

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Statement



Statement of purpose

The Department of Education (DoE) values the languages of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities in Queensland. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, like all languages, are an important part of culture and identity. Recognising the importance of languages to the achievements and wellbeing of students and their families is crucial to achieving our shared goal of ensuring that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the opportunity to thrive in education and beyond. Success in education is absolutely fundamental to this process.



The DoE *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Statement* provides the basis to assist Queensland educators and school communities to support the languages and cultures of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the school context. This statement builds on *Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools*, a key initiative within the department, and supports the Closing the Gap education strategy.

Reconciliation is also a key priority of the Queensland Government. Greater understanding and shared ownership

of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages — traditional languages, creoles and related varieties — will contribute to the Australian identity of all students, schools and communities, and will sustain Queensland's unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander linguistic and cultural heritage.

Definitions

*Traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages*¹ refers to all the languages spoken within Australia prior to colonisation. These languages inform

a holistic world view of land, culture and identity, and are linguistically very different to English. Within Queensland, over 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groupings have been recognised, with over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups across Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creoles and related varieties are languages that have evolved through contact between people who speak different languages. A number of different creole varieties are spoken throughout Queensland. These creoles may not be officially recognised, but may be referred to in their communities through a range of names such as Murri, Broken, Slang,

Lingo and Aboriginal English. Many Torres Strait Islander students speak Torres Strait Creole, now known in the Torres Strait as Yumplatok.

Standard Australian English (SAE) is the language used in Australian schools as the primary means of communication, instruction and assessment. English is a language of international significance capable of providing many educational, employment and economic opportunities. For this reason, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples consider proficiency in SAE to be important for all students in our schools.

¹ The term *traditional languages* refers to those languages recognised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as languages belonging to country. It is not intended to refer only to historical forms of these languages, as traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, as with all languages, have evolved over time.

Languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Queensland

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students come to school from a diverse range of language backgrounds due to the rich and complex language situation in Queensland.

The degree to which students speak a traditional language depends on the different historical and life circumstances surrounding individuals, families, communities and language groups. Historically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been denied the right to speak their traditional languages, and enforced removals to institutions and other settlements further reduced their use. As a result, widespread language shift² has occurred and new language varieties have emerged. These contact languages are being increasingly recognised as distinctive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

In some areas of Queensland, particularly rural and remote areas, traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are spoken within families and communities. In other areas, creoles and related linguistic varieties may have been spoken as a first language for generations. Elsewhere, students who speak a traditional

language may be acquiring the regional creole as their second or subsequent language.

As language backgrounds are determined by a range of factors including family situations and exposure to different languages, a student's linguistic background cannot be assumed. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students speak more than one language variety. Some students may speak SAE as their first language, and acquire creoles and related varieties through their interactions with others.

Whilst SAE is the language of academic learning in the classrooms of Queensland state schools, the everyday languages of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families are integral to their sense of belonging and wellbeing. Therefore, recognising, valuing and using their home language, in and out of school, is imperative.

It is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to develop the ability to confidently use their first language/s, as well as SAE (i.e. code switch). Being adept code switchers allows students to retain strong connections to their community and equally to achieve academic success in the classroom context.



² Language shift refers to the process whereby a family or speech community using one language shifts to using another language variety due to language contact brought about by factors such as war, colonisation, resettlement and migration.

Language is culture and identity

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are strongly linked to culture, country and identity. They include rules about communication, culturally bound concepts and knowledge systems. Through language, relationships are developed, culture taught, information transmitted, knowledge learned and stories told.

Within traditional languages, stories of communities, connections to country, seas, waterways and sky, spiritual beliefs and cultural practices are passed down from generation to generation. These knowledges are uniquely Australian, developed from and within local Australian environments.

Each traditional language, creole and related variety belongs to particular lands or islands, and is owned by particular people. Together they represent a strong network of spoken languages, directly linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and interconnected within the distinctive local areas throughout Queensland.

A student's language is integral to their sense of identity and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have a vital role to play in building and enriching community life. The unique language situation in Queensland is a significant part of the state's rich cultural heritage and historical legacy.

3 way strong language approach

DoE has engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and community members to develop the *3 way strong* language approach to support teachers to understand and respond to the complex Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language situation in Queensland.

3 way strong builds on the phrase '*2 way strong*', which is used to describe the desire for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow deep and strong understandings of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. *3 way strong* includes the language perspective.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages need to be recognised, valued and supported in schools, and in developing relationships with families and communities. Initiatives that develop culture and language have been found to be significant factors in increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' participation, attendance and achievements in schools.

DoE schools

1. Recognise and value the language varieties which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are using for their 'everyday' talk.
2. Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in learning and achieving in schools by teaching Standard Australian English explicitly, actively and meaningfully.
3. Support children's access to their heritage by maintaining, learning or researching their traditional languages and cultures.

1 Recognise and value the language varieties which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are using for their 'everyday' talk

For schools to close the gap in educational achievements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, they need to be aware that many students speak home languages other than Standard Australian English. Schools need to develop processes to be able to talk with parents and caregivers and community members about their language/s, and recognise and acknowledge these as living languages with an important role in family and community life.

Historically, schools have not recognised or valued the home languages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Creoles and related varieties have often been mistaken for poor use of Standard Australian English. Home languages need to be recognised and affirmed within the school in order for these students to develop a strong sense of belonging, identity and self-worth.

2 Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in learning and achieving in schools by teaching Standard Australian English explicitly, actively and meaningfully

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities want their children to be strong in English and their own languages. Students can be powerful and proud users of Standard Australian English through positive and engaging learning experiences and schooling opportunities.

Schools use Standard Australian English as the means of communication, instruction and assessment. Teachers need to recognise that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will be learning English as a second language. This affects their learning in all areas. It is crucial to establish their English proficiency level, identify the language demands of that curriculum area and plan teaching to bridge any gap.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages contain language features and structures which are different to Standard Australian English, explicit teaching strategies are required to break down the language requirements of individual tasks, and then build up the language required for successful learning.

3 way strong

Recognise and value the language varieties that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities are using for their 'everyday' talk

Engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in learning and achieving in schools by teaching Standard Australian English explicitly, actively and meaningfully



Support children's access to their heritage by maintaining, learning or researching their traditional languages and cultures



3 Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's access to their heritage by maintaining, learning or researching their traditional languages and cultures

International and national recognition of the importance of keeping traditional Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages alive has led to strong efforts to maintain those languages still in use and to reclaim, revitalise or revive others. Colonisation has had, and continues to have, drastic consequences on traditional languages. Very few of the over 100 traditional Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages of Queensland are now fluently spoken. The loss of languages and consequent aspiration to maintain, reclaim, revitalise and revive them are heartfelt matters, both for the local custodians of these languages and for all people with an interest in Queensland's cultural heritage.

Traditional Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages were spoken right across the continent for tens of thousands of years. More recently, many have developed writing systems and are used in books, movies, websites and other modern technologies. Community-run language revival programs are increasing the use of

traditional languages in many locations, while in other areas traditional languages are not currently used. The department is committed to valuing Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages by supporting communities' aspirations to teach and learn in, through and about their traditional languages and cultures in Queensland schools.

Studying an Aboriginal language or Torres Strait Islander language is also an act of reconciliation and a part of righting of past injustice. It can develop cultural knowledge, pride and identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. DoE schools are committed to raising the awareness of all students in understanding and appreciating traditional languages within the curriculum and broader school activities. The department actively supports schools working with local communities to implement the F-10 Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages, developed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as part of the Australian Curriculum, and the Short Course senior syllabus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (2019) developed by QCAA for students in Years 11–12.

To achieve the 3 way strong language approach

The department will:

- provide leadership, information and approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in schools
- strengthen our relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and stakeholders
- support schools working with local communities to implement [ACARA's P-10 Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages](#) and/or [Queensland's Short Course senior syllabus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages \(2019\)](#)
- increase the skills of our workforce to value and recognise students' home languages
- deliver high quality explicit teaching and learning that builds Standard Australian English.