

NSW Youth Parliament 2024

**First Nations Cultural
Land Connection
Program
(Establishment) Youth
Act 2024**

**Aboriginal Affairs
Committee**



NSW Youth Parliament

First Nations Cultural Land Connection Program (Establishment) Youth Act 2024

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Youth Minister for Aboriginal Affairs

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Summary of Debate

On Tuesday 9 July 2024, the Aboriginal Affairs Committee debated their Youth Bill, *First Nations Cultural Land Connect Program (Establishment) Bill 2024*, on the floor of the Legislative Assembly; presided over by The Hon. Greg Warren, Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Premier, Parliamentary Secretary for Education and Early Learning, Parliamentary Secretary for Western Sydney, and MP for Campbelltown.

Results of the Vote

The results of the amendments were 34 Ayes, 22 Noes, and 2 Abstentions. As such, the amendments were resolved in the affirmative.

The results of the vote on the Bill were 50 Ayes, 8 Noes, and 0 Abstention. As such, the Bill was passed.

The *First Nations Cultural Land Connection Program (Establishment) Youth Act 2024* (NSW) was **passed in its amended form**.

Explanatory Notes

This explanatory note relates to this Bill as introduced into Parliament.

This Bill intends to enshrine a permanent provision for co-curricular activities, tailored to First Nations students, in the Education Act 1990. Central to this initiative is the integration of On Country Learning (OCL) into the NSW state curriculum, executed through the NSW Cultural Land Connection Program (CLCP). OCL intends to promote the interconnectedness between people, environment and ancestors, often transmitted through oral traditions and experiential knowledge passed down through generations. The enacted CLCP will allow First Nations students in primary and secondary schools to maintain cultural continuity through shared experiences and teachings within the Community.

The CLCP is a statewide initiative designed to provide On Country Learning experiences for First Nations primary and secondary school students. The program is a collaboration between the Department of Education, Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, Traditional Owners, Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders. Under the CLCP, schools work closely with local First Nations communities to develop tailored OCL programs that connect students to Traditional lands, cultures, and languages. A key aspect of OCL is the On Country Excursions, in which students visit significant cultural sites within their schools' Traditional lands. These excursions are led by Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders who share stories, teachings, and knowledge. These excursions encompass cultural immersion, whereby Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders teach students about their history, creation stories, ceremonies, art, music, dance, and land management. Language learning is further integrated into the program, with students taught words and phrases from the Traditional language of their area. These lessons, facilitated by Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders, will be delivered via a hybrid method of online and face-to-face learning. Additionally, OCL includes Mentorship Programs, whereby older students (Years 10 and above) are paired with Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders or community leaders who provide guidance, support, and act as role models.

The CLCP is designed to be a continuous, long-term program designed to follow students participating in OCL activities throughout their schooling. The program aims to promote a connection to cultural identity and Country; ultimately improving wellbeing, engagement, attendance, and retention rates for First Nations students. Enhancing school attendance and retention demands strategies that engage both educators and local communities in fostering an environment conducive to academic success for Aboriginal students. The CLCP emphasises the importance of such tailored strategies, focused on promoting student engagement by considering contextual factors such as individual experiences, school climate and community involvement whilst fusing together Traditional and Western educational strategies to achieve educational outcomes.

Reflecting upon similar programs, the CLCP seeks to create an inclusive and engaging learning environment. The program will celebrate and validate First Nations cultures by embedding culturally relevant and community-driven experiences. The formalised implementation of OCL seeks to connect First Nations youth with cultural pride, an enhanced sense of identity and stronger cultural engagement. This will provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for both academic success and personal growth.

Background

Introduction

The education disparity encountered by First Nations Peoples, predominantly lower attendance rates in comparison to non-First Nations students, stems from impacts of colonisation, involving forced displacement from Traditional lands and discriminatory government policies. Fundamental to this history is the Stolen Generations, referring to First Nations children who were forcibly removed from their families by government agencies and church missions between 1905 and 1967, as part of discriminatory assimilation policies (Australians Together, n.d.). The intergenerational impacts of the Stolen Generations include ongoing intergenerational trauma and socioeconomic disadvantages, contributing to decades of lower educational attainment and reduced school participation rates among First Nations communities (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2022). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015) stated that “Colonisation severely disrupted Aboriginal society and economy [...]. The occupation of land by settlers and the restriction of Aboriginal people to 'reserves' disrupted their ability to support themselves” (p. 2). Consequently, a profound and justifiable culture of mistrust towards the education system has been reinforced within these communities.

On Country Learning seeks to reconnect First Nations students with cultural identity and consequently rebuild trust with the education system. By repairing this distrust, this Bill seeks to improve First Nations attendance rates and engagement within the school system. A 2019 review of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership in Australia shows that, “while ostensibly promoting cultural inclusion, Australian educational policy approaches are directed toward assimilation, standardisation and a narrowing focus on the measurement of prescribed Eurocentric learning outcomes” (Morrison et al., 2019, p. 7). This research highlights the need for a shift in educational approaches to better serve First Nations students. The lack of culturally relevant educational content and practices has been a significant factor in the disengagement and poor educational outcomes observed in First Nations communities. On Country Learning acknowledges the need for a nuanced, collaborative approach in combatting this issue to address its sophisticated nature, whilst striving to achieve the best outcome possible.

There is a distinct dichotomy in education attainment between First Nations and non-First Nations communities. In 2019 and 2022 attendance rates decreased by 7 percentage points for First Nations students (from 82% to 75%) and by 5 percentage points for non-First Nations students (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2020). Both current and previous educational programs and initiatives to address this issue have not demonstrated a practical evaluation of the individuality and nuance within First Nations communities (Baxter and Myers, 2019). Addressing these educational disparities necessitates a coordinated approach between educational institutions and communities. Baxter and Myers (2021) note that “Tailored solutions are required. If school-level strategies are ineffective for all students, strategies and policies designed for all of Australia's First Nations students will also affect only some of the population” (p. 1). Successful initiatives include the Learning on Country Program. The initiative builds upon small-scale or otherwise exclusive programs such as the Northern Territory Learning on Country program, in which 14 schools collaborate with rangers and participate (Learning on Country, n.d.).

Ramifications of low attendance retention

Between 2011 and 2021, there was a noteworthy increase in the proportion of First Nations individuals aged 20 to 24 who attained Year 12 completion or its equivalent, marking a rise from 52% to 68% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This increase reflects significant progress in school support initiatives, such as the presence of Aboriginal Education Officers

in NSW schools. However, in 2021, there was a discernible decline in Year 12 attainment rates in more remote areas, indicative of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). As cited by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1999), “the lack of secondary schools in rural and remote communities means that significant numbers of children generally either have to leave their communities to pursue secondary schooling”. This research highlights the role that geographical isolation serves in the lack of educational opportunities within regional, rural, and remote First Nations communities.

In addition to this, individuals who have completed an undergraduate degree earn a median income of \$76,731, significantly higher than those with a Year 11 certificate or lower qualification, who earn a median income of \$47,318 as of 2019 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This income gap is particularly significant given that 2021 Census data from the ABS estimates that at least one in three (35%) First Nations adults lived in households within the lowest 20% of incomes nationally, a trend that correlates with low educational attainment and attendance rates (National Indigenous Australians Agency, n.d.).

The implications of poor attendance of First Nations students extend further, impacting long-term health outcomes and life expectancy. The correlation between higher educational attainment and improved health outcomes is evident in statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) regarding First Nations populations. Among First Nations Peoples aged 15 to 34 who completed Year 12, 59% reported excellent or very good health, contrasting with 49% of those who discontinued schooling earlier (Year 9 or below). Similarly, for individuals aged 35 and older, the rates were 43% and 25% respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Furthermore, the likelihood of smoking decreased with higher educational levels: 34% of those aged 15 to 34 with Year 12 completion were daily smokers, compared to 68% of early school leavers. Among those aged 35 and above, the rates were 36% and 48% respectively (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

Importance of integrating emotional wellbeing to education outcomes

The State of NSW is home to over 32,000 people who live in either remote or very remote areas as classified by the ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). 16.5% of people in remote, and 31.5% of people in very remote communities identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the 2021 Census. This is significantly above the statewide average of 3.4% in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The percentage of people attending primary, and particularly secondary education in remote and particularly very remote NSW, sits significantly below the state-wide average. Additionally, students in remote and very remote areas are often faced with a lack of wellbeing support. This has a significant emotional impact on wellbeing and education retention, therefore alleviating this issue is a key priority.

Cultural Land Connection Program

A cultural land connection program aims to create a sustainable positive impact on the attendance, retention, and academic success of First Nations students. The program offers both a practical and culturally conscious apparatus within the NSW education curriculum through the permanent, long-term implementation of On Country Learning. On Country Learning is designed to reduce inequities for First Nations students by developing an engaging educational environment and closely collaborating with local communities. For the program to succeed, it is important that there is collaboration with the NSW Department of Education, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and Local Aboriginal Land Councils to deliver language lessons, cultural immersion and mentorship programs for the cultivation and empowerment of First Nation students' education. Consultations with Traditional Owners and

Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders ultimately support the delivery of effective solutions to address inequities and disparities faced by First Nations students.

Such a program signifies a commitment to rectifying past injustices and improving cultural resilience, wellbeing, and self-determination among First Nations young people. As such, the initiative acknowledges the intergenerational and intersectional impacts of past injustices associated with educational policies that have perpetuated systemic barriers both culturally and socioeconomically for First Nations students. Through integration into the education curriculum, the program seeks to uplift First Nations students and mitigate the persistent social and economic barriers they continue to encounter. It recognises the unique relationship with the educational system and culture, that First Nations young people possess. It seeks to maximise opportunities for cultural participation through various mediums and provides a culturally sound education program that meets state curriculum outcomes.

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I certify that this public Bill, which originated in the Youth Legislative Assembly, has finally passed the Youth Legislative Assembly of New South Wales.

Hamani Tanginoa, Youth Voice Coordinator



NSW Youth Parliament

First Nations Cultural Land Connection Program (Establishment) Youth Act 2024

Act no. 2, 2024

A Bill for

An Act to establish an On Country Learning program, provisions of the program, functions and education reform for First Nations students and other purposes.

I have examined this Bill and find it to correspond in all respects with the Bill as finally passed by the Youth Legislative Assembly.

Joshua Shaw, Youth Governor of the NSW Youth Parliament

The Youth Legislature of New South Wales enacts—

Part 1 Preliminary

1 Name of Act

This Act is the *First Nations Cultural Land Connection Program (Establishment) Act 2024*.

2 Commencement

The Act commences on 1 January 2026.

3 Relationship with other Acts and laws

This Act prevails to the extent of an inconsistency with another Act or law.

4 Objects

The objects of this Act are to—

- (a) promote the state-wide adoption of a sustainable Cultural Land Connection Program,
- (b) enforce the idea of reinforcing and developing Cultural and Traditional relations in schools specifically for First Nations students,
- (c) emphasise the need for the consultation of Local Aboriginal Land Councils, Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, Traditional Owners, Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders, and
- (d) foster an increasingly equitable educational sphere, with emphasis on the social development, inclusion, and empowerment of students.

5 Definitions

In this Act—

Aboriginal Land Councils (ALCs) are, a peak First Nations organisation which aims to develop land rights, creating an economic base for First Nations Communities, as well as the continued passing and enhancement of First Nations cultures, identities and heritage through the management of traditional sites and other cultural materials.

AECG refers to Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, and was established to promote active participation by First Nations Peoples in the consultative and decision-making process of education and training related matters, with the mandate that the process represents the First Nations Community viewpoint.

Cultural Competency Training means, a structured education program designed to improve a person's understanding and sensitivity towards First Nations Cultures.

Cultural Knowledge Holders means, individuals recognized for their responsibility in safeguarding the cultural and spiritual wisdom, including traditions, teachings, and practices unique to their culture or community.

Cultural Load means, the expectation put on First Nations Peoples to share cultural knowledge, or lived experience, in order to educate others knowingly or unknowingly.

Elders are who are acknowledged as the custodian of cultural and spiritual wisdom, encompassing traditions, teachings, and practices specific to their culture or community.

key learning areas means, disciplinary knowledge, skills and understanding in a range of subjects. These subjects include, English, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE), Creative and Practical Arts, and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE).

On Country Learning—see section 6(3).

self-determination means, fundamental right to determine how First Nations are actively participating in the decision-making process, and control over their lives and future including economic, social and cultural development.

Note— The *Interpretation Act 1987* also contains definitions and other provisions that affect the interpretation of this Bill.

Part 2 Cultural Land Connection Program

Division 1 Establishment

6 Establishment

- (1) There is, by this Act, the establishment of the Cultural Land Connection Program.
- (2) The program heavily relies on the On Country Learning.
- (3) For the purposes of this Act, *On Country Learning* is a culturally safe and responsive pedagogy which aims to support First Nations students to increase spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing outcomes through strengthening cultural connections to Country.

7 Management and facilitation

- (1) The program will be managed by the Department of Education through NSW Government Schools.
- (2) Schools will collaborate with local Aboriginal Community organisations, which include but not limited to—
 - (a) Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups,
 - (b) Local Aboriginal Land Councils,
 - (c) Traditional Custodians,
 - (d) Local Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders, and
 - (e) First Nations families and individuals within the local school community.
- (3) Each school will be responsible for accounting this for their local community.

8 Functions

- (1) The program aims to—
 - (a) cultivate the attendance retention rates of First Nations students,
 - (b) provide school based On Country opportunities with hopes of strengthening cultural and traditional relations, and
 - (c) allow students to have a greater opportunity to connect and create meaning of First Nations culture.
 - (d) Force stronger relationships between non-First Nations students to foster and reconciliation

- (2) The program will involve engaging on the Traditional Lands of the local school, with both off-site and on-site programs around cultural teachings and the arts facilitated by Elders and Cultural Knowledge holders where possible.

9 Implementation of the Cultural Land Connection Program

The program is to be delivered in two streams, with engagement opportunities for—

- (a) prep and primary aged students, and
(b) secondary school students.

10 Eligibility

- (1) Both First Nations and non-First Nations students in attendance of an education institution between the years of Kindergarten and Year 6 are eligible to participate in the primary school program.
- (2) Both First Nations and non-First Nations students in attendance of an education institution between the years of Year 7 to Year 12 are eligible to participate in the secondary school program.
- (3) Students must voluntarily enrol, which must be actively promoted in schools.
- (4) When section (3) applies, students who identify as First Nations, or are accepted by their community as First Nations, are prioritised in the selection process.
- (5) Interest in the program shall be communicated through written submission of a permission slip, signed by a parent or guardian providing explicit consent.

Division 2 Development of Program

11 Connection to key learning areas

The program seeks to introduce students to a focus on cultural engagement in Key Learning Areas including—

- (a) creative arts, and
(b) languages.

12 Development of content

Curriculum will be devised by the Department in close collaboration with Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders, AECGs and community organisations to ensure content is age-appropriate, culturally correct and promotes self-determination.

13 Program management

- (1) All involved parties of the program will contribute to the program's establishment, maintenance, delivery, and engagement processes with a holistic approach seeking to mitigate workplace stress, burnout and cultural load.
- (2) This includes—
- (a) the Minister and their Department,
(b) Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups,
(c) Local Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders,

(d) Aboriginal Education Officers, and

(e) involved staff members.

14 Aboriginal Education Officer involvement in development

Aboriginal Education Officers are to be involved in the development and implementation of the program.

15 Preparatory and primary school program

(1) For preparatory and primary school students, the program aims to establish foundational structures of creative and performing arts skills.

(2) The program shall additionally focus on developing foundational structures of cultural language, practices, ceremonies and connection with Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders.

16 Secondary school program

(1) For secondary students, the program seeks to build upon deep creative and performing arts skills learnt during primary education.

(2) The program shall additionally focus on deep cultural language, practices, ceremonies and connection with mentorship and leadership opportunities within the First Nations community and wider school or chosen educational pathway.

Division 3 Delivery

17 Program delivery

(1) Students will undertake 200 hours of the program.

(2) These hours must include—

(a) 100 hours of an in-school incursion, and

(b) 100 hours of On-Country Learning.

(3) The program must also feature—

(a) language sessions during a school-based education session, and

(b) a cultural session that will discuss history, art, and tradition.

18 Program facilitation

(1) The sessions must be facilitated by existing Aboriginal Education Officers, alongside Local Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders, in accordance with the advice and guidance of the First Nations Students of the local school.

(2) First Nations teachers and other staff members shall engage with participants to check in on the social and emotional wellbeing of students.

(3) Schools are encouraged to promote the integration to year groups and stages where possible.

19 Cultural load

To ensure the wellbeing of First Nations Peoples, the program must include a cultural load management plan, in consultations with First Nations students, teaching staff and community.

Part 3 Evaluation

Division 1 Ministerial Review

20 Review of mentorship and educational opportunities

- (1) The Minister must commence a review 12 months after the commencement of this Act.
- (2) Following this review, the Minister must develop a plan to promote mentorships and educational opportunities for the program.

21 Review period for classes

- (1) The program content must be reviewed by the Minister after 12 months of implementation in the first instance, and then every two years further to that.
- (2) The Minister and Department must consult with Local Aboriginal Communities during the review process.

22 Outcome of review

After a review is completed by the Minister, it shall be tabled in Parliament at the next sitting day.

Division 2 Participatory evaluation and community feedback

23 Community Feedback Mechanisms

- (1) There shall be established regular community feedback sessions at least once per school term, ensuring the active participation of students, families, Elders, Cultural Knowledge Holders, and local Aboriginal Organisations.
- (2) These sessions will provide a platform for open dialogue and collective evaluation of the program's effectiveness, cultural appropriateness, and areas for improvement.

24 Participatory evaluation process

- (1) A participatory evaluation process shall be developed that prioritises qualitative insights and community narratives over quantitative metrics.
- (2) Culturally sensitive methods such as storytelling, yarning circles and art-based feedback shall be utilised to gather perspectives on the program's impact.

25 Integration of feedback

Feedback gathered from community sessions shall be documented and incorporated into ongoing program adjustments and improvements.

26 Community Advisory Council

- (1) A Community Advisory Board shall be established.
- (2) The Board shall oversee the integration of feedback and provide guidance on program development.
- (3) The Board shall consist of—
 - (a) students,
 - (b) Elders,
 - (c) Cultural Knowledge Holders, and
 - (d) representatives from local Aboriginal organisations.

27 Transparency and Accountability

- (1) The Department shall publish a summary of feedback of the program and subsequent program adjustments annually in the form of a report.
- (2) Regular community dialogues discussing how feedback has been incorporated into the program must be provided, ensuring transparency and accountability.

Part 4 Support for Educators

28 Professional development and community collaboration

- (1) Teachers will receive professional development training for the program and will be given resources to support lessons to students.
- (2) Whenever possible, Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders or any other qualified personnel will be given priority to carry out the professional development.

29 Cultural competency training

- (1) Both teaching and non-teaching staff of education providers must complete professional learning on the importance of On Country Learning facilitated by the Department.
- (2) During the first 12 months of establishment of the program, the training shall be aimed to alleviate concerns around attendance and potential impacts of syllabus learning for involved staff and students.

Part 5 Miscellaneous

Division 1 Considerations of Remote Communities

30 Additional support for remote school communities

- (1) Schools located within remote communities shall be eligible for increased funding from the Department of Education, and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Treaty.
- (2) Funding must be allocated to the establishment of the program.
- (3) Schools located within remote communities may work with other schools within the Traditional Lands to deliver the program.
- (4) The Department of Education shall increase funding in wellbeing support for remote school communities conducting the program, keeping accordance to cultural protocols.

Produced for The Y NSW Youth Parliament 2024