
2. *Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.*
3. *States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.*

**At a regional level**, the voices, needs and aspirations of our Western District Communities are not adequately represented by our Melbourne-based peak body, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), despite the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups structure. Likewise, our region does not see accountability or changes outlined in the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan (2016-2026), from the introduction of the Aboriginal Advisory roles within the Department of Education.

**At the local and school levels**, the current lack of authority and resourcing of the *Koorie Education Support Officers (KESO)* roles means they are unable to adequately facilitate either the systemic change in schools, or support for individual Aboriginal students and families. Not all schools are



allocated KESOs, such as those in the Northern Grampians and Ararat city where there are fewer Aboriginal children and young people enrolled. In some circumstances, non-Aboriginal teachers are given the assigned role of KESO. Given the under-resourcing or absence of the KESO roles in schools, Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations take the initiative to support our children, young people, and families, providing additional schooling support programs, such as Homework Clubs, and support schools via our cultural programs, allied health, and medical services. Despite their critical contribution to schooling, these ACCO activities are largely unfunded by the Department of Education.

**2. The Victorian Government must embed and be accountable for truth-telling and anti-racism praxis across its own department including all pre-schools, public and independent schools.**

Most recently, the 2023 Voice Referendum demonstrated the lack of support for our Aboriginal communities, particularly in regional and rural areas. This has been another painful time for our children, young people, and families to witness the inadequacy of schools' abilities to tell Australia's history truthfully and to prevent and respond to everyday experiences of racism. This not only makes school environments unsafe for our children and young people but creates an ongoing ignorance that can be weaponised to continue the denial of our rights, sovereignty, and self-determination across Australian society and politics.

In this context supported by the ongoing political 'Culture Wars' about the truth of Australia's colonial past and present, the Victorian Government needs to demonstrate transformative leadership and accountability for truth telling in Victoria's public and independent schools. Until this time, there will continue to be harmfully slow improvement in the position of First Peoples' knowledge, language, and culture within the curriculum, as well teaching of First Peoples' perspectives, histories, and experiences. Embedding these perspectives will require a significant investment across tertiary teaching qualifications and existing teaching practice, beyond the 'cultural awareness' framework to include historical truth-telling and anti-racism praxis.

**3. The Victorian Government and independent schools must fund comprehensive wraparound supports of ACCOs and schools for all Aboriginal children, young people, and their families to provide the highest cultural and school educational outcomes possible.**

Alongside the cultural education supported by Aboriginal Communities, our schooling systems should lay the foundations for success in life. Western Victoria is hugely under resourced, and our educational institutions seem unable to provide the supports that individual Aboriginal children, young people and their families require to thrive. In support of closing the gap in educational access and outcomes, ACCOs are currently self-funding a range of supports for children, young people and families that should be Victorian Government funded, including:



- Cultural and community strengthening programs run by Aboriginal Communities, ACCOs and Traditional Owner groups in support of strengthening children and young people's identity and pride.
- ACCO-led supports of children and young people's schooling, such as learning assessments, homework clubs, and youth programs.
- Early help and early intervention approaches to support the learning needs of *all Aboriginal students*. This includes fully funded access to General Practitioners, Child Psychiatrists, Paediatricians, Psychologists, Educational specialists, Speech therapists and Occupational therapists to support early diagnosis and classroom support for issues that impact on students' learning. This cost is currently worn by ACCOs and there are many children and young people who cannot access these critical services at all.

### **WDAC Recommendations to Honour Local and Regional sovereignty, self-determination, rights, and governance**

**At a regional level**, the Western District ACCO Collective is ready to advise in the critical work of systemic change for local self-determination and safety for children, young people, and families in their schooling years. WDAC's is a collective advocacy voice that is directly in relationship with and accountable to our communities. WDAC and our ACCOs are also well positioned to support the important intersecting systemic change work of schools in strengthening families and reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal families and children in contact with Child Protection and Justice systems.

**At the local level**, Our ACCOs hold a deep understanding of the contemporary holistic needs of our children, young people, and families. The case study below describes how responsive collaboration and positive outcomes for children and young people are supported by funding the sustained trust and strong relationships between our Community, ACCOs and schools to **enhance children and young people's cultural and schooling educational outcomes**.

#### **Case Study: Positive outcomes of funding ACCOs to support school children and young people's Social and Emotional Wellbeing**

Since November 2023, the Social and Emotional Wellbeing (SEWB) team at Budja Budja Aboriginal Cooperative (Budja) have been funded to employ two Youth Workers. The program provides Outreach social emotional, cultural and wellbeing support to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids living across Northern Grampians Shire, Ararat Rual City and including Gariwerd (Grampians). Support is self-determined and based on the needs of our mob, as voiced by our youth, and collaborated with the schools' Wellbeing teams.

Budja's support of children, young people and families in primary and secondary schooling includes Wellbeing and Holiday programs, as well as Outreach support to individuals, siblings, and families in



need. Budja's SEWB team and staff, as well as families are experiencing significant success and change for children and young people accessing these SEWB programs including increased.

- connection to culture/identity
- connectedness and feelings of belonging,
- feelings of support, and families knowing their kids are supported,
- feeling empowered in their wellbeing,
- improved family dynamics within our mob.

Self-determined and increased funding to ACCOs to run these SEWB programs for children and young people is critical to support

- Cultural and wellbeing programs,
- Growing cultural knowledge
- ACCO staff to support the delivery of programs,
- After hours events
- Transportation drivers for access in regional and remote locations.

**At the school level,** WDAC advocates for the increased authority and revision of the KESO role to increase accountability of schools to our local Communities and provide greater day-to-day support for Aboriginal students in schools. Senior Elders and Respected Persons in our communities are well positioned to facilitate family engagement, advise, and support accountability of Principals and schools; and to guide our children and young people in their school experience. Adequate funding of these roles would see their presence in schools five days per week, supporting their ability to engage with students, families, school leadership, community and ACCOs. Additionally, the Department of Education should be directly funding local ACCOs in recognition of their role in supporting children, young people, and families in their schooling; as well as in supporting schools to deliver on their mandate to holistically educate and care for children.

Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative and Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative are resourced to provide the Koorie Pre-school Assistant (KPSA) Initiative to Early Years education settings in regional Victoria. Both ACCOs have seen positive outcomes of

- ◇ Educating and supporting reflective cultural learning and anti-racist praxis with educators.
- ◇ Embedding of Aboriginal cultural ways of knowing, being and doing in early years curriculum.
- ◇ Building relationships and trust between families and the schooling systems.
- ◇ Support for Aboriginal children's cultural learning, identity, and pride.
- ◇ Support for non-Aboriginal children's learning about the truth of pre- and post-colonial history and ongoing racism and discrimination.
- ◇ Strengthened links between ACCOs and education settings, particularly in the care of children living in Out of Home Care.





Case Study of Good Practice: Koorie Pre-school Assistant (KPSA) initiative: [Click here to link to a video link](#) created by Hayley Boehm, Koorie Preschool Assistant, Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative

WDAC look forward to continuing our conversations with the Yoorook Justice Commission to maximise the opportunities and accountability arising from the truth telling process across this and the accompanying submissions on behalf of our Western District communities. To contact WDAC for further discussion, please contact WDAC's Strategic Policy team,

- [Redacted contact information]
- [Redacted contact information]

Nyatne, Gobota (thanks, Take Care),



Simon Flagg

Chair of Western District ACCO Collective

CEO, Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative Limited

62 Morgan Street, North Geelong

Work: (03) 5277 0044

Mobile: [Redacted]

Email: [CEO@wathaurong.org.au](mailto:CEO@wathaurong.org.au)

