

NRW 2021

More than a word. Reconciliation takes action

Australian education and the current state of reconciliation

Keynote speech by

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**Leading Educators Around the Planet
2021 Reconciliation Through Education**

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Good morning and many thanks to Leading Educators Around the Planet, and particularly to Warren Marks and Susan Lazenby, for organising this latest LEAP Reconciliation symposium.

As is our custom, I wish to start by acknowledging the First Nations owners of the land from which I am speaking to you today.

I am a Bundjalung woman from the NSW North Coast but here in Sydney, I speak to you on Gadigal Country, and I take this opportunity to acknowledge the Gadigal People, their Elders and all the ancestors who have cared for this Country over millennia.

I also wish to acknowledge the great line up of speakers you'll be hearing from over the next two days.

Including of course an array of amazingly talented First Nations peoples.

Firstly, Dr Chris Sarra, who is known to every Australian with an interest in, and passion for First Nations education, through his role as founder of the Stronger, Smarter Institute.

Dr Sarra continues at Stronger, Smarter as Executive Chairman, but couples that work with the task of Director General of the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships in Queensland.

Chris has also, as I understand it, been a key and invaluable advisor to LEAP.

I also acknowledge Jeff McMullen.

At the outset I want to say that Jeff's unrelenting advocacy for First Nations people, particularly children, has demonstrated how we can all support the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Later in this address I refer to our reconciliation friends in the wider Australian community becoming accomplices rather than allies, and Jeff's work over the past few decades exemplifies what being an accomplice looks like.

Dean Widders, who'll lead one of the yarning circle discussions later this morning was a great rugby league player.

But Dean is much more than a great footballer, he has been a pioneer in efforts to eradicate racism from Australian sporting codes and has been a key player in the development of the NRL's Reconciliation Action Plan.

I suspect that the NRL RAP's focus on assisting development in local communities through the promotion of education programs in those communities has Dean's fingerprints all over it.

And, of course my tidda, Dr Anita Heiss, who'll join you tomorrow, and who is one of this country's most accomplished writers and a tireless campaigner for her people and for reconciliation.

What the work of these speakers all share, along with that of Warren and Susan themselves, is a profound belief in education and that identity, culture and self-determination are key to improving the lives and conditions of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This is a belief that Reconciliation Australia and I strongly endorse.

I hope you'll all bear with me for a moment as I ask all of you to please pause and reflect on the history of this Country, Gadigal Country.

Think about the lives of those who have lived on this land for millennia and consider the children born and educated on Gadigal Country over tens of thousands of years.

Imagine, if you can, the full lives led by the people who preceded this idea of Australia, who were here before the catastrophic change that came with the arrival of the First Fleet – not far from where we are today.

Whether it be the Gimuy, Yidinji and Yirrganydji in Cairns; or the Ngunnawal and Ngambri in Canberra, or the Wadjuk Noongar in Perth, or the Larrakia in Darwin, all these First Nations have endured similar experiences of dispossession and denial of rights over more than a century.

The legacy of this dispossession and trauma continues to haunt our people and is seen in the gap in social indicators between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider Australian population.

It is this legacy of suffering that Reconciliation Australia and the broader reconciliation movement seek to end. As the Reconciliation Australia vision so clearly states; *we aim for a just, equitable and reconciled Australia.*

To reach this vision we need strong support from Australians of good will.

The sort of support that LEAP has demonstrated in its important work with school principals and other education sector leaders.

LEAP's inclusion of reconciliation as a key theme in its professional development work is a recognition of just how important schools and education are in embedding reconciliation into the early life experiences of Australian children.

LEAP's two Reconciliation through Education events – and I hope there'll be many more of these - and the 2018 study tour of First Nations education in Canada's British Columbia province, have complimented our own efforts to ensure that reconciliation and improvements in Australian First Nations education are in the forefront of education planning.

On Friday I gave a keynote to a major reconciliation event hosted by Early Childhood Australia.

The work of both ECA and LEAP are just two examples of the education sector's commitment to reconciliation and getting the best possible outcomes for our jahdjam, for our children.

This year, Reconciliation Australia celebrates our 20th anniversary of working to ensure that Australians fully understand the brutal history of this nation's colonisation and move beyond what the Australian anthropologist, Bill Stanner described in his 1968 Boyer lecture series as the "great Australian silence".

Stanner argued that Australia was gripped by a "cult of disremembering" which had reduced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to little more than a "melancholy footnote" in our colonial history.

Arguably, one of the key challenges to the reconciliation movement over the past 30 years has been to overturn this *cult of disremembering* and our *great Australian silence*.

And in that we have had some success.

In the education sector there are two very recent developments. One is the development of a new national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood strategy which aims to ensure First Nations children have opportunities for the best start in life, in their own families, developing a strong identity as proud First Nations people.

The other is the recent proposal to change the Australian curriculum by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

The early childhood strategy is a partnership between SNAICC and the Australian Government's National Indigenous Australians Agency.

The co-design process opened days ago, with input sought from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, communities, and caregivers to ensure that the

Strategy reflects the views, experiences and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, service delivery organisations and other key experts.

Catherine Liddle, CEO of SNAICC, the peak body for the First Nations' early childhood sector said of the strategy, "We know that our children thrive when grounded in their identity, language and cultural lore and traditions, and that our people know what is best for their wellbeing."

Let me repeat those last few words – "our people know what is best for their wellbeing".

Contained in that simple statement is one of the key truths of reconciliation – First Nations people know what is best for our wellbeing and one of the measurements for our success must be in ensuring that this knowledge, born of personal experiences, is key in developing policies and programs to do away with historical disadvantage.

It's early days for this strategy but I take comfort from the sentiments that drive it.

The other key example of progress on the education front is particularly significant.

Earlier this month the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority announced that the proposed changes will see the curriculum acknowledge that First Nations experienced European colonisation as an invasion.

ACARA's review into the national curriculum found that the existing themes did not include enough "truth-telling" about the experience of First Nations since colonisation and put too much emphasis on the period before contact with Europeans.

The review also found that themes in the current curriculum failed to mention that Australia is home to the worlds' oldest continuing culture, and "do not showcase the sophisticated political, economic and social organisational systems of Australia's First Nations".

These proposed changes certainly give backing to the work of Reconciliation Australia and LEAP and support the demands of First Nations peoples.

If I can be a bit cheeky to a group of school principals and senior education leaders, I'd like to set you all some homework.

I would like you all to formally submit a statement in support of such curriculum changes to the ACARA consultation process. [You can find details on the ACARA website and the consultation process is open until 8 July 2021.](#)

The telling of the real history of this continent, both pre- and post-colonisation have been core to the demands of First Nations people for nearly a century now.

As evidenced by ACARA's recent announcement, this strong advocacy by Reconciliation Australia, by First Nations leaders, and the wider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, has been effective in challenging the orthodox history of peaceful settlement, and kindly, if paternalistic, Government policies.

I am proud of the role that Reconciliation Australia has played in this important reappraisal of Australia's colonial and more recent history.

It is essential however, that an organisation like RA continually measures the effectiveness of our work; how the material conditions for success change from year to year, and what new actions are appropriate.

One of the ways we do this is with our [State of Reconciliation](#) report that assesses the current status of reconciliation and outlines some practical actions that need to be taken if we are to continue to progress reconciliation.

The most recent State of Reconciliation report, released in January of this year, shows that the reconciliation movement is at a tipping point.

The report is based on our biennial survey of attitudes, the [Australian Reconciliation Barometer](#), as well as interviews with First Nations leaders and specific case studies arising from our Reconciliation Action Plans.

The State of Reconciliation report identified significant areas of progress, including the now almost universal belief that the relationship between First Peoples and other Australians is important.

However, it also found that reconciliation can only be progressed when we take action on the harder issues.

And in fact, more people are speaking up, speaking the truth, asking the hard questions, seeking the hard facts, and informing themselves about issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Witness the huge crowds, including a high proportion of non-Indigenous Australians, amongst them, significant numbers from African, Arab and Asian migrant communities, who attended the Survival Day and Black Lives Matter protests during 2020.

While we see greater support for reconciliation from the Australian people than ever before, we must be even more determined if we are to achieve the goals of the movement — a just, equitable, and reconciled Australia.

It is our firm belief that if we are to transform attitudinal change into substantive change in the conditions of First Nations peoples and bring about true reconciliation, we must move beyond mere words.

For even as community support for reconciliation and justice has increased, two key areas indicate that change is too slow.

The rate of removals of First Nations' children from their families and the rate of incarceration of First Nations peoples, are rising sharply and in particular the astronomical rise in Black women being jailed.

According to the [2019 Family Matters Report](#), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 37.3% of the total out-of-home care population, including foster care, but only 5.5% of the total population of children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are now 10.2 times more likely to be removed from their families than non-Indigenous children.

This rise in child removals has been compounded by a decreasing rate of placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with other First Nations carers.

These placements have declined from 65.3% in 2006 to 45% in 2019.

The situation in our criminal justice system for First Nations children is equally devastating.

Aboriginal kids are jailed at 22 times the rate of non-Indigenous young people. And they are jailed younger. In 2019 nearly 65% of children under 14 in detention, were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

And despite the key recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, now 30 years ago, First Nations incarceration rates continue to grow.

And this particularly applies to women.

Indigenous women make up 2% of Australia's population and yet we are 34% of the women behind bars.

First Nations women are the fastest growing population in our prisons.

It is not surprising that the issues of child removals and incarceration are both specifically referred to in the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#).

Let me just quote from the statement:

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet.

We are not an innately criminal people.

Our children are aliened from their families at unprecedented rates.

This cannot be because we have no love for them.

And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers.

They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem.

This is the torment of our powerlessness.

Let me repeat those words: THIS IS THE TORMENT OF OUR POWERLESSNESS.

These heart-breaking statistics are evidence that a rise in support for reconciliation doesn't necessarily correlate into concrete and practical improvements for First Nations People.

As I said earlier, attitudinal change must be followed by action.

Or to paraphrase something else that a leader in early childhood education expressed in a recent conversation with me; she said:

“We no longer have to convince people about the need for reconciliation, now we have to inspire people into action”.

Her sentiments mirror the finding of the State of Reconciliation report, that, as a nation, we need to move from “safe” to “brave” in order to realise the promise of reconciliation.

Over the past thirty years Reconciliation Australia, and its predecessor, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, have built a substantial network of organisations and individuals who have joined the reconciliation movement.

Through Reconciliation Action Plans (RAP); through our Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program; our National Reconciliation Week activities; Indigenous Governance Awards and Corporate Partnerships; through a series of national campaigns; State and Territory Reconciliation Councils; and the many local reconciliation groups and networks, we have built a strong movement of supporters.

But now it's time to inspire those supporters into actions.

It's time to raise the bar of expectation.

Reconciliation cannot just be about raising awareness and increasing knowledge, Australians of goodwill must be motivated to “braver” action.

For reconciliation to be meaningful and effective, it must involve truth-telling, and actively address issues of inequality, systemic racism, and instances where the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are ignored, denied, or reduced.

We need to move from focussing on the preconditions for reconciliation, to focussing on more substantive change.

Importantly, we are seeing examples of this substantive work, with several RAP Partners coming out in support of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

They are increasingly speaking up on issues important to First Peoples, or for example, engaging in Indigenous-led initiatives such as justice reinvestment to reduce incarceration.

We are also seeing an increase in the level of community support for truth-telling as the foundation stone upon which we can build reconciliation, and foster change in the education system to teach more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

It is the examples, including those set by individuals and organisations in Australia's education sector, from tiny regional pre-schools to some of our most prestigious sand-stone universities, that move us towards a braver reconciliation.

Our 1100 workplace Reconciliation Action Plans have created nearly 14,000 formal and informal partnerships between RAP organisations and First Nations groups and seen over \$50 million of pro bono services provided to First Nations peoples by RAP organisations.

50,000 non-Indigenous Australians have received face-to-face cultural training and another 250,000 have undergone on-line training because of our RAPS.

In education, our Narragunnawali: Reconciliation in Education program has grown enormously in its ten years.

As of last month, 7,414 schools and early learning services had registered to develop a RAP on the [Narragunnawali platform](#).

1,803 of these were primary and/or secondary schools, representing about 17% of all Australian primary, secondary or combined schools and the remainder represented about 34.7% of all Australian early learning services.

An evaluation of Narragunnawali by the ANU's Centre for Social Research and Methods found huge impact from our work in early childhood and education.

The evaluation found that *“the number of schools and early learning services engaged with Narragunnawali has continued to increase since the program's inception.”*

I hope you will bear with me while I share some direct quotes from the evaluation.

“Engagement with Narragunnawali provides a formalised means of delivering students, staff, and families with regular opportunities to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.”

It goes on to say:

“There is very strong evidence that those schools that continue to engage with Narragunnawali maintain the [reconciliation] activities that they are already doing, and increase the activities through time.

Those teachers of Indigenous students who are in schools with a RAP are much more likely to feel that their school is engaging in a range of positive activities than those teachers in other schools.

The teachers themselves are also more likely to be engaging in a range of positive activities.”

In addition to our work in education and early childhood, RA has been a major supporter and initiator of national campaigns including Close the Gap; Change the Record; Family Matters; Racism: it stops with me; and Black Lives Matter, all of

which have had, and continue to have, a profound impact on the views of Australians.

Every year since 1993 we have run [National Reconciliation Week](#) activities across the country.

Our Indigenous Governance Awards and Corporate Partnerships have linked First Nations' enterprises and organisations with some of the country's biggest and most successful corporations.

We know that this work has been effective in changing attitudes because of our biennial survey the Australian Reconciliation Barometer, which has mapped these attitudinal changes over the past 13 years and the news is hopeful.

There is far greater awareness of the complexity and magnitude of First Nations' cultures and knowledges; and many more Australians now understand the brutal impact that British colonialism and the modern Australian state have had on First Nations families and communities.

The Australian Reconciliation Barometer also shows that the community is ahead of government in relation to constitutional reform, truth telling, treaties, closing the disadvantage gaps, and helping realise equality and equity for First Peoples.

The 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer found that 95% of the general community, and 94% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, believe it is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a say in matters that affect them.

81% of the general community and 88% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe it is important to protect an Indigenous Voice within the Constitution.

89% of the general community and 93% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe it is important to undertake formal truth-telling processes in relation to Australia's shared history.

83% of the general community believes it is important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to be taught in schools.

87% believe it is important to learn about First Nations' histories, and 85% believe it important to learn about First Nations' cultures.

And, significantly, the barometer found that over 60% of people want to do something to help improve reconciliation.

So, the Australian Reconciliation Barometer survey teaches us that attitudes have been changing and Australians are more informed about our history and the causes of First Nations' current circumstances than ever before.

But how do we build on these positive changes to move from symbolic to substantive reconciliation?

Our NRW theme reflects this truth; More than a word: Reconciliation takes action.

As a nation, and importantly, as individual citizens, we need to move from "safe" to "brave" in order to realise the promise of reconciliation.

Like the tens of thousands who joined the Survival or Invasion Day and Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, Australians must shift from a passive state of merely believing in reconciliation, to taking action to expedite change, and ultimately achieve reconciliation and justice.

Australians of goodwill must move from being allies to First Nations people and become effective accomplices to achieving change.

As the 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama, reminded us, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

But how do we do this?

We have been thinking deeply about this question and I have some suggestions about how every one of us can translate goodwill into good actions.

First of all, I urge any of you here today who work for an organisation which does not have a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) to start the process of developing one. And those of you who do already have a RAP, do what you can to ensure it fits the new criteria of ACTION!

To get a better understanding of our Narragunnawali program and RAPs join in one of the learning circles led by Narragunnawali staff during tomorrow's session.

Join in on our National Acknowledgement of Country at the start of National Reconciliation Week on Thursday 27th of May at 9am.

Push yourselves and your organisations to become braver and commit to stronger action for change.

Find ways to engage with First Nations people in your local area; not only organisationally but build personal relationships with the local community.

Investigate how to make your school or workplace a more culturally safe place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Use your new relationship to discover what the key aspirations of the local community are, and ensure your RAP actively supports these aspirations.

But, it's not just about issues in your local area, nor is it just about issues in your organisation's area of work.

We are all residents of this country and we all have a responsibility to challenge structures and circumstances that add to the disadvantage suffered by First Nations peoples.

How do we create a just, equitable and reconciled Australia, if we are not prepared to vigorously contest structures that perpetuate injustice, and maintain the centuries-long disempowerment of First Nations peoples?

It's essential that the Educational RAP community throw its weight behind the national demands of the First Nations leadership.

Challenge Australia's state and federal political leaders to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander justice issues such as deaths in custody, over-incarceration, family violence, and removal of children.

Support campaigns to reduce the obscene levels of incarceration including childhood incarceration by raising the age of criminal responsibility. Campaigns such as Raise the Age and #FreeHer

Support the decades-long calls for structural changes called for by First Nations – advocate for the adoption of the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

As individuals we must loudly back calls for treaties, constitutional reform, and truth telling and encourage our institutions, to also speak up.

Talk with friends and family, call out bad behaviour in your own circles. Challenge ignorance whenever you encounter it.

Never tolerate racism. Never pass by racist behaviour without calling it out.

Silence is acquiescence.

If you come from a culturally and linguistically diverse community, ensure that information on Australia's history and First Nations' aspirations are available in your mother tongue and disseminated with your community.

Talk to your community about Australian history and about the causes of First Nations disadvantage.

All of us must become more active in supporting local truth-telling and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories. The first step is to inform yourself of local history and culture.

Then become active in sharing this history and advocating for its wide acknowledgment in the public domain including through memorialisation, plaques and renaming places with their ancient Aboriginal names.

Investigate the record of those colonial leaders who are memorialised by place names in your local area and if they are guilty of historical crimes against First Nations then start a community conversation about renaming these places.

Why should we memorialise those who massacred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the past? To do so continues the suffering inflicted by the original crime.

Now, some of you, I suspect, may think these potential actions seem difficult to achieve; many of you will have no experience in changing the world.

Some of you may be shy about challenging some of the long-held but erroneous assumptions in your immediate community but I want to assure you that across this country many people just like you are joining First Nations peoples in such actions.

Remember the words of Barack Obama,

“We are the change that we seek.”

This is what we mean by moving from safe to brave.

Before I go, I want to leave you with a quote that I believe very eloquently sums up what is at stake.

The quote is from a respondent to a survey undertaken as part of our 2021 State of Reconciliation report:

“We cannot imagine that the descendants of people whose genius and resilience maintained a culture here through 50,000 years or more, through cataclysmic changes to the climate and environment, and who then survived two centuries of dispossession and abuse, will be denied their place in the modern Australian nation. We cannot imagine that. We cannot imagine that we will fail.”

Thank you all for your time this morning.

I hope you all have a great day and an even better National Reconciliation Week.

Thank you.

ENDS