

We, First Nations language speakers from across Top End communities of the Northern Territory, are urgently advocating for our languages.

We came together at two Top End Languages Forums in 2022 and 2025 to mark the start of the UNESCO International Decade of Indigenous Languages (UNEC SO IDIL), 2022-2032, and to discuss our vision of what needs to happen to strengthen our languages by the end of the decade and beyond.

We represent more than 30 First Nations languages and 10 Top End communities where our languages are spoken on Country every day. We acknowledge that there are many other language communities that were not present at the Forums, and we support and respect their vision for their languages.

Now, midway through the UNESCO IDIL, we continue to celebrate and prioritise our shared vision for maintaining and strengthening our languages in the Top End. Through the decade and into the future, we will continue to have a focus on bilingual education and language programs in schools, community-based language practices, building connections between communities, and honouring and celebrating our languages.

Language is power

We acknowledge this from our ancestral connections that language and culture keeps us strong.

Our languages must stay strong into the future. Language connects us to our culture, Country and songlines. It is like a glue that holds these things to us, and if we lose language, we will lose everything.

We pay respect to sensitivities of history and encourage community to learn the history of disruption to language. Because of this history, some languages are stronger than other languages, or more dominant.

There is no shame in this.

All our languages deserve respect and support to become and stay strong.

Acknowledge, respect and support community wants, needs and aspirations, giving priority to local languages, culture and law

This is a declaration of shared commitment to bilingual education and language teaching in schools, community language governance, and grassroots-led revival and continuation efforts.

We invite all Australians to join us in championing our languages and keeping them strong.

Together, we all must reflect on, honour, and act urgently to strengthen First Nations languages and culture.

We expect non-Indigenous Australians to respect the local languages, culture and law.

Stand with us now, in collaboration, in respect, and in partnership.

We will lead and direct our languages and culture in our communities and our schools.

We will honour and prioritise our Elders and leaders as our cultural authorities, and embrace and respect their cultural knowledges.

We will practice humility and integrity through our collective language communities.

We must lead, serve, and impact others in a meaningful way that adds value to their lives.

We will lead and be a part of all decision-making with shared accountability for all matters that affect us.

We will speak, learn, share, promote, and perform our languages at home, in our schools, and in our communities.

Top End Strong Languages Statement

Strong Like Iron, Alive Like Fire: Celebrating the strength and vitality of First Nations languages across the Top End. The Iron Tree branch stands at its heart— a powerful symbol of language as deep-rooted, enduring, and unbreakable. Glowing with warm embers, the piece speaks to the living energy of language: burning quietly, carrying stories, knowledge, and history through time. It is about strength. It is about survival. It is about the unshakable power of words spoken on Country.

— Molly Hunt

In our schools:

Communities will decide which languages are taught in our schools, and how to strengthen our language and cultural practices.

We are committed to speaking, teaching, and learning our languages and cultures in our schools.

We expect the Western education system (including government, education departments, Principals and non-Indigenous staff) to listen to us, adapt to and reflect our way of learning, teaching and sharing knowledge – and to work with us to strengthen language and culture in our schools by embracing our cultural knowledge holders and language custodians, and aligning curriculum in support of First Nations multilingual communities.

- This means:
- **Community** will drive language and culture programs, advise how they are integrated with support from the Department of Education and leadership, and decide who we bring in, so that everyone is aligned to our culture and language, and working in culturally-appropriate ways.
 - **Cultural knowledge holders and language custodians** will have the safe spaces and support of school leadership to drive language and culture in schools.
 - **First Nations educators in every area** will be meaningfully empowered to actively lead and build capacity to teach in community, including in our schools. They will have access to specialised language and linguistics training.
 - **First Nations adults** will be supported to learn and strengthen their own language skills, and to become the next generation of teachers.
 - **Our children**, wherever they learn, will be supported to learn their own languages, in community and in town.
 - **Our children** will use their language(s), together with English, for learning in their classrooms, in urban areas such as Darwin, Katherin, Jabiru and Nhulunbuy as well as in communities. Educators will work with the knowledge students have of their language(s), including English, to support meaningful learning across different subjects and age levels.
 - **All children** will learn about our local history, languages and culture in schools. By embedding this in the curriculum, this gives all children the opportunity to connect to the story of the place they live.
 - **Non-Indigenous staff** will support us and ensure sufficient resourcing for us to speak to our children in our languages, and take opportunities to learn the local languages in a way that is directed by the Elders.
 - **All non-Indigenous teachers** must undergo initial and ongoing orientation programs that prioritise critical self-reflection and a shared understanding of cultural values, priorities, and security of their own and local community contexts (that is, they must learn about themselves, and they must be learners in our environment).

Our ways of teaching and sharing knowledge will be embedded and incorporated – for example, through **place-based curriculum** – so that our children can learn on Country about their lands and how to look after them.

Bilingual Education will be delivered through a strong and shared commitment to:

- **Implementation of structured models**, such as the Step Model, in Top End Bilingual Schools. Teachers will work with the knowledge students already have in their own language(s) and English, and structure the use and teaching of them across different subjects and different age levels.
- **Age-appropriate learning materials developed and owned by the community** for all our children, for languages of the Bilingual Program (both our languages and English) in all learning areas and spaces.
- **Development of local curriculum with language embedded** for each Bilingual Program, making sure it is accessible by all people in the community and kept safe, so that it never gets lost.
- **Treasuring and safeguarding the old resources** that the Elders have written in the early years.
- **Regular review** by a community-identified body of formal Bilingual Programs to ensure schools and education programs are accountable to community and their languages.
- **Appropriate training** for all staff, First Nations and non-Indigenous, in Bilingual Programs.

In our communities:

In our communities, our Elders will have a voice on decisions, including the empowering and upskilling of local community members.

We will bring in and connect with our neighbouring language groups.

We will invite and encourage each other to share and showcase our languages and culture through community events.

We will work and collaborate with people who are genuine in their long-term commitment, work from their heart, and want to work for the benefit of our communities.

We support each other in our language work. We use traditional ways, two-way learning, and also new ways.

With the right control and restrictions, we can embrace new technologies to help us revitalise, maintain, and strengthen our languages.

We will be empowered and supported to give proper cultural induction to newcomers to our communities, encouraging them to learn about and self-reflect on First Nations cultures, inter-cultural practices, and both-ways learning.

All those working for the benefit of our communities, including non-Indigenous organisations, government and their departments, and our own organisations, will work with us. This work will be properly funded, embedded and sustainable, on terms that work for community and reflect community priorities. This ensures that every community:

- has a language and culture centre, one that is inclusive of all the local languages.
- continues to facilitate all languages (both old and new) by supporting strong on Country learning led by community, prioritising our knowledge.
- builds greater awareness, understanding and recognition of multiple languages existing in communities, and the impact of dominant languages.
- has access to service providers to our people, such as community health clinics and sporting clubs, and local festivals and events, that build their own capacity and understanding of our languages into their work, and work in partnership with community in the care and connection of all our people.
- has repatriation systems to return archived materials back to the people and places they belong to.

Top End languages will continue to thrive through the cultural authority, leadership, strength and connection of individuals, families and communities now and into the future

As we continue to connect and share our similarities and differences with passion and respect in a meaningful way through language and culture, we expect non-Indigenous Australians to work with us, listen to us, and walk alongside us.

Under the banner of local authority, our languages will be heard on Country, in our communities, in towns, in every education institution, and beyond, led by Elders and leaders, and passed on to our children, grandchildren and future generations.