

Auditor-General's Report 7 of 2025

## Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029



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# Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029

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First Session, Fifty-Fifth Parliament

By authority: T. Foresto, Government Printer, South Australia

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2025

*The Audit Office of South Australia acknowledges and respects  
Aboriginal people as the State's first people and nations, and  
recognises Aboriginal people as traditional owners and occupants  
of South Australian land and waters.*



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Dear President and Speaker

**Report of the Auditor-General:  
Report 7 of 2025 *Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029***

Under the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1987*, I present to you this report on whether the Department for Education is effectively managing the Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029 to deliver its intended education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Our audit focused on stage 2 of the Strategy (2022–2026).

This audit is a reasonable assurance engagement where we conclude on the performance of the activities against the identified criteria. It is conducted in line with the Australian Standard on Assurance Engagement ASAE 3500 *Performance Engagements*. We complied with the independence and other ethical requirements for assurance engagements.

**Acknowledgements**

The audit team for this report was Salv Bianco, Ken Anderson, Simon Altus and Veronika Kosourikhina. They were assisted by Dr Joanne Buckskin from Flinders University.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance given by staff of the Department for Education during our audit.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Andrew Blaskett".

Andrew Blaskett  
**Auditor-General**



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# Audit snapshot – Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029

## What we reviewed and why

We assessed whether the Department for Education is effectively managing the Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029 to deliver its intended education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. Our audit focused on stage 2 of the Strategy (2022–2026).

The Aboriginal Education Strategy states that more needs to be done to ensure every Aboriginal South Australian can enjoy the life-long benefits of education. Education is a key factor contributing to cultural identity, health and employment for Aboriginal people. Education levels among Aboriginal people have steadily risen over the past decade, but there is still inequity in education outcomes between Aboriginal and other students.


## What we concluded

The Department for Education needs to address gaps in key areas to demonstrate effective management of the Aboriginal Education Strategy. These gaps are:

- reporting to those overseeing the strategy does not include information on progress against about half of the strategy performance indicators
- information reported to the public does not provide transparency on strategy outcomes
- most strategy initiatives are not planned in a way that clearly explains how they are expected to achieve intended outcomes
- the risk and change management approaches for the strategy are not clearly defined
- performance indicators for several strategy initiatives are not designed effectively
- the data collected against strategy and initiative performance indicators is not complete.

Given these gaps, the Department for Education is not able to effectively demonstrate the impact of the Aboriginal Education Strategy and how it is progressing towards achieving its goals and objectives. The Department recognises the challenges that it faces and has started a broad reset of its strategic direction for Aboriginal education during 2025, in partnership with Aboriginal people.

## Key facts



**Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029**

*Vision: Each Aboriginal child and young person is a proud and confident learner, achieving at their highest potential*

<b>14,339</b> <b>Aboriginal children</b> in SA Government schools and pre-schools in 2024	The Strategy is being implemented <b>over 10 years</b> in <b>three stages</b>	<b>Stage 2 includes</b> <b>13 initiatives</b> and is due to end 30 June 2026
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# 1 Executive summary

## 1.1 Introduction

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Our performance audit assessed whether the Department for Education (DE) is effectively managing the Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029 (AES) to deliver its intended education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.<sup>a</sup>

The AES was co-designed with the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Council and released by DE in December 2018 to drive policy and practice across the public education system. It establishes a vision for every Aboriginal child and young person to be a proud and confident learner, achieving at their highest potential. It states that:

- education is a compelling social determinant of identity, health and future life expectancy for Aboriginal people
- while Aboriginal children and young people have made some significant gains in learning and development, more needs to be done to ensure every Aboriginal South Australian can enjoy the life-long benefits of education.

The AES establishes three 10-year goals for the public education system, supported by a series of objectives. It is being implemented in three stages through initiatives that aim to address different aspects of a student's progression from early years to schooling and vocational pathways. Our audit focused on stage 2 of the AES, which started in 2022 and finishes in 2026.

There are challenges in monitoring and measuring the impact of the AES and its initiatives with many moving parts and external factors influencing its outcomes. The strategic environment for Aboriginal education has also changed since the AES was released.<sup>b</sup>

To effectively manage these challenges, changes in strategic direction and expanded commitments, DE needs to have sound governance arrangements, implementation plans, monitoring and evaluation frameworks and reporting in place for the AES.

## 1.2 Conclusion

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The Department for Education needs to address gaps in key areas to demonstrate effective management of the AES. These gaps are:

- most AES initiatives are not planned in a way that clearly explains how they are expected to achieve intended outcomes (section 3.2.1)
- the risk management strategy and change management approach for the AES are not clearly defined (sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3)

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<sup>a</sup> DE uses the term Aboriginal to refer to people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The AES states that this term is preferred by Aboriginal South Australians and DE.

<sup>b</sup> Section 2.2 details recent changes in the strategic environment impacting Aboriginal education, including expanded commitments for DE.

- performance indicators for several initiatives are not designed to effectively monitor the achievement of goals and outcomes (section 4.2.1)<sup>c</sup>
- the data needed to evaluate initiative outcomes is often not clearly defined and the data collected against strategy and initiative performance indicators is not complete (section 4.2.2)
- strategy and initiative performance indicators have not been reviewed and updated as needed to ensure that they remain useful (section 5.2.1)
- reporting to those overseeing the AES does not include information on progress against about half of the strategy performance indicators (section 5.2.2)
- information reported to the public does not provide transparency on AES outcomes (section 5.2.4).

Given these gaps, DE is not able to effectively demonstrate the impact of the AES and most initiatives and how they are progressing towards achieving their goals and objectives.

DE has implemented some sound practices in managing the AES, including:

- releasing a comprehensive guide on planning, implementing and evaluating strategies and providing training to staff on how to apply the principles in the guide
- engaging an external consultant to review the implementation of stage 1 of the AES and taking action to address most review findings
- establishing governance arrangements for the AES and developing implementation plans for stage 2 promptly.

In implementing the AES, DE has also performed work in important areas to support better education outcomes for Aboriginal people, including the co-design of an Aboriginal languages curriculum with language owners so students and families can connect with and retain their cultural identity.

DE recognises that the scale and depth of impact of the AES is not currently at the level needed to achieve its goals and objectives. To respond to this, and to the expanded commitments since the AES was released, DE has started to reset its strategic direction for Aboriginal education more broadly during 2025 in partnership with Aboriginal people.<sup>d</sup> It plans to:

- develop an approach to deliver impact at the whole-of-education system level for Aboriginal education outcomes
- co-design initiatives with Aboriginal people
- define measures and indicators of impact that reflect what is important to Aboriginal learners, their families and communities.

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<sup>c</sup> This report uses the term 'performance indicators' for all the indicators and measures used by DE to monitor and evaluate AES and initiative outputs, outcomes and impacts.

<sup>d</sup> DE advised us that while it has started to reset its broader strategic direction for Aboriginal education, the AES continues in its current form and planning for stage 3 will proceed.

## 1.3 What we recommended

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For AES initiatives to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, DE needs to understand what works and why. It needs to be clear how initiative inputs, activities and outputs are expected to deliver intended outcomes and impacts. Performance indicators must be well designed and supported by appropriate data to effectively monitor and evaluate whether intended goals, outcomes and impacts have been achieved.

In planning for and implementing stage 3 of the AES, we recommend that DE:

- clearly documents how strategy initiatives are expected to deliver intended outcomes and impacts
- implements a change management approach to help embed the AES across DE and establishes clear processes for mitigating risks to the success of the AES
- provides more guidance and support to staff on designing performance indicators and planning and performing evaluations of initiatives
- improves evaluation planning and data collection processes, including confirming the type of evaluations to be performed and data collection needs as early as possible
- regularly reviews performance indicators to ensure they remain useful and reflect what is important to Aboriginal learners, their families and communities
- reports at scheduled intervals on progress against all strategy-level performance indicators to those responsible for overseeing the AES
- updates the AES webpage to report relevant and timely information to the public on progress against the AES.

DE should also consider the principles of good practice in these recommendations when it develops and implements large-scale, significant and complex strategies in the future.

## 1.4 Response to our recommendations

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DE responded to our detailed findings and advised us how it would action our recommendations. We have included DE's responses in sections 3 to 6.

We have provided DE's response to this report in Appendix 2.

## 2 Background

In South Australia, more than 14,300 Aboriginal children and young people attend public preschools, primary schools and secondary schools. Over half of Aboriginal children and young people in the public education system live in the greater Adelaide region (56%).<sup>e</sup>

Education is an important contributing factor to cultural identity, good health and longevity for Aboriginal people.<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal people who complete more years of education also tend to have better outcomes across a range of areas, including employment and income.<sup>2</sup>

Education levels among Aboriginal people have steadily risen over the past decade, but there are still gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students attending preschool (49% compared to 76%) and school (75% compared to 88%), as well as between Aboriginal and all students completing SACE (45% compared to 69%),<sup>f</sup> and literacy and numeracy outcomes (see figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: Percentage of students completing Year 3 NAPLAN tests at a level above 'Needs Additional Support'**

	Aboriginal students	All students
Reading	63%	85%
Writing	77%	93%
Numeracy	67%	88%

Source: Information provided by DE based on 2024 data, and unaudited.

### 2.1 Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029

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#### 2.1.1 Structure and goals

In December 2018, DE launched the AES to refine existing programs and trial new ways to better address the cultural and learning needs of Aboriginal students. The AES was co-designed with the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Council (SAAETCC).

The AES states that achieving better learning outcomes is not limited to improving grades and performance on standardised tests. It also aims to make school an environment that drives student wellbeing, belonging and confidence, so that 'each Aboriginal child and young person is a proud and confident learner, achieving at their highest potential'.

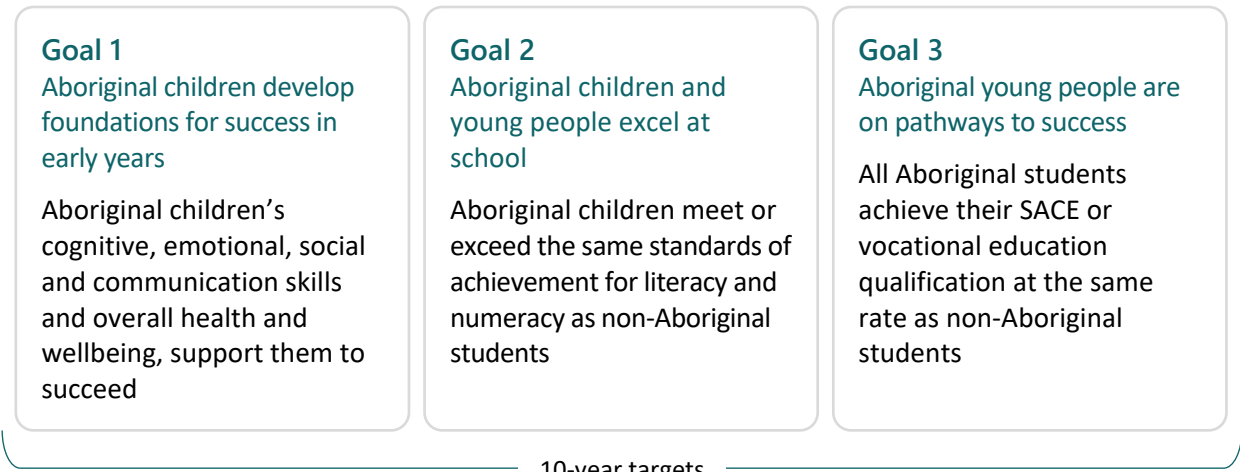
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<sup>e</sup> Information on Aboriginal student numbers and the proportion of Aboriginal students in greater Adelaide was provided by DE, based on 2024 data, and is unaudited.

<sup>f</sup> Information on preschool and school attendance and SACE completion rates was provided by DE, based on 2024 data, and is unaudited. Data on school attendance is for students in Years 1 to 10.

The AES sets out three goals to be achieved in the 10 years from 2019 to 2029. They map out a student’s progression from early years to schooling and vocational pathways.

Figure 2.2: AES 10-year goals



The AES is being implemented in three stages.

Figure 2.3: Timeline for AES stages



Total expenditure for stage 1 was \$15 million. \$31 million has been spent on stage 2 to date.<sup>g</sup>

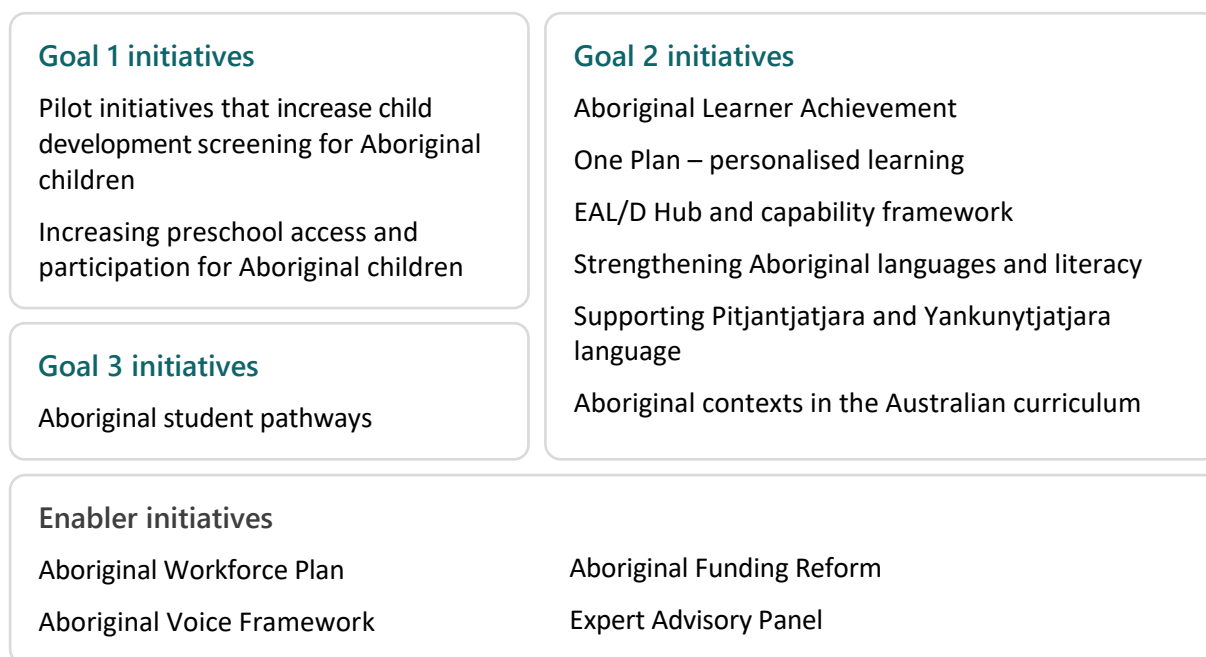
Some initiatives from stage 1 have continued in stage 2 and new initiatives have been introduced. Initiatives are projects that aim to address different aspects of a student’s progress through the public education system. For example:

- increasing preschool access and participation for Aboriginal children
- expanding programs to teach Aboriginal languages in schools
- improving programs that support students’ transition to further studies, training and employment.

The 13 planned initiatives for stage 2 are shown in figure 2.4.<sup>h</sup>

<sup>g</sup> Expenditure information was provided to us by DE and is unaudited.  
<sup>h</sup> The initiative to increase child development screening for Aboriginal children was transferred to the Office for Early Childhood Development in 2024 and the AES Expert Advisory Panel was paused in July 2023.

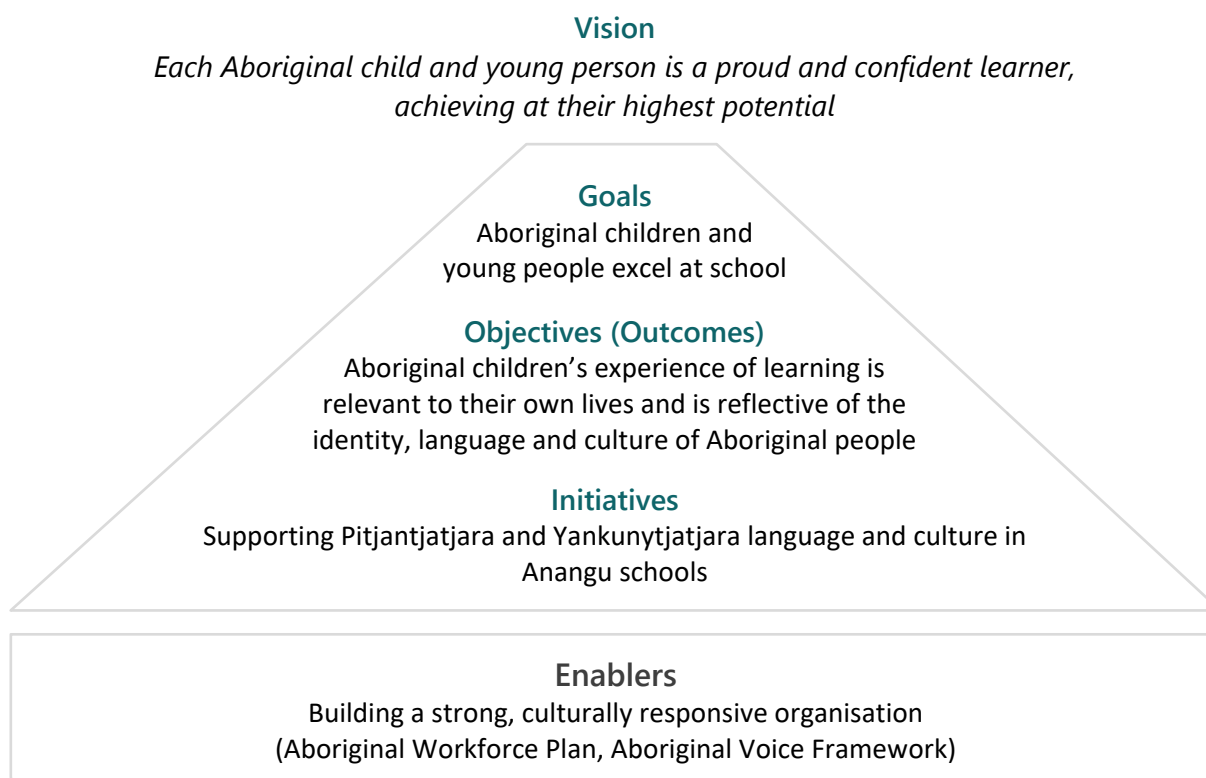
**Figure 2.4: Planned stage 2 initiatives**



Source: AES Stage 2 Implementation Plan, DE.

Each initiative has a set of objectives and expected outcomes that are intended to contribute to one of the three AES goals. Collectively, these initiatives ultimately aim to achieve the AES vision. Figure 2.5 outlines the key elements and structure of the AES and the relationship between its goals, objectives and initiatives, with examples of each element.

**Figure 2.5: AES structure with examples**



## 2.1.2 Governance arrangements

DE's Senior Executive Group (SEG) oversees the AES implementation. It is accountable for achieving the strategy's goals and is supported by these individuals and groups:

- the strategy implementation lead
- the Aboriginal Education SEG sub-committee
- the AES Expert Advisory Panel (the Panel)
- project teams responsible for delivering strategy initiatives.

The Panel was established to provide expert advice on implementing the AES and improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people. It mainly included external members, such as the former Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People and other Aboriginal education experts involved in developing the AES.

The Panel last met in November 2022 and was formally paused in July 2023 with input and advice from SAAETCC. The role of the Panel is currently under review, as part of a broader review of DE's governance and policy arrangements for Aboriginal education.

## 2.2 Other plans and commitments for Aboriginal education

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Since 2019, the SA Government and DE have committed to a national agreement and plans that complement the AES to support education outcomes for Aboriginal students:

- the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020)
- the South Australian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (2024–2026)
- DE's Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan (2023)
- DE's Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia (2023).

The South Australian First Nations Voice to Parliament (established in 2023) is another significant reform that impacts how DE conducts its work in support of Aboriginal students and its staff.

DE advised us that these broader commitments ensure that it continues to prioritise Aboriginal education beyond the AES. Some of these commitments include:

- shared decision-making and access to local data and information on efforts to close the gap and other issues directly affecting Aboriginal people
- embedding Aboriginal voices in the curriculum, ensuring DE's governance, policies and programs are culturally inclusive, responsive and relevant for Aboriginal people
- ensuring that Aboriginal children and young people see themselves in their learning and develop the knowledge, skills, confidence and resilience needed to achieve their goals and thrive in society.



## 2.3 Strategic reset

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In 2025 DE started a system-wide review to align its work across its many Aboriginal education commitments, and reset its strategic direction to support improved outcomes for Aboriginal children, young people and their families. DE recognises that the AES is not yet achieving the scale and depth of impact that it was aiming for and has identified several barriers it aims to address to sustain change beyond the scope and influence of the AES. By the end of 2025, DE aims to:

- identify key principles and approaches to deliver system impact at all levels, particularly at preschool, school and classroom levels
- develop a theory of change and implementation approach for the strategic reset that is aligned with its Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia
- understand what is important to Aboriginal learners, their families and communities and choose impact measures that reflect this
- develop a governance approach that includes Aboriginal voices in decision-making at all levels of the education system.

## 3 Implementation planning

### 3.1 Overview

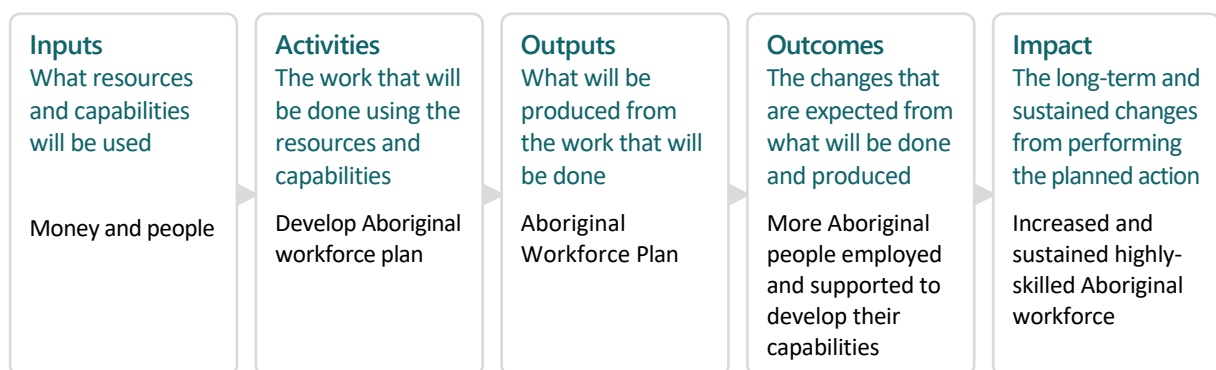
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Good planning helps ensure an agency is properly prepared to carry out specific strategic actions and initiatives. When a strategy's implementation planning is done well, its intended outcomes and impacts are more likely to be achieved.

Logic models and theories of change are important tools to use early in planning for the implementation of strategies and initiatives.<sup>3</sup> They help understand how a course of action is expected to result in change ('doing this, will result in that, because...'), and help key stakeholders agree on how the strategy or initiative should work.<sup>4</sup>

Logic models are flowcharts that show how inputs, activities and outputs link to expected outcomes. Figure 3.1 provides examples of these elements.

**Figure 3.1: Elements of a logic model<sup>i</sup>**



A logic model should be supported by a theory of change that explains how planned activities will lead to intended outcomes and impacts. It helps to clearly define and understand:

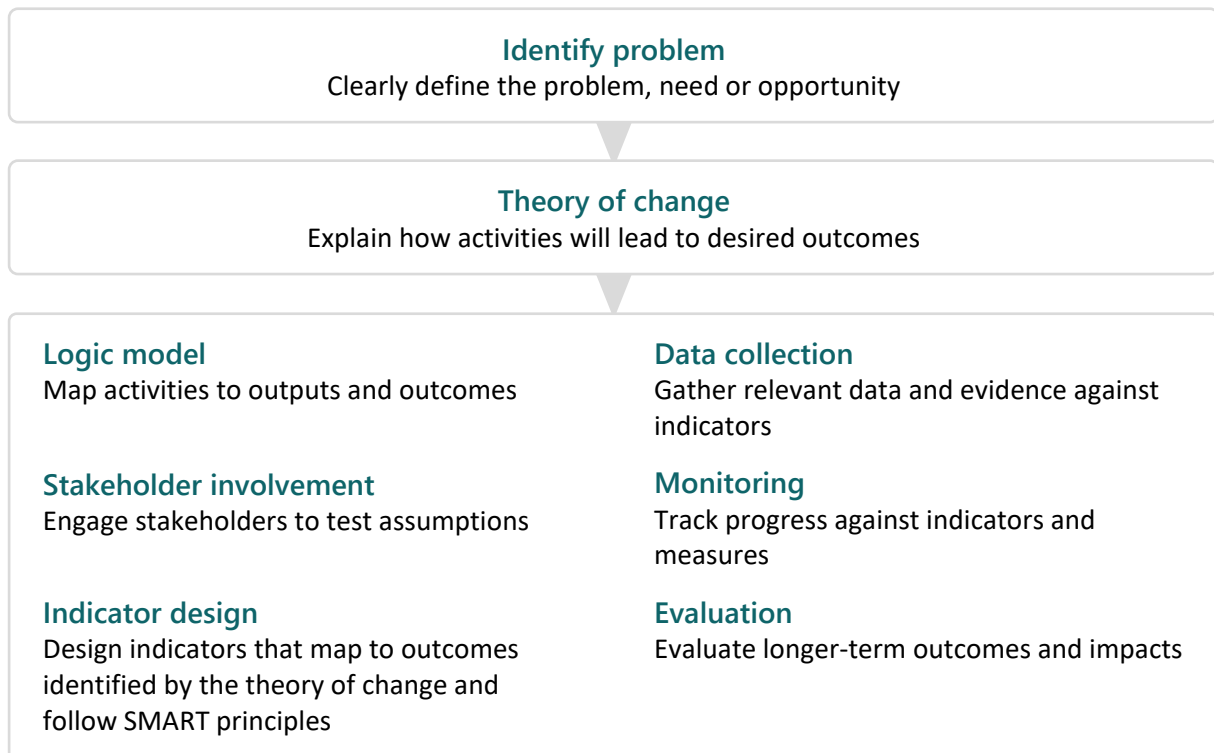
- the core problem or need being addressed
- the assumptions that explain how inputs and activities logically lead to outputs and outcomes
- supporting data and research for those assumptions.

Developing a sound logic model and theory of change also helps to guide performance measurement, data collection and monitoring and evaluation.

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<sup>i</sup> Elements of a logic model sourced from DE's Strategic Policy Model Guide.

**Figure 3.2: Key steps in implementing, monitoring and evaluating a strategy or initiative**



Source: Developed from information in DE's Strategic Policy Model Guide and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet's Evaluation Guidelines.

A clear understanding of how a strategy or initiative is intended to work helps to:

- identify what to measure and what data needs to be collected to confirm whether the strategy and initiatives are working
- monitor activities to track progress and see if they are happening as planned
- evaluate whether and how intended outcomes and impacts were achieved.

## 3.2 Findings and recommendations

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### 3.2.1 Planning for most AES initiatives does not clearly explain how they will lead to expected outcomes being achieved

#### Recommendation

DE should clearly document how AES initiatives are expected to deliver intended outcomes and impacts when planning stage 3, including mapping each activity to its outputs and outcomes. Logic models and theories of change can be used for this purpose.

The depth of analysis should vary based on the initiative's significance and complexity. It should generally consider:

- the problem, need or opportunity that DE is trying to address
- how each activity and output will deliver intended outcomes and impacts, including relevant data and evidence to support expected causes and effects
- external factors that could impact strategy or initiative outcomes
- potential unintended consequences of the strategy or initiatives.

In planning AES initiatives, DE should also:

- ensure that staff leading and implementing initiatives and key stakeholders are involved to understand their views and test assumptions
- use what it has learned from previous planning, research and evaluations
- consider assumptions about how or why strategies and initiatives will work.

#### Finding

For the AES to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, DE needs to understand what works and why. It needs to be clear how strategy and initiative inputs, activities and outputs are expected to deliver intended outcomes and impacts.

DE has prepared:

- a logic model at the strategy level that includes important elements such as inputs, activities, outputs and short-term, medium-term and long-term outcomes
- project plans that detail inputs, key deliverables/outputs and expected outcomes for each initiative.

However, the logic model at the strategy level does not clearly map each activity to its outputs and outcomes and is not supported by a theory of change. Logic models and

theories of change were not prepared for initiatives and most project plans for delivering initiatives do not clearly explain:

- the main problem, need or opportunity DE is trying to address
- how the work being done will lead to intended outcomes and impact
- why these outcomes are expected and the data and evidence that support this.

DE advised us that in its Aboriginal education strategic reset project it plans to establish a theory of change and implementation approach for Aboriginal education that aligns with its Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia. This aims to:

- reset the strategic direction for Aboriginal education outcomes
- deliver impact within individual schools and preschools, and therefore at the broader system level for public education.

## DE's response

*Planning is already underway for the evaluation of stage 2 and design of stage 3 initiatives of the AES. DE conveyed to the Audit a separate project underway, the Aboriginal education strategic reset project, which intends to provide wider recommendations to the department regarding reforms related to Aboriginal children, students and families. This project will align and leverage the interdependencies of not just the AES, but many key department strategies and initiatives. It should be noted that this project is co-designed and co-delivered with Aboriginal people, and has its own theory of change and implementation approach.*

*It is DE's view that many of the strategy initiatives in stage 2 had appropriate or updated program logics, and that was appropriate at the initiative level. Notwithstanding this, the design of stage 3 provides opportunities for the strategy to evaluate and update program logics and theories of change as required.*

## Audit comment on DE's response

Our finding acknowledges that project plans for the initiatives include some program logic elements such as inputs, key deliverables/outputs and expected outcomes. However, we found that there are other important elements of program logic models and theories of change that these plans often did not clearly explain, such as the main problem, need or opportunity being addressed and how the work being done will lead to the intended outcomes and impact.

We also note that the theory of change and implementation approach for the Aboriginal education strategic reset project were not finalised at the time of our audit.

### 3.2.2 Risks to the success of the AES were not identified as part of early implementation planning

#### Recommendation

DE should implement clear processes and responsibilities for:

- identifying and assessing risks to the effective implementation and success of the AES
- developing mitigation strategies for these risks
- regularly reviewing and monitoring these risks and mitigation strategies.

#### Finding

Effective risk management practices are particularly important for longer-term strategies like the AES as they can be more exposed to changing circumstances and external developments. These practices can help to reduce the likelihood of events or consequences adversely impacting the achievement of targeted outcomes and objectives. If significant risks are not identified and assessed early, it can be more difficult to put in place actions to effectively manage them.

Risks to successfully implementing the AES at a whole-of-strategy level are likely to be different and have a broader focus compared to those for each of its targeted initiatives. These risks need to be separately identified, assessed and managed.

We found that risks in delivering the individual AES initiatives were identified and assessed early in their implementation plans. However, risks that affect the implementation and success of the AES more broadly were not identified and assessed in early implementation planning. For example:

- the AES lacking legitimacy and support among Aboriginal staff, learners, families and communities and other stakeholders
- schools perceiving that implementing the AES is not relevant to them or operational outside of DE's corporate office
- changes in the external strategic environment, including changes in government direction
- inconsistent approaches to implementing the AES across different initiatives
- information needed for decision-making not being provided by performance indicators.

As a result, effective mitigation strategies were not in place to reduce the impact of risks early in implementation, and subsequently some risks did occur.

The approach to managing risks was also not specified in the AES implementation plan and most implementation plans for AES initiatives.

## DE's response

*DE notes that this finding relates predominantly to early planning and implementation of the strategy, and that significant improvements have been made to identify, assess and manage risks at the initiative level. It should be noted that regular reporting of risks, progress, resourcing and indicators continues to occur at individual initiative and overall strategy levels, which feeds into existing department governance and reporting structures (e.g. SEG). Governance of the AES, including the monitoring of risks, will continue to be considered and improved where necessary.*

### 3.2.3 Change management approach not developed

#### Recommendation

DE should develop and implement a change management approach for stage 3 of the AES and the Aboriginal education strategic reset project.

#### Finding

The AES aims to deliver change and then sustain it across the public education system. Achieving this for complex and large-scale strategies like the AES requires developing a clear and structured approach to preparing for, managing and reinforcing change. This should be done early in implementation planning.

An external review of stage 1 implementation noted that achieving the AES goals is dependent on support from school and preschool leaders and the Aboriginal education workforce. In response, DE developed an AES communications framework and stakeholder engagement and communications plans for several initiatives.

While DE considered some aspects of change management in its communication framework and plans, it did not develop an overarching approach for managing change in its implementation planning. This included not clearly defining and assessing:

- the nature and complexity of the changes across the education system
- who and what needs to change to successfully implement the AES
- the risks and current barriers for people delivering or adopting changes
- people's readiness for or anticipated resistance to delivering or adopting changes
- factors that could influence how change happens, such as the environment and culture in DE and the public education system
- the scale and effort required to effectively manage the changes people need to make
- what activities are needed to embed and support successful change, including the actions that school and preschool leaders and DE senior executives need to take
- processes to determine whether planned activities are effective or need adjusting.

DE noted in planning for the Aboriginal education strategic reset project that:

- consultation indicates that change is sometimes not occurring at preschools and schools and there is a perception that the AES is 'Aboriginal business' for Aboriginal staff to take ownership of, rather than 'everybody's business'
- a project outcome is to raise awareness across DE about the shared purpose of the education system for Aboriginal children and young people and to elevate this purpose as a core function and area of accountability for public education.

This supports the need for a robust change management approach to be developed and implemented for the AES and the Aboriginal education strategic reset project.

### DE's response

*DE acknowledges the Audit finding, and the need for stage 3 of the AES to have strengthened change management frameworks in place.*

*It should be noted that the reset project provides an opportunity to connect all of DE's activities with a focus on Aboriginal education, and further strengthen our collaboration with Aboriginal people and organisations when designing change management approaches.*

### 3.2.4 Key stage 2 frameworks and plans not updated to reflect current approaches or changing circumstances

#### Recommendation

For stage 3 of the AES, DE should implement scheduled reviews of key frameworks and plans and update them as needed to ensure they are still useful and reflect changing circumstances. The review process should involve key stakeholders and the review outcomes should be reported to those responsible for overseeing the AES.

### Finding

DE developed key frameworks and plans that outlined the approach to implementing stage 2. This included implementation plans for the AES and initiatives, an evaluation framework and a communications framework.

These frameworks and plans were developed early in stage 2, which is good practice. However, most of them were not reviewed and updated during stage 2 to reflect changes in implementation approaches and ensure they remained fit for purpose.

We found several instances where these frameworks and plans did not reflect current implementation approaches or changing circumstances, including:

- implementation plans for initiatives were not updated to reflect significant changes in initiative approaches, objectives and performance indicators



- the performance indicators in the evaluation framework are not current and some details are not complete or accurate. As a result there is no single up-to-date reference for what information is being measured and collected to monitor and evaluate the progress of the AES
- governance arrangements and reporting processes for the AES were not updated to reflect the decision to pause the AES Expert Advisory Panel
- DE no longer oversees one of the AES initiatives since responsibility for it moved to another agency after a machinery of government change.

The approaches for reviewing the frameworks and plans were inconsistent. Some approaches establish scheduled reviews but at different times (annually or at the end of stage 2) and others do not state if they would be reviewed.

Reviewing and updating AES and initiative frameworks and plans are needed to:

- assess if planned activities are working well and as intended or if they need to be refined
- ensure that the frameworks and plans reflect current practice and effectively respond to emerging events and changing circumstances
- maintain a shared understanding and alignment across all stakeholders for the implementation approach and supporting processes.

## DE's response

*The findings in this section are complicated by a lack of awareness of a process commenced in February 2024 to refresh the stage 2 implementation plan and evaluation framework. Planning for this process began with a survey of Project Leads and Sponsors to understand if and how projects may have varied over their duration.*

*As a result, the findings do not reflect the significant work undertaken at the individual initiative level to review and update project documentation where changes were made to scope, including where projects had been formally extended.*

*The department's view is that steps were taken to ensure the stage 2 evaluation framework and implementation plan remained current and fit for purpose.*

## Audit comment on DE's response

We note that, despite the work referred to in DE's response, we found several instances where the implementation plan, evaluation framework and initiative project plans were not updated to reflect current implementation approaches or changing circumstances, objectives, performance indicators and data collection details.

## 4 Performance measurement and data collection

### 4.1 Overview

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Performance indicators and data collection processes need to be developed early and designed well for strategy monitoring, reporting and evaluation to be effective.

The AES includes performance indicators for the three 10-year goals that can mostly be measured using existing quantitative data sources (eg student attendance and NAPLAN results). Performance indicators established for AES initiatives are measured using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, where relevant data is available.

Performance indicators need to be designed well to effectively monitor progress towards achieving outcomes and impacts. Some good practices for developing indicators include:

- having a manageable set of indicators that are clear and focused
- linking indicators to the work being done in the AES and initiatives so that their level of contribution to the observed outcomes and impacts can be assessed
- having a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators
- having specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound (SMART) indicators.

Figure 4.1 explains the features of the SMART principles for designing performance indicators.

**Figure 4.1: SMART principles for designing performance indicators**

<b>Specific</b>	Is the indicator clearly defined?
<b>Measurable</b>	Is it feasible to collect relevant and reliable data on the indicator?
<b>Achievable</b>	Has a clear target or expected trend been set, and is it realistic?
<b>Relevant</b>	Is this indicator going to help evaluate if the initiative worked?
<b>Timebound</b>	Is it clear what time points will be used for measurement?

It is important that clear baselines are set for performance indicators. A baseline is the starting value of the indicator before planned activities start. It can be difficult to measure and attribute changes and impacts to strategies and initiatives without reliable data on the situation before they began.

## 4.2 Findings and recommendations

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### 4.2.1 Performance indicators for several AES initiatives were not effectively designed

#### Recommendation

For AES initiatives in stage 3, DE should ensure that all expected outcomes are clearly mapped to specific performance indicators. These indicators should follow SMART principles.

To support this, DE should provide staff with clear guidance and practical examples on:

- choosing the right type of indicators for different circumstances
- how to design measures that follow SMART principles
- using the initiative's theory of change to guide indicator design.

#### Finding

Strategy and initiative performance indicators need to be effectively designed in line with SMART principles to assess whether intended goals, outcomes and impacts have been achieved.

We found that most indicators at the strategy level are specific, relevant and can be measured using available data (eg NAPLAN and attendance data). However, indicators for several initiatives supporting the AES are not effectively designed. For example:

- it is unclear how some expected outcomes for initiatives map to indicators
- clear baselines are not established for several initiative indicators making it difficult to assess the impact of initiatives over time
- some AES and initiative indicators do not specify an expected or targeted trend (eg increase over a period of time)
- several indicators do not clearly define what is being measured or what would represent evidence of impact.

Figure 4.2 provides two examples of how AES and initiative indicators map to SMART principles.

**Figure 4.2: Examples of strategy and initiative indicators and how they map onto SMART principles**

Strategy indicator example		Initiative indicator example	
Percentage of Aboriginal children still at school between Years 10 and 11 and from Years 11 to 12		High quality, culturally responsive practices are increasingly evident in the classroom	
Specific	Yes	Specific	No, it is unclear what classroom practices are considered to be high quality or culturally responsive
Measurable	Yes	Measurable	No, it is unclear how this information will be gathered
Achievable	No, baseline and expected trends or targets not specified	Achievable	No, the indicator does not specify if baseline data will be collected and what successful change will look like
Relevant	Yes	Relevant	Yes
Timebound	Yes	Timebound	No, it is unclear how often it will be measured and how much time is needed for the initiative to create measurable change

Staff developing the indicators told us that they would benefit from more support and guidance as they often do not have the technical skills needed to design indicators.

## DE's response

*DE acknowledges the Audit finding, and the need for the AES to have appropriate indicators. It should be noted that, given the number of factors that influence education outcomes, it is not always possible to isolate change using clear baselines with expected trends and targets. There is global acceptance in education sectors that some indicators are not available or are imperfect, especially as they relate to diverse contexts and equity considerations. This finding implies there are widely available and accepted indicators, which is not always true.*

*DE notes the recommendation, and will provide clearer context for any stage 3 initiatives where there are no widely accepted indicators, or if proxy measures are used to indicate progress. It should also be noted that since the AES's initial design, DE's overall technical experience and expertise in designing indicators for system-wide strategies has increased.*

## Audit comment on DE's response

We acknowledge that there are circumstances where there are not widely available and accepted indicators. Where this occurs, DE will need to invest time to develop indicators that are tailored to initiative objectives and contexts/theories of change. Setting clear baselines with expected trends or targets where possible will also help track progress against indicators over time.

### 4.2.2 Gaps in data collection processes for performance indicators

#### Recommendation

DE should improve its data collection processes for stage 3, specifically:

- define data collection needs, including sources of data and time periods, early to support monitoring and evaluation processes
- confirm that the data needed is readily available or can be practically obtained
- confirm that the data collected is reliable and can be compared over time
- define observational data recording requirements to ensure that it is consistently and accurately collected.

#### Finding

Collecting relevant, timely and reliable data on all AES and initiative performance indicators is needed to effectively assess progress towards achieving intended goals, outcomes and impacts.

We found instances where:

- data was not collected for established indicators
- data is being collected for indicators but is not complete
- indicators needed to be revised as data was not available or fit for purpose
- indicators and/or data collection methods are still being developed.

We also identified instances where the requirements for collecting observational data on initiative indicators were unclear, such as recording anecdotal evidence from discussions with staff at schools.

DE advised us that the design and data collection processes for some indicators (ie NAPLAN indicators) are outside its control. These indicators can be changed by external agencies and result in data not being comparable over the life of the AES. Our recommendation focuses on indicator design and data collection processes that are in DE's control.

## DE's response

*The department appreciates your office acknowledging that the design or collection of some indicators (i.e., NAPLAN) are outside the control of both the Strategy and the department. These indicators can also be changed by outside agencies, and this would result in data that would not be comparable across the life of the Strategy. We accept this is a complication when committing to a long term strategy such as this one, however we remain committed to continuously improving our data collections and documenting and explaining any changes to indicators.*

## 5 Monitoring and reporting

### 5.1 Overview

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Successfully implementing strategies and initiatives requires active management and oversight that is underpinned by effective monitoring and reporting processes. Monitoring includes the ongoing collection and analysis of initiative and system-level data and tracking of performance indicators and risks during implementation. Monitoring also supports evaluations by generating evidence during implementation that can be used to assess whether intended outcomes and impacts are being achieved. Section 6.1.4 discusses how evaluation builds on monitoring activities.

Effective monitoring and reporting processes should provide useful information to those responsible for overseeing strategies and initiatives. This is to keep them informed of their progress, outcomes and risks, help identify problems early and guide decisions about changing their scope, timing or resourcing.

### 5.2 Findings and recommendations

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#### 5.2.1 Performance indicators were not reviewed to ensure they are still relevant

##### Recommendation

For stage 3 of the AES, DE should review performance indicators to assess whether they:

- are still relevant, useful and capture data needed for decision-making
- continue to be aligned to DE's objectives and reflect what is important to Aboriginal learners, their families and communities and other stakeholders
- need to be changed or complemented by additional indicators and measures.

DE should ensure Aboriginal voices are part of the review process.

##### Finding

DE has not reviewed the AES performance indicators since the Strategy was released to see if they are still useful for tracking progress toward the AES goals and objectives.

The project teams responsible for managing three stage 2 initiatives told us that:

- they had not reviewed all their indicators
- some indicators were no longer relevant or aligned to current objectives
- some new indicators could be added.

We found that there were no processes to regularly assess whether the measures and indicators for the AES and initiatives were still suitable. Some issues in implementing the AES that could have been addressed earlier if DE reviewed its indicators include:

- matters raised by the AES Expert Advisory Panel, such as the use of culturally appropriate indicators when measuring and capturing what successful Aboriginal learners look like
- the impact of the release of DE's Our Strategy for Public Education in South Australia in 2023
- the AES indicators not being co-designed with Aboriginal people.

It is particularly important to regularly review indicators for long-term strategies like the AES as it is more likely that during implementation there will be:

- changes to an agency's objectives and what is important to stakeholders
- new insights gained, including how to better measure outcomes and impact.

This enables changes to be made early, including adding new indicators as needed, and ensure DE is collecting meaningful information to monitor progress and guide decisions.

DE recently identified a need to design new measures and indicators of impact that reflect what is important to Aboriginal learners, their families and communities. DE plans to complete this work in the Aboriginal education strategic reset project.

## DE's response

*Similar to the department's response to Finding 4.2.2, there are a number of factors outside the control of the department relating to some indicators. For example, the department provided commentary to the Audit that the changes to NAPLAN testing and reporting in 2023 is a broader problem affecting all jurisdictions and education systems, not just public education or the AES specifically.*

*Notwithstanding this, the department remains committed to improving the design and implementation of new and existing initiatives within the strategy, and documenting indicators with limitations or dependencies, so as to provide more transparency for outcomes. DE's approach continues to include co-designing initiatives with Aboriginal people and organisations.*



### 5.2.2 Reporting to those overseeing the AES does not include information on progress against about half of strategy performance indicators

#### Recommendation

DE should determine who should receive information on progress against the AES performance indicators and how often they should get it. This should include those overseeing the AES's implementation and achievement of its targeted goals and objectives. Reporting should be scheduled to support timely monitoring and decision-making and provide:

- information and data on progress against all strategy indicators
- performance against baseline data where it is available and against targets where they have been established.

#### Finding

The AES includes a range of performance indicators, such as the rate of Aboriginal young people undertaking and completing their SACE qualification. These help DE track its progress towards the AES long-term goals and objectives.

DE established a process for reporting progress against all strategy indicators to the AES Expert Advisory Panel, which was good practice. This reporting ceased when the Panel was paused in July 2023. Since then, there has been no process in place for reporting on all AES indicators to those responsible for overseeing the Strategy.

DE has other reporting in place which is shared with SEG members, but this only captures about half of the AES performance indicators.

Regularly monitoring and reporting on all AES performance indicators is needed to provide those overseeing the AES with a clear view of how the strategy is going. This helps them to identify any issues early and make timely decisions on actions to be taken to address them.

#### DE's response

*The department wishes to highlight the challenge in selecting broad system-level indicators (e.g. NAPLAN) where it is not the Strategy alone that is responsible for driving outcomes for Aboriginal learners. This is not to ignore the need for appropriate reporting of progress against Strategy indicators, rather it emphasises the need for reporting that is also qualitative and shows evidence of impact. Improvements did occur in 2024 that enabled more regular and consistent reporting for every initiative of the Strategy.*

### 5.2.3 Inconsistent reporting on emerging impact of initiatives

#### Recommendation

DE should review the approaches and processes used by project teams for reporting on the emerging impact of initiatives to SEG. This should include providing guidance to the initiative leads on the information that SEG needs.

DE should ensure measures and indicators for monitoring and reporting impact are effectively designed.

#### Finding

Monitoring and reporting AES and initiative outcomes and impacts is a key element of effective governance arrangements. Reporting useful and relevant information to those overseeing the AES helps to:

- support and inform decision-making
- build awareness of what is working and leading to targeted impacts being achieved
- identify any required adjustments to approaches in a timely way.

The AES information reported to SEG in 2022 and 2023 focused on initiative milestones and deliverables rather than on their outcomes and impact. From 2024 the quarterly reporting to SEG improved to include information about the emerging impact for selected indicators for most initiatives. This has given SEG more useful information to help with its role in overseeing the AES in some instances.

However, we found that the way project teams report on the emerging impact of their initiatives is not consistent. This includes instances where:

- indicators were not developed and emerging evidence of impact was not reported
- it is difficult to tell how much impact there has been from the information provided
- indicators are measuring outputs or outcomes rather than impact
- the information and examples of impact do not relate to the indicator
- indicators were not designed to track emerging impact.

For this reporting to be useful, project teams must clearly understand what information users need. Several initiative leads told us that they are unsure if the information they are providing meets SEG's needs and need more guidance.

#### DE's response

*Similar to the response to Finding 5.2.2, this finding does not necessarily acknowledge the importance of the 'narrative' approaches to reporting on impact in an educational context. The department acknowledges that reviewing and refreshing the reporting processes will be an important outcome moving into stage 3.*

## 5.2.4 Public reporting has not provided up-to-date information on the progress and outcomes of the AES

### Recommendation

DE should:

- finalise the review and gap analysis of the AES webpage
- review how it makes information on the implementation and outcomes of the AES available to Aboriginal communities and the wider public.

This review should be completed in partnership with Aboriginal people and representative organisations to ensure the processes for public reporting consider the information needs of Aboriginal communities and appropriate communication methods.

DE should ensure its reporting to the public on the AES:

- provides relevant and timely information on its implementation progress, outcomes and indicators
- highlights the achievements of Aboriginal children and young people.

### Finding

It is important that DE gives the public regular updates on how the AES is progressing, including:

- what has been done and achieved so far and what impact it is having
- what is working well and what has been challenging
- progress made towards achieving the AES goals and objectives.

This helps build trust and keeps people engaged. It also enables stakeholders, including Aboriginal communities and the wider public, to hold DE accountable for its performance and management of the AES.

We found that the information reported to the public on DE's website does not provide transparency on the progress and outcomes of the AES.

DE committed to publishing AES implementation plans and progress reports on its website. However, DE:

- did not publish progress reports on its website during stage 1
- has not published implementation plans and has only shared limited details about its planned implementation approach for stage 2.

When stage 2 began in 2022, DE created an AES webpage and established processes for reporting information to the public. These included:

- updating the AES webpage quarterly with its progress and achievements
- publishing an annual impact report summarising its outcomes and impact.

The processes that DE established were well designed. The case study videos developed for some initiatives were a good communication method to show how the AES is being implemented in schools. However, there are key gaps in the information that DE has reported to the public during stage 2, including:

- the progress of initiatives had not been updated on the AES webpage for more than two years
- information and data on DE's progress towards the AES's goals and objectives were not made available
- annual impact reports were not published in a timely way.

In late 2024, DE started reviewing the AES webpage to identify gaps and improve the information it reports to the public. This work is still ongoing.

## DE's response

*DE accepts the public reporting of the AES has been inconsistent, and this will be addressed as part of the gap analysis of the strategy webpage.*

*Notwithstanding this, it should be noted that individual initiatives and project teams aligned with the AES do have strong, ongoing engagement with Aboriginal organisations and stakeholders.*

## 6 Evaluation

### 6.1 Overview

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#### 6.1.1 Objective of evaluations

Evaluations collect and analyse evidence to:

- assess whether intended outcomes and impacts are being achieved
- understand how and why results have occurred
- improve the design and delivery of initiatives by providing evidence to support decisions about continuing, expanding, scaling up or stopping activities.

#### 6.1.2 Types of evaluations

There are different types of evaluation which are conducted for specific purposes and use different methods and ways of collecting and analysing evidence. Two types of evaluations that are relevant to the AES are:

**Process evaluation**, which examines whether an initiative has been implemented as designed and outputs are being delivered as intended. This type of evaluation can be used to improve the understanding of how the initiative is working in practice and can be performed at any stage during the implementation of the initiative.

**Outcome and impact evaluation**, which examines if and how an initiative is leading to intended outcomes and impacts. This type of evaluation gathers evidence on the extent of change resulting from an initiative and examines its role in producing this change. Outcome and impact evaluation are performed after the initiative has operated for some time and may be conducted at various stages during long-term strategies. This type of evaluation may seek to confirm the extent to which changes can be attributed to the initiative and under what conditions the initiative is most effective.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6.1.3 Planning evaluations at an early stage

Evaluation is most effective when it is considered early as part of implementation planning and designing strategies and initiatives. It can be performed at various stages, such as when implementing a strategy or initiative or after a strategy or initiative has ended. The types of evaluations that should be performed, and when, need to be determined early. This ensures that:

- evaluation activities are aligned with key decision points
- data collection processes and systems are in place from the start
- evaluation findings are available when they are needed to inform decisions.

#### 6.1.4 Monitoring and evaluation are separate but related activities

Evaluation is a separate activity to the ongoing monitoring of initiatives. It provides:

- evidence for why outcomes or impacts are being achieved or not and any unintended outcomes or consequences that have been observed

- internal and external contextual factors that influence the success of initiatives
- details of enablers that support or barriers that prevent effectively implementing and progressing toward intended outcomes and impacts
- insights that can be applied to refine and improve future activities and initiatives.

Evaluation uses evidence collected in performance measurement and monitoring, but examines a broader and deeper range of contextual and performance information compared to information from ongoing monitoring. It also involves targeted research designed to answer specific questions about how and why an initiative is performing as it is.

### 6.1.5 Sharing evaluation results with the public

Sharing evaluation results with the public provides transparency to the community as it helps stakeholders to understand what works, what does not and why. It can also help people understand how government initiatives are performing, including whether they are achieving their intended outcomes and impacts.

Sharing agency responses to the evaluation results is also important for people to see how evidence from evaluations will be used to improve public services that affect them.

## 6.2 Findings and recommendations

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### 6.2.1 Evaluation approach for several initiatives is unclear

#### Recommendation

DE should improve its evaluation planning and practice for stage 3 by:

- confirming at the start of each initiative how it will be evaluated considering the initiative's size and complexity and what it is trying to achieve
- confirming how planned evaluations will be resourced, including where DE staff could be used to perform or support evaluations
- providing training to staff on evaluation planning and performance, focusing on research design and methods used in education evaluations.

#### Finding

DE recognises in guidance provided to staff that evaluations should be planned for early, built into implementation and not 'added on'. However, our review of evaluation planning for the AES found that:

- DE did not prepare an evaluation framework for stage 1
- DE developed an evaluation framework for stage 2 in December 2022, but it does not specify the type of evaluations to be performed or how they will be resourced

- project plans for some initiatives do not specify if an evaluation or review is planned
- evaluation plans for some stage 2 initiatives were not developed in a timely way, including up to two years after initiatives started
- staff involved with initiatives generally had limited experience and expertise in planning, conducting and commissioning evaluations.

Early evaluation planning can improve the quality and effectiveness of evaluations by:

- ensuring that DE has tools, systems and people in place to collect the data that is needed and that it is collected from the start of implementation
- increasing the range of evaluation methods that can be used and supporting the design of more robust evaluations
- confirming adequate resources and realistic time frames are allocated for evaluations.

## DE's response

*DE shared with the Audit that evaluation frameworks for individual initiatives were inherently inconsistent, as initiatives were at different stages of implementation during 2024 and managed by different teams and divisions. It was also unclear if the Audit requested, or was provided, specific evidence of evaluation approaches for individual initiatives.*

*Notwithstanding this, the substance of the recommendation is acknowledged. There has been significant progress in increasing the level of experience and capability of staff responsible for designing and delivering Strategy initiatives since its inception.*

## Audit comment on DE's response

In conducting our audit, we obtained specific evidence that included:

- the AES evaluation framework
- project plans for initiatives
- evaluation plans for initiatives where they had been prepared.

We also spoke to some initiative leads who advised us that the approach for evaluating or reviewing the initiatives was not determined or finalised.

While initiatives were at different stages of implementation in 2024, our finding and recommendation discuss the need for the evaluation approach to be considered upfront at the start of each initiative (ie before 2024). This includes confirming if evaluations were to be performed and if so, what type of evaluations, when and how they would be resourced.

## 6.2.2 DE has not established an approach for making evaluation findings available to the public

### Recommendation

For the planned evaluation of stage 2 of the AES, DE should determine how the evaluation findings and its responses to them will be shared. It should confirm:

- if the evaluation will be publicly released and what information will be shared
- how the evaluation will be shared with Aboriginal people, communities and organisations.

DE should develop an approach for making its other evaluation findings and recommendations and its responses to them available to the public on its website.

### Finding

The Productivity Commission has highlighted the need for transparency when evaluating government policies and programs that affect Aboriginal people, including:

- Aboriginal people should be able to access evaluation findings and have the right to know about the effects of government programs that impact them
- transparency provides incentives for high quality evaluations to be completed that meet the needs of Aboriginal people
- evaluators should work with Aboriginal people early in the evaluation process to determine how to share evaluation findings in ways that meet the needs of Aboriginal communities and organisations.<sup>6</sup>

In planning for evaluations of the AES and initiatives, DE has generally not considered and assessed if evaluation findings and its responses to them will be publicly released. Findings and recommendations from the external review of stage 1 and DE's response were not publicly released. DE did not assess whether this should be done.

DE advised us that:

- it does not have an approach for deciding when to publish evaluation reports or its responses to evaluations findings, either for the AES or more generally
- there is a need to develop an approach to help guide decisions for publicly reporting evaluation findings and its responses, including when this should be done and how much information should be shared.

### DE's response

*As noted in the finding, this requires consideration of a department-wide approach to publishing, not just related to the AES. DE acknowledges this gap and will consider its position to publishing evaluation reports on our website.*



### 6.2.3 Evaluations should better reflect lived experiences and knowledge of Aboriginal people

#### Recommendation

For stage 3 of the AES, DE should work with Aboriginal people to reflect the lived experiences, knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal people when:

- planning for and performing evaluations
- designing performance indicators for monitoring and evaluating progress against targeted outcomes and impact
- testing and interpreting evaluation findings.

#### Finding

When Aboriginal people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them, better life outcomes are more likely to be achieved.<sup>j</sup>

There is scope for DE to work in closer partnership with Aboriginal people and reflect their lived experiences, knowledge and perspectives when planning for evaluations, designing indicators and interpreting evaluation findings. The Productivity Commission states that this is good practice as it helps to improve the credibility and usefulness of evaluation findings.<sup>7</sup>

We observed some good practices adopted by DE, including an evaluation framework developed for an initiative that was co-designed by an external firm with staff from an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation. However, we also found:

- several instances where the knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal people were not sought in planning for evaluations and designing AES and initiative indicators
- it was not clear whether Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives would be sought in testing and interpreting evaluation findings or how this should be done
- an instance where Aboriginal families and communities were not engaged in an evaluation of an initiative.

Working with Aboriginal people early in evaluation planning and to test and interpret evaluation findings helps to improve their credibility and usefulness.

The AES includes objectives such as Aboriginal children and young people being capable of demonstrating cultural pride and knowledge and developing their cultural identity. For these objectives it is particularly important that DE works in partnership with Aboriginal people to reflect their lived experiences in planning for evaluations and designing indicators that are culturally appropriate and effective in measuring and evaluating impact.

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<sup>j</sup> This is recognised in the SA Government's principles for co-design and authentic engagement with Aboriginal people and in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

## DE's response

*The AES is premised on the establishment of a framework and practices that empowers Aboriginal people and enables their voice to be heard.*

*Whilst we can always strive to do better, this Audit finding did not fully acknowledge the significant achievement of mandating a process for embedding Aboriginal voices, experience, knowledge and expertise into the department's development of policies and projects since September 2022. As such, the department believes this finding is not consistent with the evidence provided.*

## Audit comment on DE response

The *Aboriginal Voice: Aboriginal education policy consultation framework* that DE refers to in its response states that 'staff must follow this framework when developing, updating and deleting policies, projects, procedures, guidelines, frameworks and standards in all areas of the department'.

In our view the mandated use of the framework does not capture or extend to the points we make in our finding and recommendation about planning and performing evaluations, including testing and interpreting evaluation findings. The framework has not been applied in practice for this purpose in stage 2 of the AES.

# Appendix 1 – Audit mandate, objective and scope

## Our mandate

The Auditor-General has authority to conduct this audit under section 31(2) of the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1987*.

## Our audit objective

We assessed whether DE is effectively managing the Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029 to deliver its intended education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

Our audit focused on stage 2 of the AES, which started in 2022 and finishes in 2026.

## What we audited and how

We considered the following sub-objectives in performing our audit:

- Has DE effectively planned the implementation of the strategy?
- Has DE established effective performance measures and data collection processes to monitor whether outcomes are being achieved?
- Is DE effectively monitoring and reporting the progress, implementation and outcomes of the strategy?
- Has DE effectively evaluated strategy implementation and outcomes?

Our assessment was based on evidence we obtained from a range of sources and methods. We made inquiries with DE staff responsible for managing the strategy and some initiatives. We also interviewed an officer from an Aboriginal education representative body to get their views on DE's management of the AES. We reviewed:

- implementation plans for the strategy and initiatives
- a report prepared by an external firm who reviewed implementation of stage 1
- the evaluation framework for the strategy and evaluation plans for initiatives
- DE guidelines for implementing strategies and for project and change management
- reporting provided to DE governance groups on the AES
- information reported to the public on the progress and outcomes of the AES.

We engaged a consultant to provide cultural advisory services and assistance to us to ensure that culturally sensitive matters were appropriately considered in this audit.

## What we did not audit

Our audit does not conclude on the actual extent to which the strategy is achieving improved education outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

The following areas were outside the scope of our audit:

- processes to develop the strategy and initiatives
- obtaining evidence from Aboriginal students and families to assess the impact of the strategy and initiatives on targeted education outcomes
- implementation of other related strategies and plans such as DE's Stretch Reconciliation Action Plan and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

## Appendix 2 – Response from the Department for Education



Government of South Australia  
Department for Education

CEW2025/1733

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Dear Mr Blaskett

Thank you for your letter of 1 August 2025, the enclosure of your proposed Report 7 of 2025 *Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019 to 2029* (the strategy), and for the opportunity to respond to the report as Chief Executive of the Department for Education (the department).

I would like to firstly thank the Audit Office and your staff for working constructively with officers of the department, and for the careful consideration of the evidence and feedback provided throughout the Audit process.

By way of background, the strategy was co-designed with the South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Council (SAAETCC), and launched in December 2018 to make long term, meaningful change to the department's policies and practices that ensure Aboriginal children and young people are on pathways to success. The strategy declares itself as 'ambitious' and commits the department to holding high expectations, whilst also acknowledging that a reform of this scale and breadth will require ongoing review and adjustment to our approaches. To that end, the department welcomed the Audit during 2024-25 as it passed through the mid-point of the strategy's 10-year implementation.

While the strategy established goals and initiatives that reflected the aspirations of Aboriginal people, the department recognises that achievement of the strategy requires a different set of choices, not just the implementation of projects and policies. This is a human endeavour that requires deep cultural and structural changes that empower Aboriginal people, so they can participate and work in a culturally safe and responsive education system.

The Audit's focus was understandably on the department's use of frameworks and methodologies commonly used for delivering projects and initiatives. Unfortunately this scope provided limited opportunity to show the historic challenges faced by Aboriginal learners, staff and communities, nor an opportunity to fully demonstrate the significant progress and achievements of the strategy to date.

The Audit's timing, midway through stage 2, also meant that the planned evaluations of individual initiatives had not yet been established and could therefore not demonstrate the department's ongoing commitment to review and adjustment of the strategy. Notwithstanding this, the department welcomes the proposed report and its recommendations, which will be considered along with other external evaluations, to make positive changes and improvements as it transitions to the third and final stage during 2026.

In response to the Audit's concerns that the strategy is not on target, we do not shy away from our ambitions being bold, nor any constructive feedback. I wish to place on the record the significant challenges in designing, delivering and measuring cultural change, such as this strategy, which aims for unprecedented and generational change. Sometimes that will mean we do not reach our targets first try, however, we are proud of the achievements and evidence of impact of the strategy to date, including but not limited to:

- Engagement of 17 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to co-design, inform and/or deliver initiatives in stage 2.
- Establishing the Aboriginal Voice Framework with over 100 Aboriginal staff members contributing to department-wide policy development.
- Increased membership of the Department's Aboriginal Workforce Network (DAWN) – up to 262 staff in 2024.
- Between 2018 and 2023, participation of Aboriginal children in at least 600 hours of preschool in the year before school has grown by 8% (45% to 53%).
- Significant increase in Standard Australian English for Anangu students (an increase by 3 levels, the equivalent of 3-years growth in 2024).
- The percentage of Aboriginal children who can phonically decode at an age appropriate rate in the Phonics Screening Check has doubled (21% to 42%).
- Significant increase in Aboriginal languages taught in our schools – 73 programs in 66 schools, delivered to more than 8,200 students as at May 2025.
- Increased secondary school pathways for Aboriginal students through an expanded South Australian Aboriginal Secondary Training Academy (SAASTA) and Workabout programs, with real-world impact on job prospects.

I welcome the proposed report's recognition that the strategy was co-designed with SAAETCC, and mentioning of the department's current reset of Aboriginal outcomes through deep engagement with Aboriginal staff and leaders. However, some of the Audit findings do not sufficiently acknowledge that the direction, governance and implementation of all strategy initiatives continues to involve Aboriginal people. This is not a new approach, rather a strengthening of our existing systems and structures to engage with Aboriginal people, which is at the heart of the strategy.

As a department we will give careful consideration to each of the recommendations in the proposed report, to inform our next phase of evaluation, design and delivery, in partnership with our Aboriginal staff. I remain confident that the department's current reforms and forward-looking focus will bring together all our efforts to close the gap and improve the lives of Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia.

Thank you for sharing the proposed report in the spirit of continued improvement and success in our education system.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Westwell', written in a cursive style.

Professor Martin Westwell  
**CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

8 August 2025

## Appendix 3 – Abbreviations and terms used in this report

Abbreviation/Term	Description
AES	Aboriginal Education Strategy 2019–2029
Baseline	Measures conditions at the start of a monitoring period to enable later comparison and the identification of trends
DE	Department for Education
Impact	Long-term and sustained change resulting from taking a planned course of action
Logic model	A visual diagram that shows how a strategy or initiative is meant to work by linking the activities that will be done to the outcomes and impact that are expected
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
Outcome	Intended change that a strategy or initiative aims to achieve
Performance indicator	A specific measure used to monitor success and track progress toward achieving a particular goal or outcome
SAAETCC	South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Council
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SEG	Senior Executive Group
SMART principles	Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timebound
Theory of change	An explanation of how and why planned activities will result in change and lead to the intended outcomes and impact
VET	Vocational Education and Training

# References

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- <sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024, *Determinants of health for First Nations people*, viewed 16 July 2025, <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/social-determinants-and-indigenous-health>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Biddle, N & Yap, M 2010, *Demographic and socioeconomic outcomes cross the indigenous Australian lifecycle: evidence from the 2006 Census*, The Australian National University, p. 59, viewed 16 July 2025, <<https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/caepr/demographic-and-socioeconomic-outcomes-across-indigenous-australian>>.
- <sup>3</sup> Department of the Premier and Cabinet 2022, *Evaluation Guidelines*, p. 9, viewed 16 July 2025, <<https://www.dpc.sa.gov.au/responsibilities/economic-insight-and-evaluation>>.
- <sup>4</sup> Department for Education 2022, *Strategic Policy Model Guide*.
- <sup>5</sup> NSW Treasury 2025, *Evaluation Guidelines*, pp. 54-57, viewed 16 July 2025, <<https://www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/public-sector/financial-information-for-public-entities/centre-for-economic-evidence/nsw-government-investment-framework/evaluation-guidelines>>.
- <sup>6</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, *Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, p. 18, viewed 16 July 2025, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy>>.
- <sup>7</sup> Productivity Commission 2020, *A Guide to Evaluation under the Indigenous Evaluation Strategy*, p. 33, viewed 16 July 2025, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-evaluation/strategy>>.





