

# Community-controlled schools can create better education outcomes for First Nations students

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In Australia, more than a dozen independent, community-controlled First Nations schools were set up in the 1970s and '80s. These schools, some still in operation, offered culturally and linguistically relevant education to First Nations students reflecting Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

Our research projects have explored [self-determination in Indigenous community-controlled schools in Australia](#). We [found](#) First Nations-led schools can support self-determination and improve education outcomes for Indigenous young people.

This is also the lesson of a new children's book [In My Blood It Runs](#) by Arrernte and Garuwa man Djujan Hoosan. The new book shares Djujan's experience of navigating an educational system not designed for him, and the benefits of First Nations-controlled education.

## **First Nations controlled schools**

Our research found many First Nations-led schools were set up in the [1970s and 1980s](#), as communities began to fight for appropriate education. This emerged after a long history of insufficient government-mandated education, forced exclusion from school, or forced attendance at missionary and reserve schools.

These included the community-controlled [Yipirinya School in Mparntwe](#). The school was set up by families in the town camps and their European allies. The school developed curriculum in Arrernte, Pitjantjatjara, Western Arrarnte (also known as Western Aranda), Lurijta and Warlpiri, as well as in English and Aboriginal English. Classes were initially taught in the town camps.

Others included the [Black Community School](#) in Townsville. The school was set up by Torres Strait Islander land rights campaigners Eddie "Kioki" Mabo, Bonita Mabo and Woiworrung and Yorta Yorta author and activist Burnum Burnum. Another example is the [Northland College](#) for Koori kids in Richmond.

The [Hughes Report](#), published in 1988, became the basis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy for the next decade. It recognized First

Nations-controlled schools as an important step in overcoming a long history of educational exclusion. The report called for self-determination in education, the training of First Nations teachers, and developing suitable curricula that embedded Indigenous languages and knowledges.

Bilingual and multilingual schooling [began from community-led initiatives in First Nations communities](#). They demonstrated how schools controlled by local communities provide safe and sustaining places for First Nations young people. It was [around this time](#) the numbers of First Nations people participating in education increased most dramatically. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrollments in universities [increased](#) by 50% in the 1980s, and primary school enrollments increased by 40% in the 1990s.

However, policy began to [shift away](#) from this focus in the late 1990s and onward. Education debates began to emphasize attendance as the key issue, and measuring English-only literacy and numeracy data as a way to gauge the success of education.

## **Recent developments**

Released last year, Dujuan's story *In My Blood it Runs*, coauthored with his grandmothers Margaret Anderson and Carol Turner, illustrates how Indigenous children balance their existence in two distinct worlds.

After many years of struggling at school, Dujuan left Mparntwe (Alice Springs) to attend an Indigenous-led Garuwa homeland school on his father's country in Borroloola, about 1,200km north of Mparntwe. Here, he was able to learn on Country, from Aboriginal teachers, in a nourishing and rewarding environment. He became excited to attend school and his learning journey took off.

First Nations-led non-profit organization Children's Ground recently

released a [report](#) responding to ongoing policy failures in First Nations education. This includes the dismantling of bilingual education.

The report calls for a First Nations-controlled education system and the establishment of an independent governing body to oversee it. The recommendations in the report align with the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). This includes a key focus on self-determination in education.

In particular, Article 14 of the Declaration recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to establish and control their own educational systems. This would ensure education is culturally and linguistically relevant to Indigenous peoples.

And the recent release of a report from the [Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs](#) into whether Australia should implement the UN declaration has renewed attention on self-determination.

Similar discussions have been had in Canada for many years. Recent treaties have included provisions to transfer control of education of First Nations students to First Nations groups. Graduation rates have been positively impacted for groups who have obtained authority over education. When First Nations group Mi'kmaq from northeastern Canada initially took control of their education system in 1998 only 30% of their students were graduating from secondary school. According to the [most recent annual report](#), 83% are now graduating.

## Where to from here?

We can look to successful examples in Australia, such as Yipirinya School in Mparntwe, the Black Community School, and recent education reforms in Canada, as important lessons on how to support First Nations-

controlled education in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

We can also look to Dujuan's story. His book is a call to action to reform [education](#), juvenile justice, child welfare and racist practices.

Dujuan's story invites us to imagine how we can make school work for First Nations children.

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