

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION WEEK

BE BRAVE. MAKE CHANGE

An invitation for us to co-create, to collaborate and to work together in reconciliation

1 JUNE 2022

Dear Colleagues

Earlier today I had the great privilege of launching EREA's Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (2022-2025), at the Catholic Leadership Centre in Melbourne. Joined by young people from our Melbourne schools, it was a significant celebration for our community during National Reconciliation Week, as we are called to embrace this year's theme to *Be Brave and Make Change*.

With the launch of our Stretch RAP, while we must not be boastful, or rest easy because we have arrived at this particular point, we can afford to be somewhat proud of the work of many to get us to this point. I pay tribute to Dr Nerida Blair, the Chair of the RAP Committee and all the members of this committee – Ray Paxton, Thelma Parker, Cynthia Rowan, Matt Hawkins, Ann Rebgetz, Ivan Mahoney, Marie Barton, Karina Blackman, Brad Copeland, Mark Walsh, Dr Marnie Shay and Andrew Kirkpatrick – who have worked studiously to prepare our Stretch RAP. I also provide my thanks to Reconciliation Australia for their ongoing advice and support of this work.

As we have had pointed out to us, and we know instinctively, this is not work that "arrives"; it will never be complete, and we continue to strive to do better. It is work that is iterative, and evolutionary. Last week,

on National Sorry Day we acknowledged the Uluru Statement from the Heart, in which First Nations Peoples, "coming from all points of the southern sky" extended the invitation:

**"walk with us
in a movement of Australian people
for a better future."**

We have publicly endorsed the Uluru Statement so that we provide a liberating education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and non-Indigenous children and young people, as well as signalling this endorsement as our absolute commitment to act for reconciliation. We note that reconciliation in Australia is at a tipping point, and we are called to move on from a safe to a brave space on issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Our EREA Stretch RAP seeks to further embed reconciliation initiatives in our organisational culture. In concert with the development of our Stretch RAP, we have written our EREA Learning Statement "Implementing Liberating Practice to Co-create a Better World". The key deliverable of this statement is to "explicitly co-create the learning conditions, dispositions, and relationships to enable deep listening, confidence, agency, and freedom". I hope you can draw a nexus between these two initiatives.



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Our aim in developing and embedding our Stretch RAP is to demonstrate and provide real leadership in promoting respectful relationships and creating opportunities *with* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

We aim to advance the five dimensions of Reconciliation, being: Race Relations, Equality and Equity, Institutional Integrity, Historical Acceptance and Unity. The Stretch RAP will provide an impetus for our schools to integrate and embed the values and priorities of the reconciliation movement into the culture of each of our schools – their daily business and ways of being, knowing, and doing. This Stretch RAP, I hope, demonstrates our ongoing commitment to reconciliation and further extends this commitment.

It has been my profound privilege to visit schools across this ancient land of ours, particularly in rural and remote areas where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students amount to as much as 80% to 100% of the student population in some of these schools.

Early this year I visited the Flexible Learning School in Mt Isa. I was fortunate to be at the school on the day that the school was officially opened and blessed for the year, with Uncle Will and Uncle Frank, two Aboriginal elders who came to offer a smoking ceremony for the community. We were all invited to take a eucalyptus leaf and to hold on to it. Meanwhile Uncle had started a fire. The fresh leaves were added so that it smouldered and produced an aromatic smoke. There is no mistaking the smell of burning eucalypts! In turn, we were invited to come into the smoke, to let it swirl in and round us, over us and under us, all the while, clutching our single leaf. This leaf was to be the symbol of our past year – all of the hurts, disappointments, perhaps failures and shortcomings of the year we have left behind. To really let it go though, we had to consciously

bring all of this to mind, and to then choose to do so. Once we were ready, we were invited to put our leaf into the flames and let it literally as well as figuratively burn away. In the letting go, we turned our eyes and our thoughts to the new year, to our hopes, prayers and wishes for a better 2022. We were invited though to make it a better year. The elders then visited every room of the school and let the smoke cleanse the school and rid it of negativity.

Also present during this smoking ceremony were Frs Mick and Emene from the Parish of the Good Shepherd in Mt Isa. They had come to seamlessly provide a blessing for the school for the new year, and to offer a rite of sprinkling. The Priest followed Uncle through the school, and it was at once blessed and cleansed, acknowledged and made holy.

What struck me on this day was the profound respect the young people had for this dual ceremony and for all gathered. The smoke and the water; the holy men – the Elders and Priests, worked in natural rhythm, smoking and sprinkling. It was a powerful invitation for us to co-create, to collaborate and to work together in reconciliation.

As I have previously mentioned today and in other fora, our work in reconciliation is not ever done. We continue to review, refine, and expand the principles of reconciliation in all domains of governance at EREA, so that we can be confident that opportunities have been afforded, and so that barriers to inclusion are removed, and so that we listen deeply and respectfully to the voices of First Nations Australians. Today we also restate our commitment to learning, unlearning, and relearning so that our cultural competency grows, and so that together, we work in the pursuit of justice, healing and restoration. Then we can say that we have a shared identity as Australians that is reflective of the best of all of us, and so that we ensure that past wrongs are never repeated.

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