

WHATEVER IT TAKES: ENCOURAGING ABORIGINAL STUDENT ATTENDANCE AT SALISBURY NORTH R-7 SCHOOL

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Salisbury North R-7 school is a disadvantaged school in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. There are approximately 400 students, in the school, including a New Arrivals Unit for English as a second language learners, and up to 60 Aboriginal students at any one time. Most Aboriginal families in the school are relatively stable, with strong family links. (In 2001, one senior Aboriginal elder had fourteen grandchildren in the school.) The principal had a strong history of involvement in Aboriginal education, and had recruited other educators experienced with Aboriginal learners. The Aboriginal Education Worker had worked in the school for some years, and had strong community links.

As in many Australian schools, the attendance of some of the Aboriginal students in a few families is a problem some of the time. Although the school has a strong and successful literacy program running, if students are not in the school, teachers can't teach them, so active work had to be done to improve attendance.

The following is a description of the Aboriginal Education Team's attendance strategies for one year, 2001, when the three of us were part of the team at Salisbury North R-7; Julie a classroom teacher, Muriel the Aboriginal Education Worker, and Bronwyn the coordinator of the Indigenous literacy project. Other people involved in working on attendance were the Aboriginal Education Teacher, the school principal, the trainee AEW, and the ASSPA Committee.

Some of the identified reasons for absenteeism at Salisbury North R-7 were:

- no food for breakfast or recess or lunch
- shopping day once per fortnight when the social benefits money arrives
- more exciting social business going on at home
- transience: families moving frequently between two sites
- run out of clean clothes
- lack of transport for students who move out of walking distance from school
- avoidance: escaping the stresses and demands of school by feigning sickness

Listed below are the strategies we consciously employed to encourage students to come to school. They were intended to address different reasons for absence, as no one strategy would work on its own. The role of the Aboriginal Education Worker in keeping all of this together was crucial.

Strategy 1: no shame

Indigenous students formed a critical mass of the school population. This, along with their strong sense of pride and identity affirmed in the school program, and by the adults with whom they worked, as well as their community, may have contributed to reasons for students walking proudly in the school.

Strategy 2: lunch vouchers

If a teacher realised that a child had come to school without recess or lunch, they filled out a voucher, the child took it to the canteen, and they were supplied with a simple sandwich. This system applied to all children in the school, not just Aboriginal. However, for some children, the shame of telling the teacher, or taking a pink voucher to the canteen was enough to prevent them from using the system. One classroom teacher took the simple step of filling out lunch order bags with the sandwich order. In this way, the student could put their name on the bag and put it in the lunch basket the same as other students and not look different.

Strategy 3: the Aboriginal Education pantry

There were always some children who were too embarrassed to go to the canteen, or to tell their teacher that they didn't have food. However, the Aboriginal Education team couldn't use school funds to buy food just for the Aboriginal students, nor could we work against the school canteen policy. The issue was always worse just before payday. So the AEW arranged for a locked cupboard in her room, and families put together their own bags of food on shopping day to be stored in that cupboard for their own children, like a pantry away from home. The AEW could make sure that the children were fed at school from their shopping bag each day. (A fridge has now moved into the office, and a microwave oven is planned.)

Strategy 4: the clothes whip around

The Aboriginal Education Worker, Muriel, was amazing in the way she could rally community resources. If a family turned up without sufficient clothing, or a child was shamed to come into the classroom because they had no socks, she would disappear and find them somewhere. She could always find someone who was willing to help out.

Strategy 5: end of term and annual attendance awards

It was the task of the trainee Aboriginal Education Worker to get the attendance feedback from the previous term, and determine the best attenders in each year level (excluding absences and lateness). These students were presented with MacDonaldis vouchers for them and their family at a special Aboriginal Education Assembly. The prizes for the annual awards were more substantial: T-shirts, caps, and books. We think that trophies similar to a football or netball trophy might be more valued.

Strategy 6: short term rewards

For some students, old habits of non-attendance needed to be changed. Rewards were negotiated with individual students, usually younger students, sometimes with a system of stickers for each day attended, followed by a reward at the end of a week of full attendance

One teacher implemented a reward system solely for the Aboriginal student in her class who had most trouble getting to school. It was kept in the teacher's desk, and the student marked herself off each day. After five days attendance in a row, she would choose a reward. This was then extended to getting to school more on time. A sign of success was when she began arriving at school with an absentee note from her mother so her absences were no longer unexplained.

Strategy 7: feedback to parents

Some parents just didn't realise how much learning their children are missing. With the trainee AEW we devised a way of visually representing student lateness, absences and days attendance, in the form of a pie chart. After consulting the ASSPA committee on its use, the AEW trialed the use of the pie chart in conjunction with a

face to face talk with selected parents. The actual number of full days attended sometimes came as a shock, and brought about short term change. This *Attendance feedback tool*, now in a more sophisticated form, is available on the Aboriginal Education website

http://www.aboriginaleducation.sa.edu.au/pages/Educators/attendance_retention/.

We had our best chances of success when the classroom teacher also worked at forming good relationships with the parents and families, rather than leaving this business to the Aboriginal Education Worker. Then the classroom teacher and the AEW could work together to determine the best strategy for talking to parents. Sometimes the chat was more effective coming from the AEW, sometimes it was the teacher.

Strategy 8: haranguing

Someone has to be the witch! One of the spin-offs of having such a good relationship with the Aboriginal students in the school, and their positive self esteem, was that we could hassle the older students when they began a pattern of absences before it became entrenched. The haranguing was carried out by anyone with a good relationship with the student: peers, teachers, AEW, aunties, cousins.

At the same time, we were very careful about how, when and whom we harangued. If a student was getting herself up, organising herself to get to school and often organising siblings as well, we were not going to worry about her being a little late! We let her know how admiring we were of the effort.

Strategy 9: pick ups

Sometimes it was strategic to run around to the child's place and pick them up. This gave them the message that we were relentless in pursuit of their presence. Usually the AEW did this, but others also helped. In one instance, a family of students who had already attended 12 schools in their Primary school life were picked up and dropped off by a teacher passing by for a term when they moved yet again, and we didn't want their Year 7 learning interrupted.

Strategy 10: success in learning

A significant motivator for some students was success at school. When we began the Deadly Writin', Readin' and Talkin' Project, using scaffolded literacy pedagogies of Dr Brian Gray from the University of Canberra, some students made sense of school learning for the first time, and began to be successful at reading and writing. One or two chronically poor attenders began to come regularly. After all, why would you come daily to a place that reinforced a sense of failure? It was fundamental that what happened in classroom rewarded students for getting there, and helped them to form positive identities about themselves as learners.

None of these strategies worked all of the time. The problem was never permanently solved. It required relentless commitment to do whatever it took to get students into school, then relentless commitment to ensure that they were successful once they got there. This task was everybody's business, from the receptionist, to the parents on canteen, to the classroom teacher. Together we made a difference!