



Australian Government

Department of Education, Science and Training

What Works. The Work Program: CORE ISSUES 5

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. The 'Core issues' series is an attempt to distil some topic-based key directions for practical action.

Student engagement: Attendance, participation and belonging

Three of these four terms — engagement, attendance and participation — have a high profile in discussions of improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. They sometimes have indistinct boundaries with attendance being used as a synonym for participation for example, and engagement ranging in people's minds from meaning concentrated effort in the classroom to a description of very broad types of involvement. At ground level, participation probably means things like joining in a sports carnival or providing an item at a concert, whereas from a technical perspective it is often related to grade retention and suspension statistics. Belonging brings a different flavour to the discussion and is included here for reasons explained overleaf. But taken together they provide a description of how we want our students to be — immersed constructively and enthusiastically in the developmental experiences and products that schooling provides.

Engagement is believed to be so significant it has been used in the most recent MCEETYA paper, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008*, to frame the five domains for action (‘critical to engaging Indigenous children and young people in learning’): early childhood education; school and community educational partnerships; school leadership; quality teaching; and pathways to training, employment and further education.

The reason? ‘Engagement in learning is critical to academic achievement and providing students with the understandings, knowledge, skills and confidence to move on into training, employment and higher education. ... Engagement is critical because it makes a difference to academic achievement and fosters in students a sense of belonging and self-worth. In addition, ‘engaged learners are doers and decision-makers who develop skills in learning, participation and communication that will accompany them throughout adulthood.’ And its definition: Engagement is a construct involving three dimensions: behavioural (involvement); affective (personal attachment to others, such as teachers and classmates); and cognitive (application to learning)’ (2006: 17).

Engagement
in learning
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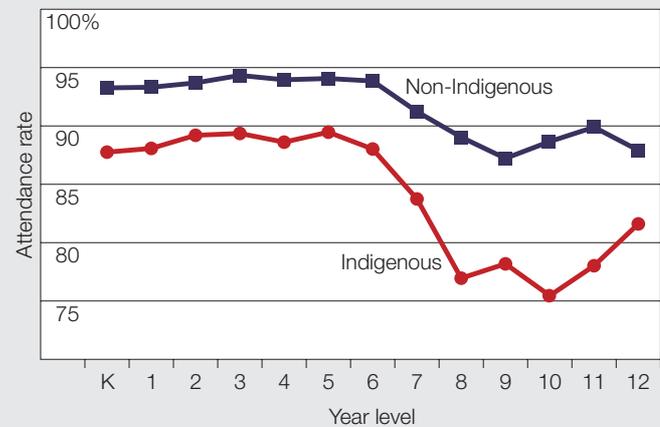
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Attendance: Only part of the story

Indigenous students’ school attendance

It is widely assumed that school attendance rates of Indigenous students are lower than those for non-Indigenous students. A major report on attendance, *Better Practice in School Attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students* (2000), prepared for DEST by Colin Bourke and others, collected and analysed the data which was available at that time and concluded that average absenteeism for Indigenous students was about twice the rate for non-Indigenous students. Attendance was also one of the major interests of the recent *Review of Aboriginal Education* (2004) conducted by the NSW AECG and the NSW DET. Data about attendance was specifically collected for this review from a carefully selected sample of 200 schools for a period of a month and the results, appearing in the table below, very closely resemble those of the DEST study.

Attendance rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from Kindergarten to Year 12 (sample of 200 NSW schools)



(Source: NSW Review of Aboriginal Education, 2004: 25.)

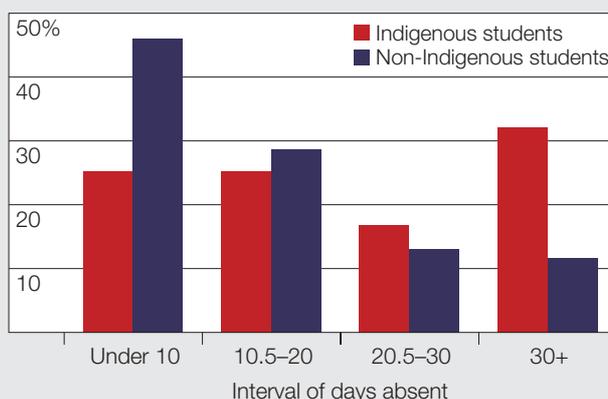
Without wanting to diminish the scale of the issue and its various impacts, focusing on the negative aspects of these data can deflect us from understanding something that the data in this table do tell us in an unqualified fashion, and that is: **the majority of Indigenous young people who are enrolled at school attend regularly and consistently.**

These data suggest that attendance levels during the primary years are reasonably consistent but, as for non-Indigenous students, rates decline quite sharply in the early secondary years. Some commentators would note the probable effect of alienation from school among early adolescents applying far more widely than just to Indigenous students. Attendance levels improve among those Indigenous students who remain in the senior years, remembering that about 30 percent leave school at the end of Year 10.

This might suggest that most school effort related to attendance issues should be directed to students in the upper primary and early secondary years. However, from their analysis of relevant research, Mellor and Corrigan (2004) suggest that absenteeism frequently begins in the earliest years of schooling and sets a pattern for future years, suggesting that tackling this problem must begin very early in the child's school life to be successful.

The DEST study notes the significant problems in the recording and collection of attendance data and the high levels of uncertainty about detail, especially in the ways individual students behave. This is reflected in the form in which these data are most commonly presented. In Barry Barnes' analysis and commentary on attendance issues for the NSW Review, he points out that reporting mean average attendance rates masks the situation of individual patterns of attendance. An attendance rate of 84 percent for ten students in one school could mean, for example, that each of the ten students was away for 32 days, 'in which case 84 percent is very descriptive of the attendance patterns of those students. Or it could be that two students were away for 160 days each while the remaining eight students attended every single day' (2004: 14) in which case the modal average, the most common pattern, would be closer to 100 percent attendance.

This observation is given more concrete substance by the information presented in the following table drawn from the DEST study. Those Indigenous students who are not attending regularly have comparatively longer periods of absence, especially in the secondary years.



(Source: Bourke et al., 2000: 14.)

The DEST study also notes the following.

- Research reviewed for the project suggests that the level of school attendance in remote/very remote areas is markedly lower than in urban areas, particularly at secondary level; with considerable variation in attendance reported between remote schools, as well as dramatic variation in the level of attendance from one week or time period to another.
- While the majority of Indigenous students maintain a consistent enrolment in one school, others show very irregular patterns of attendance and a significant group move frequently between schools. 'Mobility is, in fact, reported to be a major cause of non-attendance and to have serious consequences in relation to educational outcomes. Indigenous students not only move from one school to another more frequently than non-Indigenous students but, in tradition-oriented remote communities, family mobility associated with social and cultural obligations, which often entails lengthy student absences from school' (ibid.: 13).

It has been commonplace to assume that academic performance is closely linked to levels of attendance. In our own discussion of attendance in the *What Works Guidebook* for example, it states: 'There is a very strong correlation between students' achievement and attendance levels'.

After a close investigation of salient research and through his own work, Barnes contests this notion, at least in the bland way in which it is stated in the *Guidebook*. Studies of this issue consistently produce some cases where comparatively poor attenders achieve well academically, and some very consistent attenders do not perform so well.

Experienced teachers could imagine reasons why both these situations might occur. Barnes does, however, establish a stronger correlation between levels of attendance and state-wide Year 7 literacy and numeracy test results. He concludes that: ‘The association between attendance and performance is weak for primary education but is strong for early secondary education’ (op. cit.: 22). It would be common sense to assume that as the work gets harder more consistent and engaged classroom attendance is required for success. More powerfully, it is obvious from looking at the data presented here that at the very point where we can confirm the relationship between academic success and attendance, attendance begins to decline rapidly. That matters.

Reasons for absence

Why can attendance be problematic for some Indigenous students? Barnes provides a schema (op. cit.: 7) which he labels, ‘A multitude of factors repeatedly described as impacting on attendance’.

Every one of these issues, most frequently in concert with others, could be the reasons for absence from school. The *What Works Workbook* contains a brief summary of reasons located for non-attendance in a substantial research investigation (pp. 40–41). Their diversity is enormous — boredom, transience, consistent failure, other more pressing responsibilities, peer influence, bullying, being ‘too cool for school’.

The message is, if you’re going to work on attendance issues —

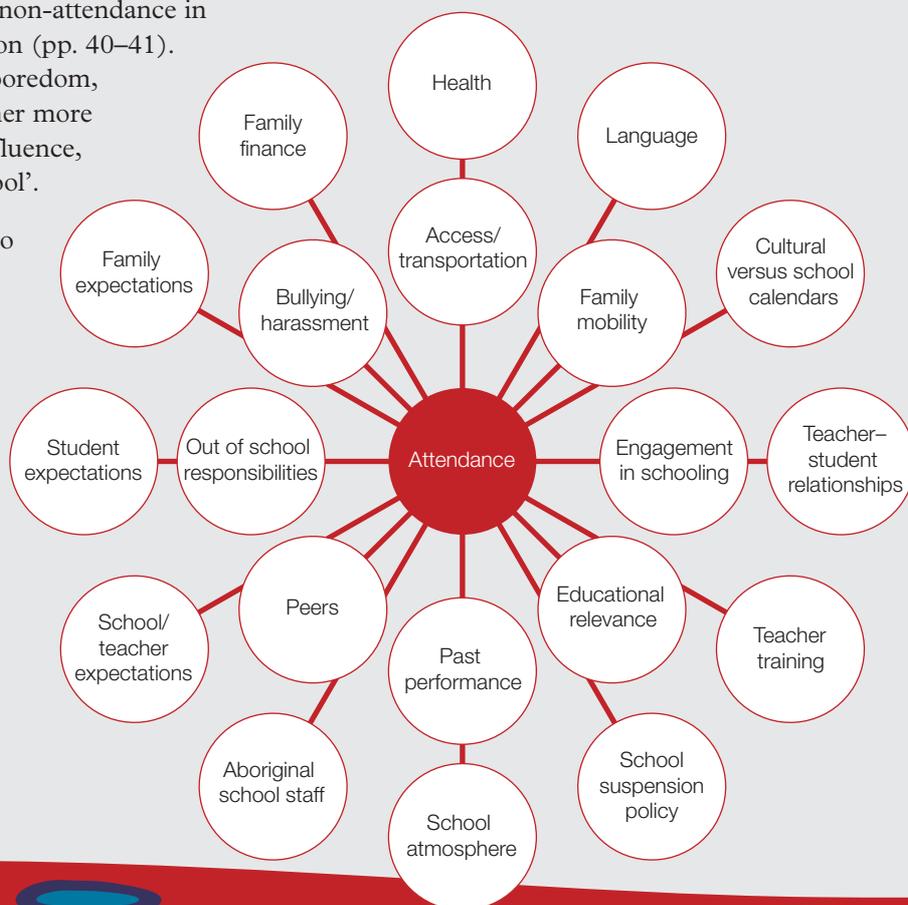
Find out what is really going on. Don’t make assumptions. Get skilled and knowledgeable help (often available from your Indigenous education worker). Don’t take an aggressive stance, with punishment as the first resort. Think about what the problem really is.

But there is a more important message, suggested by the last point above.

Think of poor attendance as a visible symptom of a situation that needs tackling from a larger and more holistic perspective.

This does not mean don’t follow up absences with parents or carers. It is very important to do so. The research to hand all comments on Indigenous parents’/carers’ wishes to know if there are problems with attendance. The huge rate of unexplained absences for Indigenous students in data collected from one jurisdiction (about two-thirds compared to the non-Indigenous rate of about one-third) leads Bourke et al. to conjecture that school personnel may either be reluctant to follow up the absences of Indigenous students, or to have simply given up on them. The survey of students conducted for the DEST study suggested that ‘attendance levels were significantly higher among students when teachers got in touch with their parents to talk about how they were going at school’ (op. cit.: 26).

One practical tip is to reiterate the value school personnel have found in presenting information in visual form when talking with parents/carers. Material on the *What Works* website is provided for this purpose. (Go to www.whatworks.edu.au/3_3_5_2_3.htm)



Focusing on the bigger picture

On the basis of his analysis of the interaction between attendance and a wide range of variables, Barnes concludes that improvement in attendance *by itself* will not necessarily yield an improvement in academic achievement. It might be likened to the process of getting a car repaired. Even if it is a necessary first step, just taking the car to the repair shop will not get the job done. There are other matters which must be attended to as well.

The analysis from *What Works* of how educational outcomes might be improved for Indigenous students rests on three ideas — and we do have this right. As expressed in *The Guidebook*, if Indigenous students are going to succeed at school, the minimum requirements are:

- skills which are fundamental to succeeding. In Australian schools these include literacy in standard Australian English, and numeracy,
- consistent attendance, which is frequently based on the sense of security, comfort and confidence they have in school environments,
- consistent engagement, which is frequently based on realistic and meaningful challenge and a sense of capacity to rise to that challenge. This also means completion of required work.

The three central avenues for action by schools which generate success are:

- cultural recognition, acknowledgment and support,
- the development of requisite skills, and
- building adequate levels of participation.

But we provide this strong caveat — These three factors are not separable for two reasons.

- First, *success is genuinely derived from a partnership of the parties to the educational process — student, family, community, institution.* Cultural support, recognition and acknowledgment can only be achieved by active and effective relationships between Indigenous communities and those who work in schools. Both parties have a role to play. The development of requisite skills will evolve from teachers' high expectations of students and the skill and, especially, the sensitivity with which they approach their work. Support, even in limited forms from home, will aid this process.

Adequate levels of participation will only be achieved by active encouragement from home and the provision of a welcoming and accepting climate in the institution.

- Second, *holistic approaches are essential.* The absence of any of these three components will seriously impair the likelihood of progress. For example, it will be fruitless to have an excellent literacy programme if students are not attending school. Equally, if students are attending, quality programmes are required for progress to be achieved.

After describing a number of successful strategies operating in schools, the DEST study identifies principles which are common to them all (op. cit.: 48–49). One way of reading this list is as the description of a comprehensive improvement effort. They have been re-ordered here to fit under the trio of *What Works* headings.

Cultural recognition, acknowledgment and support

- Involvement of Indigenous teaching personnel, parents and community members in all aspects of the schooling process.
- Collaborative planning and choice of appropriate teaching material which helps to ensure that learning activities are relevant to students' experiences and to their current needs and interests, providing meaning and purpose to what they are learning.
- The provision of professional development training for staff concerning Indigenous culture and lifestyle.
- Respect for Aboriginal languages.
- Recognition of Indigenous patterns of discourse.

Skill development

- Recognition of the benefits of an explicit teaching/learning approach and early intervention strategies to ensure the adequate acquisition of literacy skills in the early years of schooling.
- Recognition of the fact that standard Australian English is not the first language/dialect of some Indigenous students.
- Recognition of the importance of focusing on the learning needs of the individual student.
- Use of computers which allows students to feel in control of their learning situation by working at their own pace and level.

Participation

- Provision of a safe, secure school environment, characterised by good teacher/student relationships, which is welcoming to Indigenous students and free from racism.
- Empowerment of students by allowing them to be involved in making real decisions with respect to the learning process through planning of the learning context in collaboration with teaching staff.

The factor noted in the study which is, to this point, absent from the list above is this. 'A whole-school approach based on a commitment to providing successful learning experiences and outcomes for all students.' To pursue this course of action you need to think about more than attendance. The *What Works* materials are designed to help you do exactly that.

However, the rest of the paper is designed to take a slightly different tack to the consideration of engagement: meaning 'attendance' in the sense of being physically present at school; meaning 'participation' in the sense of consistently taking an active part in school activities and in out of the classroom; and, crucially, meaning 'belonging' in the sense of feeling comfortable and secure as part of larger group and being part of an enterprise which has some personal meaning and value.

After analysing the results of a survey questionnaire, the DEST study found that higher attendance was more likely among Indigenous students who:

- were more likely to think that significant others, especially parents and teachers, strongly wanted them to attend,
- believed that positive consequences flowed from them attending school, especially that they would succeed in their school subjects and get a better job,
- reported that their teachers were prone to keep in touch with their parents, and
- claimed that their attendance at school was more rarely affected by them providing help for their families and through their involvement in Indigenous cultural business (op. cit., 2000: 16).

That all makes good sense.

What would get *you* to school and keep *you* actively engaged?

You are invited to think about this question, with some prompts, and to apply your answers directly to thinking about how the engagement of Indigenous young people in schooling might be improved.

Going to school is something I enjoy. I have friends there. I enjoy the activities.

Is being at school stimulating and fun? Is there a mix of activities at least some of which I really look forward to? (How often do we check our teaching programmes from that point of view?)

Have I got friends at school who I look forward to seeing every day and who I can share things with? Am I comfortable with other students? Do I get treated as somehow 'different'? Do they sometimes pick on me and hassle me for no apparent reason? Do I get included as a matter of course in games and social activities? Or is it a struggle? Is there someone at school who knows about us Indigenous kids? Have I got teachers or other adults at school who I feel understand me and who I can talk to? Have my mum and dad got someone at school who they feel they can talk to if they're worried about something, or if they just want to talk?

Do I learn anything at school that seems to be about me and my life, that I can make an immediate connection with, about which I sometimes feel I can be expert? (How often do we check our teaching programmes from that point of view?)

Going to school is something I find value in. I feel confident and successful at school. It will be important for my future.

How do I know school education is something of value to me? How can that be established when it is not something I think automatically? (How much attention do we pay to that? What do we do, what can we do, to establish that?)

Do I have success with my school work most days? Do I know what that sort of 'success' means? Has it been defined for me in terms I understand? Am I acknowledged by the teacher? Do I think the teacher is interested in my particular needs? Do I think it's genuine success, the same as applies to other kids, or is it something lesser? (Are we ensuring that our Indigenous students have access to the more challenging aspects of the curriculum?)

When I think ahead, it's the weekend I think about. That seems far enough. Has anyone talked to me about the future when I grow up, the sorts of things I might like to do and education's role in that process? Do I know what it will take for me to get where I want to go? Has it been laid out for me in steps that I think I can achieve if I try my hardest? Do I know any Indigenous kids who have finished Year 12? (Have we helped our students make contact with positive successful role models who will help develop positive, confident ideas about future possibilities?)

One school we know uses this slogan as its constant point of reference for its students: *'Don't be afraid. Choose for the future. Keep on learning.'*

Going to school is the conventional way to behave. It's what my friends do. There is nothing stopping my involvement.

Is it the conventional thing for me to do, the normal way to behave? Do I understand that going to school is a required part of growing up? (If not, how can we foster that idea? What meaningful justifications of that point of view do we provide? How can we make those justifications more effective?)

Is it what my friends do? (The power of peer influence is well-attested. Alongside thinking about and working with individual students, should we think about working on whole groups of students? What can we make of peer mentoring processes? Should mentors chosen always be successful students in mainstream terms? Could we, should we, take more risks in thinking about ways of engaging peer influence for the benefit of the larger group?)

What might stop my involvement? At the simplest level, transport. Can I get to school reasonably readily? (Is there something that we might do to make this easier?) Health: how well am I? (Do *we* know?) Are my hearing and vision up to scratch? Have I had bouts of *otitis media* that have left me with permanent levels of impaired hearing and therefore impaired learning? (How can we help with that?) Do I have to look after the other kids, or even my mum and dad? Am I going to get in trouble because I haven't got a proper uniform? Can I concentrate? Am I hungry? Am I worried about things at home? Am I in trouble with the police? (Have we got productive relationships with other agencies that have similar concerns?)

Individual case management is one solution we have encountered which works consistently. This process includes home visits and other forms of community liaison; an emphasis on personal contact with consistent follow-up where absence occurred; personal planning and goal-setting; some work-related studies and experiences; intensive support with academic work; linkages (actual and/or electronic) with other Indigenous students in similar situations; and counselling and mediation where problems were occurring. The underlying theory relates to developing and supporting student motivation and developing in students a sense of what may be possible.

But as noted in *The Guidebook*, 'It is clear that schools must get direction and help on these issues from members of Indigenous communities and from the influence of encouragement and support coming from those communities operating as a whole.'

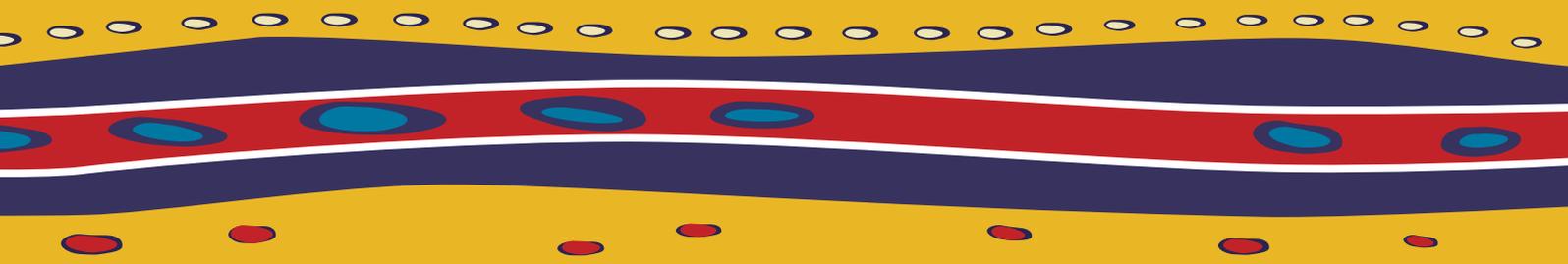
[Indigenous students] can find school, with all its concerns about regulation, order, uniforms and timekeeping to be an irrelevant and unwelcome additional strain. On the other hand, if it reaches out to accommodate them, it can be one welcome place of security in their lives (Groome & Hamilton, 1995: 25).

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What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students



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Disclaimer

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The project's website is at:
www.whatworks.edu.au

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