

# **VAEAI'S SUBMISSION TO THE YOORROOK COMMISSION ON EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Colonial history of Victoria has had a profound and lasting impact on institutions such as the education system that still exist today. The Yoorrook Commission is reviewing this history, collecting and collating stories from across Victoria with the goal of reaching a pathway towards truth and reconciliation. In this inquiry of education and schools, the Yoorrook Commission will hear testimony of our shared history including the origins of an education system which was explicitly designed to exclude and segregate Australia's First Nations People. It is necessary to develop a strong understanding of this historical account in order to inform remediation and reconciliation.

In this submission VAEAI will outline what this legacy has meant for Koorie learners across the state and how this has shaped and influenced their engagement with the education system. However, VAEAI will also outline how genuine efforts towards reform have been in place for three decades and involve concerted efforts to include local community members in shared decision making. No doubt there is more to be done, and this inquiry will help guide future efforts. VAEAI believes that the Yoorrook Commission can not only bring a voice to the Koorie community on their education experiences but also amplify a message of potential, hope, and the good work that has already produced positive outcomes for Koorie learners.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE LEGACY OF VICTORIA'S COLONIAL HISTORY ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.**

The education system in Australia was initially designed with the explicit purpose of excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from not only scholastic achievements but society more broadly. This has left a shadow over the contemporary education system. Historical education practices based on scientific bias supported a skewed perspective which influenced the founding of Australia, deemed *terra nullius* by the settlers in 1778. VAEAI as a voice for Aboriginal students, families, and community is committed to ensuring that an account of Aboriginal history is being incorporated into the curriculum to address these historical injustices and create an inclusive education system going forward.

It is important for the Yoorrook Commission to take account of this history, to build a comprehensive case detailing the harms both past and present that this system has caused for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is also important that these harms are understood in the context as provided by this and other submissions detailing the dislocation and dispossession of lands held by Koorie communities for generations prior to colonisation. It is important that the Yoorrook Commission recognises that despite the many positive and constructive changes that have taken place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the legacy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still persists.

The education system was constructed to instruct students into the ideological values and systems of Europeans. It is necessary to unpack its core tenants which were based on a (mis)interpretation of scientific theories to justify the aggression and violence that was metered out against this countries First Nations peoples. Though not detailed in this submission, the Yoorrook Commission will, throughout its investigation, become aware of specific harms caused during the early colonial period where settlers' concerns about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's capacity for numeracy and literacy were central to exclusionary practices. With this submission, VAEAI aims to inform future efforts towards remediation and reconciliation. As such, it is necessary to understand the full impact of the roots and origins of Victoria's education system that was designed to replicate European values and its systems.

The origins of the education system in Victoria were designed with the exclusion of Koorie communities in mind. This supported dispossession and dislocation and was crucial within the establishment of missions. Missionaries held the view they were responsible for educating First Nations People. This reinforced the imposed class dynamics that had been established by settlers further restricting the agency of Koorie communities within and beyond the classroom. For example, early expectations for Koorie learners were only focused on menial labour.

VAEAI understands that large scale social and cultural changes began within the education system. Recognising and addressing the harms of the past through the curriculum and other formal educational materials and settings provides key opportunities to grow and develop together. VAEAI's core mission is to improve the experiences of Koorie learners, their families, and their communities in contemporary society through the education system.

Improving education outcomes requires a broad view on how environmental factors influence learning. For Koorie learners this means taking account of the long and tangled legacy of intersecting governmental systems that have controlled their social, learning, and home environments. As such, VAEAI recognise the education system, the justice system, the welfare system and community services as being deeply interconnected, and central to the development of life skills. The legacy of colonial Victoria needs to be recognised across these systems. Forms of racism that have been embedded need to be identified and challenged in order to create a positive social, learning, and home environment for Koorie learners.

Historical colonial education practices immediately and definitively dismissed Koorie cultural and social structures that existed prior to colonial arrival in Victoria. From the colonial perspective there was no society, rather a blank slate in desperate need of Eurocentric instruction first and foremost. It was the missionaries and then missions that offered the only chance at education for First Nations people. Here the deep entanglement between land and education was a key concern. From a Koorie perspective education and country have long been entwined. As such, intergenerational trauma resulting from the dispossession, dislocation, cultural and social eradication, and forceable removal has had long-term consequences in how Koorie learners continue to interact and engage with the education system today.

Remnants from the explicit segregation of the education system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can still be found in both the compulsory and non-compulsory education sectors today. Koorie learners are often placed at an unfair disadvantage as a result.

## REMEDIATION AND RECONCILIATION

VAEI's core mission is to ensure that all Koorie learners have the opportunity and support to reach their academic potential and educational aspirations. VAEI values education as a key driver for social and cultural change. VAEI recognises that the education system plays a critical role in the revitalisation of Aboriginal cultures and languages. The education system provides a crucial space for enacting self-determination within and beyond the classroom. VAEI have adopted an expansive view of education as a life-long process that serves to strengthen the capacity for Koorie learners, their families, and their communities to succeed. VAEI is working in partnership with our communities, other ACCO's and the State and Commonwealth governments, to create holistic improvements that ensure Koorie learners are strong in their identity and culture.

Strong cultural identities can be supported throughout the curriculum from early years through to higher and further education. Creating positive reflections of Koorie achievements provides opportunities for Koorie learners to achieve academically. Through our partnership with the Department of Education and the VCAA, VAEI have worked on continuous improvement to ensure that the curriculum is culturally responsive and reflects both present and historical Koorie achievements.

VAEI has created both comprehensive and long-lasting changes that have increased Koorie attendance, graduation rates, and academic success. VAEI is supporting this by advocating on behalf of local communities, representing their aims, goals, and aspirations for their children's education whilst simultaneously representing statewide concerns to the Department of Education and the Victorian government.

Through our ongoing partnership with the Victorian government, the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Jobs, Services, Industry and Regions (DJSIR) and Toorong Marnong we have developed effective strategies that support Koorie learners across all sectors of education and training. The contemporary relationships that VAEI has through these partnerships began more than three decades ago. In 1990 VAEI established the very first formal partnership of any kind between an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) and state government. The *1990 Partnership in Education: Koorie Education Policy*, has been critical in VAEI's development in becoming a peak body for Koorie education in the state of Victoria.

As a peak body for Koorie education, VAEI has had, and continues to have, direct input into policy development with the goal of increasing kindergarten enrolment, school attendance, year 12 completion, and university and TAFE enrolments. VAEI's partnership with the State government has empowered students, families, and their communities to participate in shared decision making around their education. VAEI have been able to develop a number of strategies to facilitate this shared decision making including: YALCA, Wurreker, Marrung, and Toorong Marnong.

Since the inception of this partnership agreement, the Victorian Koorie community has had increased Koorie representation within the education and training sector with significant achievements along the way. Through the success of this collaboration with the State, VAEI launched the YALCA agreement in 2001. The YALCA, *Education and Training for the New Millennium*, policy provided a framework covering the whole of Victoria and remains the primary

framework underpinning the work that VAEI does and has led to major Koorie education strategies that build upon this success.

The Wurreker strategy, which began in 2000, has been the foundation for ongoing relationships with TAFEs, RTOs and Learn Locals which has resulted in the creation of culturally responsive spaces for Koorie learners. This is significant because it allows local communities opportunity to build reliable education pathways that meet their social and economic needs. To achieve this outcome, each TAFE across Victoria works closely with their VAEI through their Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG) to produce an annual Wurreker Implementation Plan which allows for a long-term approach towards embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of learning into the institutions.

In 2016 VAEI and the State Government launched the *Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026*. Marrung allows local Koorie communities to have a voice within education decision making. VAEI Marrung Facilitators work to regularly host consultation meetings and community yarns. These meetings allow local communities genuine input into the curriculum, helping to shape and influence learning environments across both compulsory and non-compulsory spaces. A key example of Marrung's success is year 12 graduations. These are a leading indicator of overall school engagement, demonstrating how community consultation and direct input on decision making leads to improved outcomes for Koorie learners. Since Marrung began, more than 700 year 12 students have graduated, marking a significant increase from the previous average of 2 Koorie year 12 graduations per year.

VAEI has also driven other innovations through this strong partnership with the State government. Since 2021 VAEI have been engaged in consultation with the Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA) for all government school upgrade, and since 2022 VAEI has been engaged in consultation for all new school builds in Victoria. The process for these consultations is extensive and incorporates local community representatives from the LAECG network. This process has produced meaningful inclusion and allowed for Koorie perspectives to be embedded across all aspects of the building and landscape. Through this work, schools and local community representatives are able to create learning opportunities through language and stories embedded in the spaces, and the use of sustainable materials during construction. Additionally, this work has been foundational to ongoing relationships between the schools and local community representatives who continue to have direct input into the school culture and environment. Together these efforts have provided a culturally safe and responsive space for Koorie learners leading to increased attendance and indigenous presence within school environments.

Another example of the success of the Marrung strategy is cross curricula Aboriginal perspectives being embedded in the curriculum. VAEI has recently collaborated with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) to create opportunities for all students to have access to a deeper understanding of First Nations' history and culture. Efforts to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into each subject provide a strong basis for a culturally responsive curriculum that also strengthens student connections.

VAEI is committed to a positive, harmonious, culturally responsive and safe future for Koorie learners in all education and training institutions in Victoria. VAEI is committed to Koorie initiatives becoming universal projects that benefit everyone (such as Koorie Kids Shine and Best Start Best

Life), because fundamentally we know that remediation and reconciliation influenced and informed by Aboriginal practices will benefit everyone.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Yoorrook Commission will hear accounts of Victoria's colonial history and the painful individual stories born of the harm that colonisation has caused. However, VAEAI also sees this inquiry as an opportunity to amplify a message of potential, of hope, and of an education system producing positive outcomes for Koorie learners. The impacts of Victoria's colonial history continue to leave a mark on Koorie communities throughout the state and whilst there has been significant achievements and improvements made already, there is still considerable change to be made. There is considerable scope for developing community support, with the long-term goal of creating education outcomes that lead to lawyers, doctors, and captains of industry being comfortable in their own identity as an Aboriginal person. VAEAI's continued partnership with the Department of Education and the State government has already gone a long way towards reconciliation and remediation and will continue to work towards these larger aims. VAEAI believe that the Yoorrook commission is well placed to further strengthen Koorie participation in critical institutions such as education and promote positive reforms that reflect shared decision making. Allowing Koorie communities to guide these institutions by embedding Aboriginal perspectives and implementing Koorie cultural and spiritual practices, sustained through continued consultation, will lead to improved outcomes in not only education, but in health, justice, and community welfare overall.