

## Features: Embracing Indigenous heritage



*Always Was, Always Will Be* recognises that First Nations people have occupied and cared for this continent for over 65,000 years.

We are spiritually and culturally connected to this country.

This country was criss-crossed by generations of brilliant Nations.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were Australia's first explorers, first navigators, first engineers, first farmers, first botanists, first scientists, first diplomats, first astronomers and first artists.

Australia has the world's oldest oral stories. The First Peoples engraved the world's first maps, made the earliest paintings of ceremony and invented unique technologies. We built and engineered structures – structures on Earth – predating well-known sites such as the Egyptian Pyramids and Stonehenge.

Our adaptation and intimate knowledge of Country enabled us to endure climate change, catastrophic droughts and rising sea levels.

*Always Was, Always Will Be* acknowledges that hundreds of Nations and our cultures covered this continent. All were managing the land - the biggest estate on Earth - to sustainably provide for their future.

Through ingenious land management systems like fire stick farming we transformed the harshest habitable continent into a land of bounty.

NAIDOC Week 2020 acknowledges and celebrates that our nation's story didn't begin with documented European contact whether in 1770 or 1606 – with the arrival of the Dutch on the western coast of the Cape York Peninsula.

The very first footprints on this continent were those belonging to First Nations peoples.

Our coastal Nations watched and interacted with at least 36 contacts made by Europeans prior to 1770. Many of them resulting in the charting of the northern, western and southern coastlines – of our lands and our waters.

For us, this nation's story began at the dawn of time.

NAIDOC 2020 invites all Australians to embrace the true history of this country – a history which dates back thousands of generations.

It's about seeing, hearing and learning the First Nations' 65,000+ year history of this country – which is Australian history. We want all Australians to celebrate that we have the oldest continuing cultures on the planet and to recognise that our sovereignty was never ceded.

By Pat Byrne, President  
October 2020

The October edition of *Western Teacher* is a special one, one inspired by NAIDOC Week. It contains a series of articles that we hope will inspire and encourage the celebration of the NAIDOC 2020 theme – *Always Was, Always Will Be*.

It also contains a series of feature stories looking at the incredibly important role education has to play in addressing inequity and racism and in ensuring all Australians recognise the wrongs done in the past and set about making the future better and brighter.

There should be a great sense of pride for all educators in that a young man inspired by his state school art teacher to follow his passion has created the most incredible work in the national [NAIDOC Week poster](#).

Tyrown Waigana's [story](#) is just one of many in this magazine which demonstrate the transformative power of a high-quality,

free, public education in equipping people to break through barriers and reach their goals.

Other articles show how teachers are changing minds at the school level, what is being done to develop educators more attuned to cultural needs and what we can all do to address issues like racism in a positive way.

This can be a vital touchstone for teachers and lecturers when it sometimes seems that the ability to make a difference is being eroded.

Such stories are also an affirmation of why the SSTUWA puts promoting high-quality public education for all at the very forefront of our principles.

It is also why the union will be seeking, as part of our 2021 state election campaign, an unequivocal commitment from any future WA government to provide at least 85 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) for state school funding.

Within the most recent Commonwealth/state agreement, in which the federal government commits to supplying 20 per cent of state education funding, there lies hidden a clause allowing state governments to reduce their commitment from current minimum of 80 per cent of the SRS to 75 per cent between now and 2023.

There is absolutely no reason for this to happen in WA – we have regularly funded our schools at above the SRS in the past and should continue to do so as is required by our huge size and tiny regional populations.

Remember, the SRS is an average figure across Australia; some states have fewer average costs than others. In WA the figure needed is at least 105 per cent. So the potential is there for combined state and federal funding to fall 10 per cent short of what is required if the WA government contributes according to the terms of the latest state/federal agreement.

This would see all our schools suffer but would also mean that remote and regional communities, often with high populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – would be hardest hit.

This is why the SSTUWA will be seeking unequivocal declarations from all political parties in WA that they will not undermine public education in such a way; calling for a guarantee that the SRS funding in WA will always be at least 105 per cent (i.e. 85 per cent from the state and 20 per cent from the federal government).

Of the 16 key socio-economic aims of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to which the WA government declares it is committed, five are specifically dependant on high quality education. Indeed, it can be argued that every one of the 16 aims will have a much greater chance of realisation if education outcomes improve.

If it is serious about that Closing the Gap commitment, then in the interest of remote and regional education alone an iron-clad guarantee of the 85 per cent figure is absolutely essential from the state government.

Those Close the Gap aims have been developed in cooperation with Aboriginal people.

The SSTUWA is calling for a clear and explicit commitment from all WA political parties to engage regional and remote communities and educators in full consultation processes about how to improve the delivery of education in their areas.

We need to end the era of imposing unsuitable solutions; or thinking that there is only one way to improve education in regional and remote communities. Not only do we need to do this to engage the issues of the present, but to anticipate and meet the challenges of the future.

Stronger local support networks for regional and remote educators and leaders, more suitable curriculum content and flexibility are immediate challenges. Ensuring the progress of all students as education becomes more and more technologically oriented is also crucial.

Of critical importance is the engagement of, and respect for, local community members and professional educators in the development of policy. Let's see the same respect for professionals in the classroom as we have seen for medical experts in recent times. We listen to them for a reason.

The October edition of *Western Teacher* is part of the SSTUWA's acknowledgement of NAIDOC Week and I hope you and your workplaces will acknowledge it too.

I leave you with the 2020 NAIDOC Week message and the story behind the theme:

