What Works.
The Work Program: CORE ISSUES 6

What Works. The Work Program is a set of resources designed to help schools and those who work in them improve outcomes for Indigenous students. In most of the 'Core issues' series we try to define some topic-based key directions for practical action. This edition takes a slightly different approach in that it describes what people are doing at present in a small but growing field of Indigenous education.

Boarding

For most Indigenous students living in remote areas access to secondary schooling, especially to the upper levels, means leaving home to go to a school which makes provision for boarding. This is not a new phenomenon. Some of the schools providing these sorts of opportunities have been doing so for more than 50 years, with well established links to particular communities and families. However the increase in the number of young people being born and growing up in remote communities and the higher levels of aspirations for their educational success being driven from a range of sources means that the demand for this type of provision is increasing. The Australian Government provides supplementary funding to support boarding schools as well as the families of students that attend these schools.

In late 2006 a number of people, mainly principals, representing 17 boarding schools with a significant group of Indigenous students enrolled, spoke with the Australian Government's Minister for Education Science and Training, the Hon. Julie Bishop MP, about issues that they were confronting. Understandably, some of these issues related to funding and administrative matters. Others focused on health and well-being and improving the interactivity between the relevant responsibilities of various government departments.

But there was a lot of good news as well.

This *Core issues* paper has been prepared to share some of these experiences, particularly the professional issues confronted in working in these schools and the ways found of moving towards increasingly successful operation. The school participants in this forum were interviewed in early 2007. Their names and locations can be found at the end of the paper.

It is important to understand the diversity of these schools (almost all of which are Catholic or independent). Some are large with 1000 or more enrolments, the majority being non-Indigenous day students, located in a capital city. Others, the majority, are small with fewer than 100 students in more isolated settings where as one informant said 'there are fewer of the social diversions that might cause problems in the bigger centres'. A small majority have an enrolment composed entirely of Indigenous students, but in one there are 15 Indigenous boarders among 1100 other students. Some of the schools have a long history; others are only a few years old. Some have longstanding relationships with particular communities, in several cases that being the reason for the school's formation. Others are still building such relationships. It was a surprise to learn that students in one of these schools, and not one of the larger ones, come from five states and the Northern Territory; and while one can provide buses to collect more than 90 percent of its students from their homes, most of them have students who need to travel by air for at least one leg of their journey to school.

They also share some characteristics. Almost all the students we are focusing on here have English as a second language, in some cases Standard Australian English as a second dialect. There is a small but significant proportion (somewhere around 10–15 percent) for whom English is a foreign language.

For some perspective, the total number of Indigenous boarding students in these schools is about 1600 — if not a huge number, a reasonable sample. But as was pointed out consistently during the interviews every one of these young people has his or her own story which needs understanding and attention.

The schools also share issues. In the interviews these were grouped under entry and orientation, the maintenance of social, emotional and physical well being, attendance, the development of academic skills, and, finally, transition from school to where? It will be noted that the perspectives represented are those of school leaders.

Enrolment and orientation

Where do the students come from, and why?

The longer-established boarding schools frequently have long-standing relationships with particular communities, not necessarily in their immediate vicinity. A school in Sydney, for example, draws mostly from quite specific but widely separated communities in country New South Wales; one in Forbes from towns in western New South Wales. The Darwin schools have their own feeder areas which, while in the Top End, are not necessarily in the Northern Territory. PLC Perth has established relationships with several communities in the Kimberley. Abergowrie near Ingham in Queensland draws many of its boys from the Torres Strait Islands. Knowledge of the school and the people who run it are of high significance, as is the tradition of sending young people off to specific schools. Several instances were cited of current students whose the grandparents had been students of the same school.

Having family or friends is one important consideration in selecting students for enrolment. At one of these schools, the students — not obviously part of the one family group — worked out possible relationships, and discovered that all of them were related to each of the others somehow. Staff are reluctant to enrol students who have no other immediate family or members of their community enrolled. This was expressed in these sorts of ways. 'Very rarely do we have a student at school who has no relations or other kids from their community there. We would think long and hard before enrolling someone who was on their own.' 'Kids who are on their own, "single kids" we call them, they rarely stay.' 'We must have more than one student from a community — we have a broad target of a minimum of six — and we encourage Elders to come sometimes to stay with students in the boarding house. The need for us to understand and have strong and effective contact with their communities is paramount.'
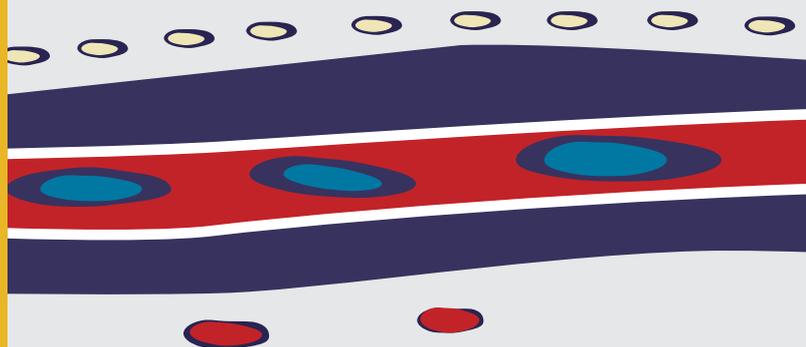
Community liaison may be conducted by staff employed for the purpose — the crucial significance of this role was noted by the principals and almost all had evidently found first-rate people for this purpose — or by the school's executive staff who spend time travelling to meet parents and community members. While noting the substantial time and expenditure costs of this process, those who did that were emphatic about its value for all concerned.

There are pull and push factors involved in the decision to send students away to school. Obviously one of the push factors is the absence of the availability of other options for schooling. But most of the informants also mentioned that some students' parents at least would like them to spend the years of adolescence away from the problems of growing up in their community. They also want them to have contact with the diverse versions of the 'wider world' that these schools provide.

The most commonly mentioned pull factor, from the perspective of principals, was the very strong wish of parents for their children to become literate in and confident with the use of spoken and written English. Numeracy was mentioned as well, but literacy is the dominant concern.

Students' own aspirations are not quite as clear and, of course, vary enormously. But the following view was not uncommon. 'They have difficulty in thinking, certainly in the initial stages, past the their immediate communities and what goes on there. Teacher aide, health worker perhaps, retail, traineeships … There is plenty of work in the mining industries which exist where many of our students come from, but you need skills, sometimes of a reasonably high order, to get the jobs that are available. Sometimes its hard to get that across.' Another informant suggested that, 'Our kids don't want to set goals. Life in the mainstream of Australian society is a dream that they may or may not have. We work on self esteem and building ideas about the futures they may have. Older students have work experience with mentors from outside the school to give them bigger ideas about what they might be able to do.'

One school at least goes further. Students sign a reciprocal agreement at entry where they provide some basic undertakings related to completion of school work, attendance and behaviour. In return the school undertakes that no students will leave without direct, positive and available opportunities for employment or further training. 'We share the responsibility for succeeding.'

What sorts of challenges do the students face?

Arrival in a new setting to live and work produces challenges for anybody, especially where living in close proximity with people many of whom you don't know is involved.

These students are mostly young adolescents often confronting very new living arrangements. 'It's the routine as much as anything, and being told what to do. A number, perhaps the majority, of the students we get are used to fending for themselves and living very independent lifestyles. We have a set of rules which we hope are both generous and sensitive, but they are still rules, and we do try very hard to make sure they are adhered to.' It was commented quite regularly that students are encouraged to learn that 'this is the way we do things here at [this, that or the other] school'. Peers were a crucial influence in this regard, but new students very often have a steep learning curve. However there were some comments about the number of students who had got themselves ready for this experience and were ready, and most willing, to make some substantial changes in the way they lived their lives.

One principal from a large school in provincial centre noted that his new students mostly come from very small schools in small communities or towns. 'They are daunted by the sheer physical size. They also come from places where the whole population, or nearly so, is Indigenous and yet here they are in this town where the Indigenous group is about one quarter of the whole. They don't necessarily know much about non-Indigenous people and how they behave.' That in itself is a most significant challenge.
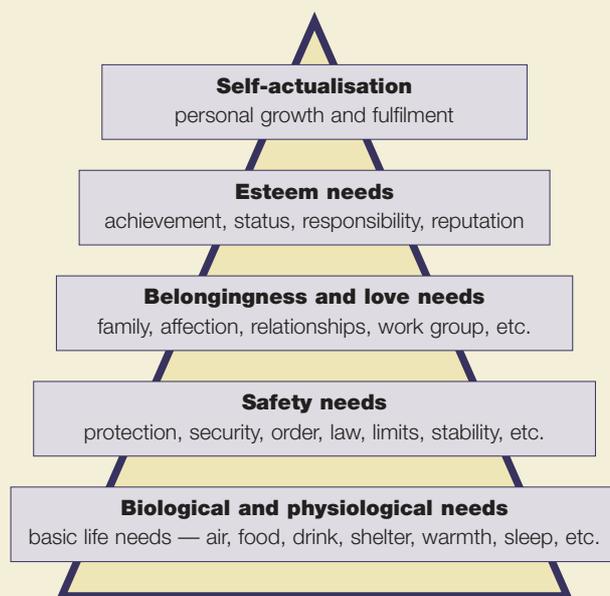
The schools' response

'We provide our new students with a very warm welcome. They are part of an extra family now. We want them to know that we will love and care for them.' That comment contains the tenor of responses to the question — how do you help induct new students into boarding school life?

'We don't talk too much, we do it quietly, lots of smiles, gentle redirection if it is needed.' 'We meet them at the plane and from that moment they are part of the family.' 'Our Indigenous registrar meets them, and she's just a remarkable woman. She gives them this fabulous welcome but she is also very direct about what school is about. She takes them off to introduce them to all the people they need to know in the first instance — not too many, we try to make sure of that.' 'Its about hospitality — what can we do that will make them feel welcome. We constantly reinforce the idea that it is a community, a small one in our case, and an even smaller one in that they will be living in a family house with house parents who will generally be with them for the whole time they spend at school.'

Well-being

A range of needs

When discussing students' needs nearly half the group of informants made reference, unprompted, to Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a reference point for thinking about their care and well-being; and clearly there was concern related to each of Maslow's categories. 'You can start by providing a shower, three square meals a day, a roof over your head, plenty of exercise and someone to love you and make sure no one is humbugging you, and that will get you a fair distance', was the way one of the principals put it. 'For many of our students there are some new experiences right there.'

Self-actualisation
personal growth and fulfilment

Esteem needs
achievement, status, responsibility, reputation

Belongingness and love needs
family, affection, relationships, work group, etc.

Safety needs
protection, security, order, law, limits, stability, etc.

Biological and physiological needs
basic life needs — air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sleep, etc.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

'Emotional, social and physical health are the absolute foundation for the work. Until you're close to getting those right, you're just treading water with academic issues.' This was a typical comment. Others mentioned the crucial importance of communicating a sense of security; structure, order and predictability; fun and a sense of belonging. But the key to success is quite obviously the quality of relationships which can be established — warm, caring but also direct, clear and firm about rules and responsibilities.

This section may appear to concentrate on the sorts of problems that arise, and these should not be underestimated. There are major challenges confronted by people working with these students which are completely unfamiliar to teachers working with day students in mainstream settings. However, it is important to stress that the tenor of these conversations was upbeat with a strong emphasis on how well so many of these students are doing and the very positive contributions it was felt that schooling was making to their well being — social, emotional, physical and, because so many of these schools are church schools, to their spiritual well being as well.

Health

Physical and mental health is an ongoing concern, referred to consistently by these school leaders.

Entry processes include screening for health problems. A range of physical problems is often located during this process. Indigenous students often present at boarding schools with medical conditions including nutritional issues, trachoma, diabetes, sight, hearing and/or dental issues. Sometimes these are serious, like acute rheumatic fever — Australia's Indigenous peoples living in remote communities have the highest incidence of this problem in the world — major heart conditions or difficult-to-remedy tropical diseases. Some students also display particular mental health and behavioural issues. Managing these problems can often require an intensive effort. Boarding school staff regularly attend hospitals, clinics, medical services and pharmacies with students. Indigenous students also call on chaplaincy and school counselling services for guidance and support, particularly when they first attend the school, but also in times of individual or family crisis.

All the schools had made arrangements for the on-going treatment of health issues. One has a Well Being Unit staffed by two social workers and full-time nurse. Another has a Student Services team which is accessible 24 hours a day. 'It's never enough but it has produced a significant improvement in the confidence with which we can talk about students health.' One school is regularly serviced by the Flying Doctor Service.

While getting appropriate help for dental issues was mentioned consistently by informants in more remote areas as a major issue, the biggest issue of concern to the principals was the availability of support for psychological problems via professional counselling. The complex group of qualities and skills needed to carry out this sort of work effectively appear to be in short supply.

Living arrangements

Most of these students live in boarding houses on the school site with staff in charge of care and supervision. Staff change over to meet the demands of providing 24 hour care. One school with around 50 boarders has a core staff of six or seven with another 20 people providing part-time support. In some cases the boarding facilities are located off-site, in one case in a number of houses spread through the community. 'We feel that this creates a more realistic environment, even though as you would understand it produces a number of logistical problems. But we think it helps to keep the kids at school.'

There was one other variation. 'One of the distinctive features of our school is that our students live in family group homes [on the school's campus in a remote setting] each of which is staffed by a couple who act in a parental role. There is no daily or weekly turnover of staff. One of our measures of success is the degree to which the family atmosphere is maintained and working. This reinforces our very strong emphasis on building a community. We want them to know that they are alive in the hearts and minds of people 24 hours a day seven days a week. The students become very attached to their school families.'

Boarding staff

One of the universal challenges of boarding provision is finding the right staff — 'not just people who do the job, but people who are really skilled and committed to the kids.'

One of the informants singled this out as the key issue in a large scale process of reform and improvement. 'Our boarding house was previously staffed by people with no special skills.
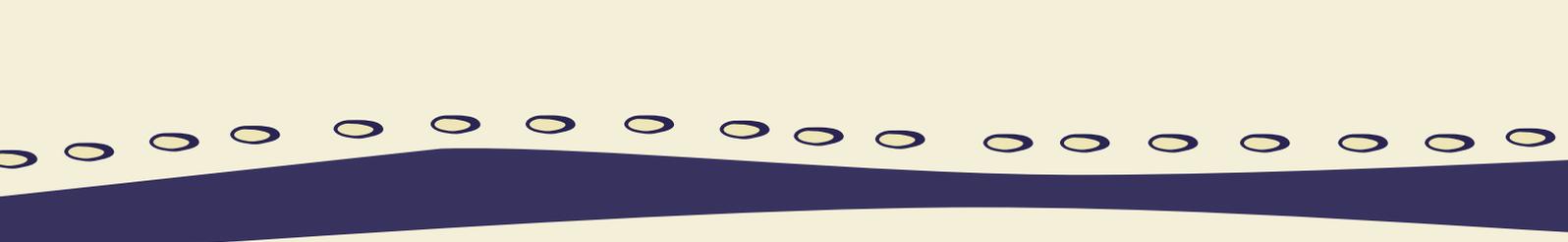
It was just a job and often a difficult one without much back up or support. Things were held together by a local Elder who was a remarkable man and loved by everyone. But there is only so much one person can do. We hired new staff and looked for people who already had relevant skills — a number of them were trained teachers and there were two people with a background in youth work — and who were willing to develop them through further training. This training provided through a specialist agency was described as "providing a shared language and methodology which produced a real consistency of approach. Consistency is critical." '

There was strong agreement with that last view. 'We started making headway when we developed whole-of-school approaches to matters like behaviour management and the ways in which we treat kids. People talk about this in mainstream schools, but if we get it wrong in our schools the consequences are much more dire.'

Three of the schools provide training for boarding staff before they take up their positions. 'It doesn't make recruitment any easier mind you,' one noted. Others have found suitable VET and tertiary courses for training while on the job. Several offer mandatory training in cross-cultural awareness.

There was some disagreement about the necessity for having Indigenous staff working in the boarding school, perhaps less about having an Indigenous presence. A number of the school leaders, however, were emphatic about the need for Indigenous staff in the boarding section of the school noting that their schools had made significant efforts to find suitable people. 'We stand or fall on that basis.' Others were less insistent about it. 'The boarding house parents our students really missed when they left were white South Africans. They wanted them replaced by other South Africans. It seems to be more about personality than anything else.'

Extra-curricular activities

No discussion of the process of boarding would be complete without reference to extra-curricular activities. 'A full, rich and busy program of activities out of school time is one of the keys to success' was a common and taken-for-granted view.

These students frequently love sport and it was regularly mentioned that they were very good at it. One principal who was concerned about attendance chuckled away as he said, 'There's always football. They'll always come for that.'

Long lists of sports, festivals, excursions, picnics, trips, clubs and activities were provided to illustrate the richness of extra-curricular activities. These, of course, were not always formally structured. At the one school without a set period of homework/study, 'the kids go down to the waterhole, muck around on their bikes, they've got their jobs to do — plenty of those — but really they do all the things they'd do at home.'

The hardest cases

As noted in the section under 'Attendance', some schools are becoming more selective about the students they are willing to enrol than they have been in the past. This is an option that non-government schools can pursue. Where there is less choice about which students to take, or when schools decide to take all-comers, there are some students who present problems which boarding schools find difficult to accommodate.

'I worry about more seriously damaged kids. Their behaviour can be really very difficult. They might, for example, have serious medical conditions or really troubling psychological conditions. They are ready to fall apart, and sending them home is no solution. It is very difficult to have them as part of a school with all that entails — teachers and other kids in your face, life in a dormitory which depends to a significant degree on routine and organisation. You have a hassle there and there is little opportunity for the sort of respite you need. We need to be able to protect the ones who are going well and ourselves, but we also care about the ones who need types of support and facilities that we can't provide.'

There were several references to the need for respite facilities for such students, places they could go where the pressure is taken off but they can still receive the attention and care they need. There is currently little provision for this sort of assistance.

Attendance

Attendance may appear to be an odd issue to discuss for students who are boarding. It might be better described as maintaining consistent attendance over the full period of secondary schooling. Two schools provided figures of rolling enrolment. In one case in a school with 200 places, 380 spent some time in the school during last year, and with 100–120 consistent attenders the very brief period spent by the others is evident. At another school it was possible in the past to have as many as 800 students cycle through 250 places during the course of a year. 'We had a policy of open entry, open exit, come as often as you like, and of course it wasn't working.' In a document prepared by one of the principals contributing to this paper he suggests: 'Student retention (or lack of student retention) is probably the biggest issue faced by schools and hostels that cater for Indigenous students. It seems to be an issue faced by all schools and hostels although some organisations have better Indigenous retention than others.'

It is not an issue faced by all the schools in this survey. A couple of the smaller schools sited in more remote locations did not identify this as an issue. The expense and difficulty of getting home was a factor. Also where students were coming from families and friendship groups where there was a longer and more substantial history of educational participation and engagement, they seem more likely to participate consistently for longer periods. But, as usual, individual responses are subject to a complex range of factors. It was suggested that older students were more likely not to return. 'They become more engaged in other issues in their communities.' 'They think that they have "done" school after a while.' As noted above, students who are on their own, without family or other friends from their community, are at high risk of leaving and not returning.

From a more positive point of view, all schools had made efforts to make their programs and activities as attractive as possible to students. One principal mentioned a smart tactic no doubt repeated elsewhere: 'We make sure that there is always something on that they love, like a big sporting or social event, early in the new term.' But it is not a straightforward issue.

Better quality provision is certainly one important response and, as mentioned, this is a concern of all schools and in some cases this has clearly had an impact. However it was common for schools with high levels of rolling enrolment to take a firmer line. Several of the larger schools had developed more efficient tracking systems and data collection procedures — 'We are much clearer now about who is here and who isn't, and if they're not here, we know where they are' — but also stronger policies and more direct ways of talking to parents and communities about the requirements of schooling. (Steve Florisson makes this case and for more rigorous initial screening in the boxed material.)

The following comment describes the approach adopted by one of the schools referred to above as having serious rollover problems. 'Now we say, if you come you have to stay. We have spent a lot of time and effort in encouraging the idea that education goes on for a long time, and that if you want to get the best out of it you have to keep at it consistently for that time. We've set up a community/parent education program to try to get this across. We're very explicit about it with a lot of quiet, patient explanation. We also understand that there are phases in the contact. The first which might last as little as a few days or a week or two is "checking it out" — what's it all about, what you do here — then they might go home and come back expecting to stay longer, and we expect them to stay longer. We've developed a Readiness Policy which contains ideas and procedures like that. It's part of trying to develop a longer term perspective. We track them all now, backwards and forwards, and now we have 280 enrolled, 240 attend consistently and 200 will have stayed over a five-year period. We learnt not to try to be all things to all people, and we just try to do our best.'

The principal of the other school mentioned in the beginning of this section tells a similar story. 'We talk to their parents and families in a way that we try to ensure is non-threatening. We ask them if there are any problems that we could try to resolve — any teasing or fighting, and tell them that they're missing out by not being at school. Then at the end we always ask when are you bringing them back? It doesn't always work, but we haven't found a better way.'

Getting things right from the start

It is important to carefully screen all students who apply to come to your school. This is best done by visiting the student in their own environment, interviewing the student, parents, previous school/s and possibly community leaders. Students may have a history of short stays at hostels, (travellers), poor behaviour (including violence to persons), life control problems (with drugs, solvents, etc) and/or significant involvement with courts. Students may also be young for their age (immature) and just not ready to leave home and go to a boarding school.

You may choose to accept a student with some of the above problems (particularly if there are clear reasons why a behaviour may have occurred) but at least you know from the start the real situation. We have accepted students in the past we would have normally screened out because our numbers were low and we needed the associated finance. This has never worked for us and has resulted in a range of problems in addition to an end-of-year deficit.

There is an argument that all students should have an opportunity and a second or third chance. While this is a valid argument, we have come to the realisation that our core business is to provide quality education and hostel care. We are not trained or equipped to deal with complex behaviour and life control problems. We should encourage the establishment of more "second chance" type programs so that these students can be accommodated in programs equipped to deal with these issues. There is also the issue of the existing students who are just normal students entrusted to us by parents in good faith. These parents do not expect that their students will be in contact with, and possibly influenced by other students who have complex behaviour and life control problems.

We have found that effective screening and selective enrolment increases retention and provides a pleasant working environment for staff and students. An effective screening process generally consists of pre-agreed parameters for enrolment and a committee to review applications and make decisions.

Once the student has been enrolled we are in a partnership with the student's family. It is important that the parents (or guardians) are very aware of the implications of enrolment and the importance of support for the school and the student during the students stay at the school. The family should understand the purpose of the student attending the school, educational and other outcomes, and the importance of the student completing the enrolment period. We advise parents that a student is expected to attend for the full term and if they return prior to the end of term (without a satisfactory reason) it is unlikely they will be accepted back at school. Wongutha's educational program is organised to ensure that a student completes units of work during one term so that if a student does not return for the following term they have completed units and resume satisfactorily if they return in the future. If a student leaves mid term, it is unlikely they will have completed units and they have effectively wasted their own time as well as that of teachers.

Establishing a partnership with parents is important and can best be done with face to face meetings rather than long distance communication. Relationship is foundational to Indigenous culture and establishing a relationship between the parent and the school or school representative is an important part of beginning the partnership that will support the student and aid retention.

— From a paper prepared by Steve Florisson, Principal at Wongutha CAPS for the Indigenous Boarding in Secondary Schools (IBISS) group.
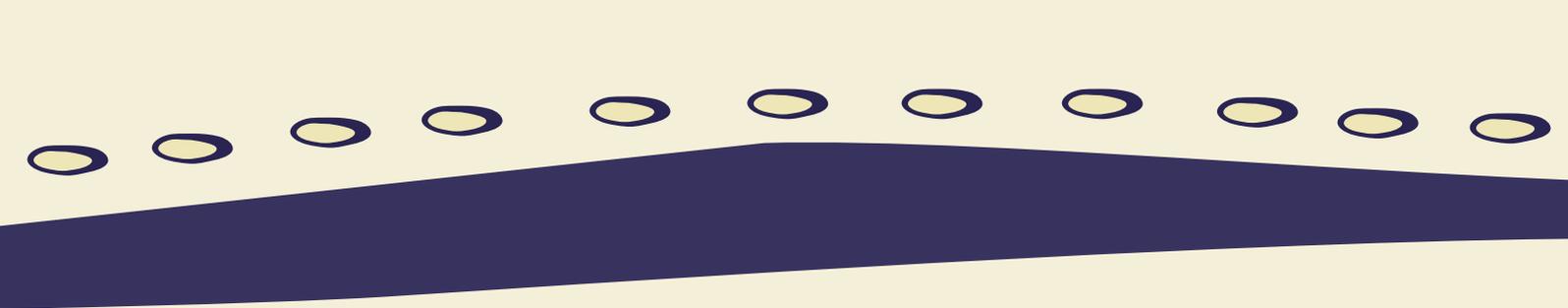
Academic support and development

As has been mentioned, students entering these schools for the first time have limited backgrounds in Standard Australian English and their academic skills are frequently at a low level. One principal, for example, said that about 75 percent of the school's (secondary-age) students are working at below Year 3 level at entry. Another said, 'We assume that they have missed out on primary education and start again from that point.' This view is too strong to apply across the board — some of these students have been awarded scholarships based on the academic promise they have displayed — but building academic skills, and especially basic skills in literacy and numeracy, is clearly a major task. (It is worth noting in passing that one school locates students who are likely to enrol prior to that occurring and provides them with some preparatory work, via, for example, digital resources for developing numeracy.)

Collection of relevant data, like former school records, Basic Skills Test data, at entry was universal. Some schools conduct their own testing procedures for skill level ascertainment. The use of Neale Analysis tools was mentioned several times.

Students then enter bridging programs or other forms of intensive classroom support. This usually takes the form of a curriculum focused nearly exclusively on the acquisition of basic skills, and smaller class sizes with just one teacher for the purposes of consistency and stability, often working with one or more aides, in charge of the group. In one case where there was only a small number of the types of students being discussed the students go into mainstream classes with a flexible individualised program, but this was an unusual case. Several of the larger schools had set up an Intensive English faculty to develop specialist skills and capacities among the staff. One estimate suggested that it conventionally took six to 12 months to reach a level of English adequate to participate, but that additional support was commonly required for a minimum of three years.

A good deal of attention is paid subsequently to student placement in their various classes. In fact this activity is a good example of the consistent monitoring of individual students that was much in evidence in the responses of these school leaders.

One consideration which had been thought about extensively in co-educational schools was single sex classes. Four of these schools were single sex schools and so the issue didn't arise, but in the others there were quite strong views in both directions about the value of gender segregated classes.

In later years ability grouping remains common, in particular for numeracy/maths. Some schools relate students' class placement very strictly to literacy ability. But the multiplicity of factors which can be taken into account when making these judgments is indicated by this list provided by one informant. 'The primary thing is age/year level, keeping kids with their social peers. But we also think about things like social maturity, how long they've been in the level, gender balance, level of literacy and numeracy ability, social confidence, and success at being able to work in a group. We would think about all those things in our regular discussions about where kids might fit best.'

The two strategies most commonly reported as being effective for the development of academic skills were increasing the level and intensity of teacher support, and the use of Accelerated Literacy.

Increased levels of teacher support were provided through small class sizes. Class groupings of six to 12 are not uncommon, especially for newer students. Some schools organise their structures so that core learning (literacy and numeracy) occurs in 'half' classes. The complementary strategy is to increase the number of adults in the classroom or otherwise working with individuals in the class group by withdrawal of individuals or very small groups (two to three students for example). The value of the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) was particularly noted in the regard. 'We try to work on 1 to 4 or 1 to 6', was a typical comment. 'We give our bottom stream class our best teacher working with a classroom aide', was another.
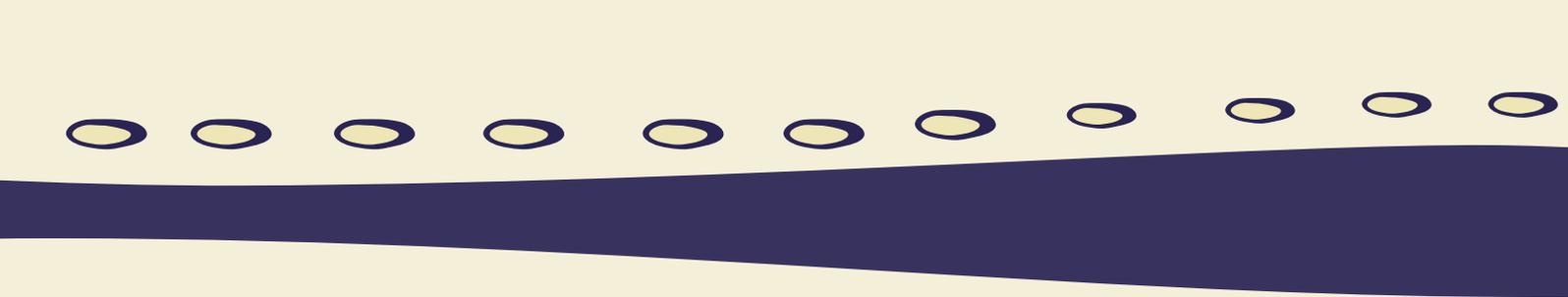
The impact of one-to-one tutoring was consistently commented on as a way of making a real difference. 'With good attendance we have kids jumping as much as two year levels in six months with that sort of intensive support.' Reducing the number of teachers students had contact with was another version of this approach.

Eleven of the 17 schools are running Accelerated Literacy programs. Some had been doing so for several years. (See the boxed story on Wiltja.) In others it was just commencing, but there was universal agreement about its potential impact as being an extremely effective way of developing literacy in late English learners.

Several schools provide their students with individual learning plans; but the only other strategy mentioned more than once or twice was the value of including VET provision in programs for senior students. The reasons: 'VET course are practical, hands on. Kids like them and can see the point of them.' Horticulture, hospitality, various forms of farm work, auto mechanics and music were some of the courses referred to which are currently run. More remote and smaller schools reported considerable difficulty in mounting VET programs either at all or to the degree that they would like.

Homework

All of these schools except one has a structured program for homework four or five nights a week (often Monday to Thursday and Sunday night). Various arrangements are in place. The common amount of time was 90 minutes/two hours per session, sometimes straight after school, most often at night after dinner. In some cases this was supervised individual work, but tutors were frequently employed to provide individual students with more focused support. In one case the 'house parents' do all the supervision and tutoring. 'While we expect homework most nights, there's no specific set period. "Mum" will say, off we go, and there she'll be on the other side of the kitchen table giving you a hand. We just try to make it as much like home as possible.'

It is not necessary to underline the prospective impact that an additional 10–15 hours of study time consistently per week could have on achievement, nor the effort required to make it happen productively.

The outcomes

How far do these students progress?

Sometimes not far. Understandably, little academic progress is made if attendance is limited to one or two terms, or participation is sporadic. One view, the product of considerable thought and experience, suggested that the process of catching up to the sorts of performance anticipated for non-Indigenous day students at that school can only occur beyond the period of conventional schooling; there is simply not long enough to catch up. Entry to tertiary education may follow from a period taking TAFE courses, but direct from school was unlikely. A principal of a school in an urban area said that she felt confident that her Indigenous boarders would gain their School Certificate (Year 10), but going on to be successful at Year 12 represented another level of challenge and struggle. 'Upsets in the family, homesickness … it just gets too much for the regular consistent work needed to succeed.' That said, she noted that at the time of our conversation there were four Indigenous boarding students in Year 12.

There were several other stories which focused on students who were achieving at high levels. 'All our Year 12 students got their NTCE last year.' 'The number of students getting their NTCE continues to rise' [14 last year up from 12 the year before, possibly more again this year]. 'We have 11 students sitting for their HSC this year and I expect them all to succeed.' 'We have a very strong group in Year 11, big numbers at that level for us, and as long as they all come back they will do very well. We expect seven students to sit their SACE this year.'

Accelerated Literacy at Wiltja, an annexe of Woodville High School, South Australia

Wiltja provides programs for Indigenous secondary-aged young people from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. Students with potential for further academic development are nominated by their teachers in these remote communities, and following consultation with parents and family members, travel to Adelaide to participate. Students live in a hostel at Northfield, and participate in a tutorial program on most week-nights that is designed to support their school-based program. Fifty-five places are available in the Wiltja program at any one time.

Wiltja was one of the first test sites for the new approach to developing literacy pioneered by Brian Gray, now known as Accelerated Literacy then called Scaffolded Literacy. (See *Core Issues*, number 3 for a more extended discussion of this strategy.) It has been in operation at the school for eight years and, as Bob Lines, Wiltja's principal, says, 'It has been taken very seriously. It was a research project and we have had to honour the demands that makes of us. We have had to see if we can make a difference.'

All teachers at the school have had training in this approach. 'A lot of regular training and support', as Bob said. 'We constantly revisit, examine, think and talk about our practice. Literacy is everyone's business, and it **is** the number one item on our strategic plan.'

What Works has previously recorded a number of comments made by Wiltja teachers on this topic.

> 'I have been teaching Anangu students for about seven years, and have never felt particularly successful in the various schools in which I have taught in terms of literacy outcomes. After looking for some time for an alternative, I was relieved to get involved in the scaffolding approach. Other schemes that I tried, such as phonics, didn't address the needs of fifteen year olds with reading ages of six or seven year olds. Junior primary methodology just wasn't working either with these kids.'

> 'A major point of resistance for many experienced teachers, given that it is so personally challenging, is the need to review your whole questioning technique. This was certainly the case for me, as I was concerned that by feeding answers to students I would be inhibiting independent thinking skills. Actually, this has tended to have the opposite effect, because the kids feel so much more confident, and are asking more critical questions.'

Significant increases in student achievement have been measured. At the same time, teachers have noted a range of student learning outcomes that are more difficult to measure, like an increased level of student engagement in their learning. Video and anecdotal evidence reflects much higher levels of student participation, especially in terms of the quality of dialogue between students and teachers as well as students themselves. Another reported outcome was student enthusiasm to select their own texts, something no teacher in the project had experienced previously.

'Kids are more prepared to have a go, in terms of volunteering answers. There is no shame involved about making mistakes, and students are more willing and able to help each other along. Previously, these kids were really reluctant to participate. For example, students would pull their jumpers over their heads and so on. I have also noticed that words like 'Wiya!' (No!) and 'Lanma!' (Boring!), which were commonly used by students in the old days have more or less disappeared.

'It's like what we're teaching is not just how to read, but the purpose and the "why" of it. And I find that the focus now is on meaning and making sure that the students are getting meaning. Then they are getting appreciation from reading and they have success because they're engaged straight away, and they're active, they're part of it. The minute we read and they follow and we teach them how to follow along the strip they feel they're part of the process. And then the next minute when we're highlighting or text marking they have something explicit to do.'

'The kids realise fairly quickly what you're trying to do. And they realise that pretty well every step of the way they're going to be successful. There are no tricky bits. They know if they learn this bit, then they will be able to answer the next question. … I think it's the explicit teaching but it's also the success bit. Kids *are* successful every time they have a literacy lesson.'

A process of peer co-mentoring has been put in place for staff, a part of a very lively involvement on professional learning. Bob Lines again: 'You need a group to become strong enough to support each other and assist in the training of new members… We are maintaining literacy as a core focus, rather than taking on a range of issues. In other words, we are trying to do as well as we can in literacy, and not be distracted by other things. There is a real sense of determination here… That means persistence, and hanging-in there when there are frustrations and difficulties.'

More recently some of the core Accelerated Literacy approaches have been adopted in the teaching of a wider range of KLAs including senior SACE subjects. This is reportedly working well.

What comes next?

'This group of kids is as capable as any other group of kids, but they have to be able to see a future.' When the question was asked about what happens next the issue of aspirations and continued support after school arose.

'Some finish Year 12 even getting quite good TER scores, but keeping on going is hard. Housing issues crop up. They're living away from home and what has until recently been their 'home'. There isn't much support they can count on. Not at the levels they have been used to anyway.' 'We have had kids who want to be doctors and teachers. But doing it by yourself is pretty tough. Parents talk about high aspirations, but then there are all the other influences.'

Role models were mentioned as being highly significant, especially those of other students who were known to current students. 'Rebecca and Gerald have got traineeships. You could do that too.' 'Dimity did teaching. You know her. She could do it. How about you? What are you going to do?'

'The only way is to get them early and to talk constantly about career goals and how to get there.' That seems to be a useful summation of ideas in this regard. One school uses this slogan as its constant point of reference: *'Don't be afraid. Choose for the future. Keep on learning.'*

Acknowledgements

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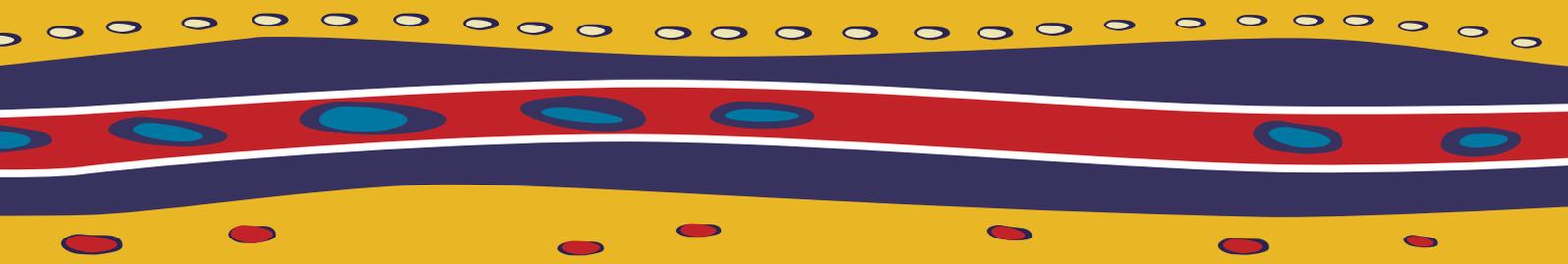
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