



# What Works. The Work Program: CORE ISSUES 2

*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.

## Reducing suspensions

Reducing suspensions explores positive alternatives to suspension and an indication of some of the ways they can be implemented in schools to achieve improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

*'The suspension of students is a very important issue for Aboriginal communities.'*

(NSW Review of Aboriginal Education, 2004: 126)

Suspension is an indication that something has gone grievously wrong. It is a process of exclusion directly at odds with the philosophy of inclusion which appears consistently in national and Departmental statements of policy and intent.

Generally it has two purposes. One is to remove threats to the safety and well-being of the school community. The other is to punish the offender, commonly in the hope of remediation and more consistently acceptable behaviour.

As the table on the following page indicates, Indigenous students are massively over-represented in suspension data from all states and territories in Australia. The total number of school days lost to suspension each year is high and current predictions suggest that it will continue to rise.

### Number of suspensions annually per 1000 students: Years 7 to 10

	Short suspensions	Long suspensions
Aboriginal female	251	37
Aboriginal male	629	168
Non-Aboriginal female	62	11
Non-Aboriginal male	188	43

(Source: NSW Review of Aboriginal Education, 2004: 126)

This situation needs to be interrogated. Are figures like these acceptable? Do they reflect a broader failure in relationships? Can that level of suspension, in this case more than 60% of all adolescent Aboriginal boys, be justified? Does suspension change and improve behaviour? From a longer term perspective, does it have *any* value?

Respondents to this recent review made their views clear.

... [C]ommunities argued that many students regarded suspension as a reward rather than as a punishment because they didn't have to come to school. Families also felt that some high schools treated suspension as the easy way to get rid of a difficult or disruptive student rather than trying to understand why the student was behaving unacceptably and help them to improve. There was concern that suspended students were at increased risk of conflict with the police and the legal system. Communities pointed out the anomaly between expecting compulsory attendance and the use of suspension for unruly students as the young people most frequently suspended were the ones most in need of help. There was a sense that students were reinforced in the feeling that their school did not want or care about them.

(Source: NSW Review of Aboriginal Education, 2004: 126)

Can this situation be improved? What are the alternatives? Will they work?

## Suspension: for and against

The best possible circumstances and conditions within a school setting are those in which staff and students are able to engage fully and without disturbance in the processes of teaching and learning.

Conduct, discipline or behaviour codes normally embody the belief that it is the right of students and staff to be treated fairly and with dignity in an environment free from disruption, intimidation, harassment and discrimination.

In cases where behaviour reaches unacceptable levels, and where it appears to be in the best interests of the school community and/or the student involved, for the student to be removed from the school for a period of time, the option is available to the principal of the school to suspend the student.

The arguments commonly advanced for this course of action are as follows.

- Suspension of students for certain types of behaviour is mandated by Departmental policy, and so implementing suspension is a matter of following directions from elsewhere.
- Teachers, students and parents/caregivers feel secure knowing that they are protected by a sanction that will be applied to any student who threatens their well-being or their education.
- Teachers get a break from high-maintenance students when those students are suspended.
- Suspension sends a strong signal to parents and the school community that specifically defined inappropriate behaviours will receive the sanction of suspension.
- A zero-tolerance policy has an immediate and positive impact on students' behaviour.

On the other hand, relevant research is near unanimous in suggesting that, despite its frequent use, suspension is not an effective means of either reducing the incidence or changing the behavioural problems it is intended address. The research findings are not dissimilar to the views expressed by respondents to the NSW Review of Aboriginal Education and recorded above. What does it tell us?

- Suspension is used disproportionately with students who are: male, from low socio-economic status families, of a minority ethnic or racial background, and who are identified as having a disability or low academic competence.
- Suspension can be counterproductive in building and maintaining positive relations with students and their parents/carers. If suspensions are not both fair, and seen to be fair, consequences of school policy, then the situation will be worse.
- In some communities, suspensions and expulsions typically result in extremely needy (academically, socially, and emotionally) students being unsupervised for anywhere from a few days to an entire school year. Rather than having their needs met by caring adults who are committed to educating all youth, these young people get to sleep in, watch television, and wander about the community with peers who are in similar situations. For some, this situation becomes permanent and they drop out of school completely.
- Far more disturbing is the fact that depriving at-risk children of what they need most, an education in a caring environment, has somehow come to be construed as an acceptable consequence. Most significantly, students lose face-to-face teaching and learning time as well as opportunity to engage in socially appropriate behaviour when on suspension.
- The benefit derived from a zero-tolerance policy is offset and outweighed by the serious negative short-term consequences for the excluded pupils and their families, and longer-term consequences for the communities in which they live.

There is a case to be made for suspending students who threaten the educational opportunity, or the safety and wellbeing of others. Even principals who recognise the weakness of this option will and must use it in those circumstances where it is unavoidable. However, in many other instances, alternatives to suspension are a means of achieving better, far more positive, outcomes.

## Building the foundations

What are the optimum conditions found in schools that successfully employ alternatives to suspension? How do you reduce the need to deal with the issue? If we can create a culture and a climate where kids feel respected and safe and secure then we can get to the nuts and bolts of effectively teaching kids who cause us problems.

A synthesis of research regarding the effectiveness or otherwise of suspension as a disciplinary tool concludes that although the suspension rate is related to inappropriate and challenging student behaviour, it is more strongly affected by school factors. School characteristics, such as the principal's and executive's attitude to discipline, are more important than demographic or student background data in predicting a school's use of suspension as a disciplinary approach.

*A student's chances of being suspended from school are most affected by teachers' beliefs and perceptions, by the school's administrative structure in handling student discipline, and by the presence of institutional biases (racial, socio-economic and academic).*

First, what conditions are most likely to generate problems?

It has been consistently confirmed that the attitudes and behaviour of the staff contribute significantly to the effectiveness of the school discipline policy. Some of the issues that need to be addressed by the principal and executive in order to achieve the most productive environment for alternative responses to inappropriate behaviours include:

- ambiguity in the construction and interpretation of school rules: so, construct them with care and spend time communicating and discussing with all partners to the process
- a lack of experience among staff in teaching expected behaviours and an unwillingness by staff to recognise their own roles in and contribution to the causes of student misbehaviour; so, effective professional learning and reinforcement of self reflection is crucial
- low teacher expectations and habitual negative judgments; so, challenge all evidence of behaviour of this type
- inappropriate staff responses and discipline strategies in classrooms and resistance to change in implementing more effective discipline strategies; so, the need is clear to establish a climate where improvement is expected and celebrated.

# What works?

In 2004, Western NSW Region schools were asked for information about their enrolments and suspensions (both short and long) in relation to Aboriginal students. Schools were also asked about student welfare strategies used to support Aboriginal students and their families, including those used in resolution procedures.

Schools that had relatively lower suspension rates for all students, Aboriginal students and a higher level of resolution of suspensions exhibited one or more of the following characteristics.

- Clear and consistent procedures, including follow-up procedures, for dealing with poor/unacceptable student behaviour
- Regular contact with parents, before, during and after concerns arose
- Documented procedures for the involvement of other relevant agencies, e.g. the Department of Community Services
- Use of Regional staff, including Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers and Aboriginal Education Consultants to work with families to help resolve issues
- Staff being provided with relevant and appropriate training as part of school planned approach e.g. in several high schools have trained a significant number of staff in Mind Matters
- Students being encouraged to develop personal goals and targets (including behavioural targets)
- Systems established (and used consistently) for monitoring students at risk
- Strong Learning Support Teams that examine attendance and suspension data as part of their procedures to support individual students
- Teacher conferences regarding at risk students to help analyse events which led to a suspension
- The implementation of social skills programs e.g. anti-social behaviour program
- The use of team teaching as a strategy to build student and staff confidence
- The use of an in-school time out space
- Regular review of school procedures.

(Taken from the *Aboriginal Education Portfolio Western NSW Region Suspension Evaluation Report, 2004*)

Following directly from those solutions, research suggests the following school characteristics are closely related to the successful reduction of suspension rates.

## A strong and flexible leadership team

Programs are only as strong as the people leading them. Leadership is the key factor in the successful implementation of all of the strategies used as alternatives to suspension.

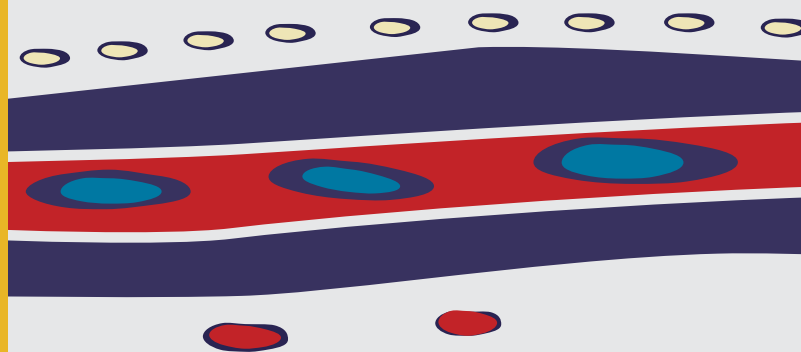
The principal and the executive team who demonstrate organisation, energy, flexibility and a determination to succeed *will* achieve success in the sphere of behaviour change.

Strong and flexible leadership is expressed in a determination to:

- understand the circumstances that lead to inappropriate behaviours, and
- achieve the goal of keeping the students in the learning environment.

At the same time it is necessary to balance those goals with the imperatives of working within policy guidelines and maintaining staff morale and enthusiasm. This requires both good judgment and strength to pursue effective courses of action.

To do this successfully, however, a principal needs support from everyone concerned with the outcome. By selecting strong and motivated teachers to lead these strategies, principals and schools are well on their way to success. Principals who are effective leaders work closely with their teachers to define what are the most appropriate referrals to the office, and which should be handled at the classroom level. Effective principals are flexible in their approach and find creative and positive ways to develop and use the disciplinary code.



## **Strong and effective relationships**

There is universal agreement that the most important element of success in improving both academic and social outcomes for Indigenous students is the strength and effectiveness of the relations between the groups of people who have the school as a meeting place for a large part of their lives.

Principals need strong and effective relations with their staff, with their students, with their students' parents and carers, and with their communities.

And every one of those groups needs positive interaction with every other group if they are to succeed in their educational goals.

These strong and effective relationships are achieved by:

- identifying and mobilising key partners in the school community including staff and pupils, parents, local agencies, and community organisations, and ensuring effective communication systems within and between these groups
- acknowledging the ownership, the commitment and the responsibility of each group for the success of the whole; and working with these groups, in partnership, to achieve a joint understanding of local school-related problems
- developing, in partnership, local action plans to address problems, and setting and actively pursuing goals for future successes, and working together to evaluate and to revise projects, policies, and procedures.

Paramount in this instance is the importance of promoting a common understanding among staff, students, parents, and administrators of how discipline works at their school. Schools where strong relationships exist between all groups affected by suspensions can modify the traditional notions of out-of-school suspension and expulsion so as to send a strong disciplinary message to students without reducing (and even in some cases increasing) their time spent in school. Consistency of approach is vital.

## **High expectations of achievement in academic and social outcomes**

A school with flexible and effective leadership and with strong relationships between all the groups involved in education will also be a school with pride in its students and in their achievements.

There is ample evidence to support the claim that it is the school atmosphere and ethos together with support from community, parents and teachers that underpins high academic and social achievement by Indigenous students.

The commonplace saying that 'What you focus on is what you get' is nowhere more apparent than in the outcomes achieved by Indigenous students. They live up to their teachers' expectations. When those expectations are sufficiently high to stretch them, when the relations between teachers and students and parents is positive, Indigenous students achieve at levels comparable to any other group of students in Australia.

In terms of social outcomes, the same argument applies. When school staff focus on positive outcomes, Indigenous students generally respond with an equally positive response.

A strong and effective leadership team, good relationships between all the groups involved in the educational process, and high expectations of achievement in academic and social outcomes, result in a safe and productive school environment. Alternatives to suspension play their part in contributing to the creation of this environment.

Let's have a look at those alternatives.

## Alternatives to suspension

Alternative actions to suspension do work, particularly those that are implemented before the point of suspension is reached. They are practicable in all schools, suitably modified to take account of context and circumstances.

But now is the time to flag that there are obstacles to success. It is essential that alternatives to suspension:

- are designed to fit local circumstances
- have the support of staff, students and parents/carers, and
- be given adequate opportunity to succeed.

It takes time to consult, to co-operate and to reach an agreement to support an effective discipline policy.

It takes energy and commitment to implement such a policy, particularly when it means additional time spent in thought and action.

It needs ongoing engagement between the principal, the staff and the parents and carers to embed and ensure sustainability of the discipline policy. Good program implementation cannot be rushed or hurried.

A further challenge is the expectation that a discipline policy will reduce or eliminate all risk. It won't.

### A list of suggested alternatives

The richest area of opportunity to help students change behaviour and make profitable use of their time in school is in the time before inappropriate behaviours occur.

The key element of alternatives to suspension design is co-operation between the designers, (the classroom teacher, the monitor of the alternative program), the student (the implementer) and the parents/carers (the supporters).

A range of alternatives to suspension is available, and can be modified to suit the context and circumstances of a particular school.

- **Problem solving/contracting.** Negotiation and problem-solving approaches can be used to assist students in identifying alternative behaviour choices. The next step should involve developing a contract that reminds the student to engage in a problem-solving process, and which includes reinforcers for success and consequences for continuing problem behaviours.
- **Restitution.** In-kind restitution (rather than financial restitution, the burden of which often falls on the parents) permits the student to help to restore or improve the school environment either by directly addressing the problems caused by the student's behaviour (e.g., in cases of vandalism students can work to repair things they damaged), or by having the student improve the school environment more broadly (e.g., picking up garbage).
- **Removal of privileges.** It can be appropriate to deny access to 'fun' activities, such as certain excursions, provided these are not an integral part of the curriculum. Sometimes this approach is used in connection with restitution.
- **Reflection and decision-making opportunities.** Provide short- or longer-term changes in the student's environment that gives him or her an opportunity to think through circumstances and behaviours and design behaviour modifications. This program should be tailored to student needs, and focus on student-chosen and -designed alternative behaviours. Examples of this currently operating in schools are explained in their program titles, e.g. 'The Transition Room', 'The Positive Thinking Room'.
- **Parent involvement/supervision.** Parents should be invited to think about and discuss ways in which they can provide closer supervision and be more involved in their child's schooling. Better communication and more frequent contacts between teachers and parents, as well as coordinated behaviour-change approaches, are the most powerful tools in behaviour change and can be incorporated into the school's discipline and welfare policies.

- **Community service.** A response to inappropriate behaviour developed with the local community that requires the student to spend a fixed amount of time in supervised community service outside of school hours.
- **Behaviour monitoring by student and support by classroom teachers.** Student and teacher jointly monitoring behaviour and academic progress (e.g., self-tracking of behaviours by student together with teacher-feedback sessions) can lead to stronger student/teacher relationships.
- **Coordinated behaviour plans.** This entails the creation and implementation of a structured, coordinated behaviour support plan specific to the student and based on a jointly-developed (ideally student/parent-carer/teacher developed) set of goals and targets. The plan will focus on increasing jointly acknowledged desirable behaviour, and replacing jointly understood inappropriate behaviours.

### If a suspension is necessitated...

There are times when suspension is a mandatory response to particular behaviours. Principals have available to them a flexibility within the bounds of suspension policy that can be used to effect some positive outcome from suspensions.

Principals of schools with the lowest suspension rates frequently view district policy as a guide rather than a rigid document when using alternative strategies to suspension.

The possibility of a **negotiated early return** from suspension should be explored. This offers the opportunity to build better relations between teacher, student, parents/carers, and the school. An interview with the student's parent/caregiver to design a re-entry program is a chance to establish a common goal for all involved. It is a chance to begin, or to reinforce, the relationship between those who care for the student, those who are responsible for his or her education, and the student.

By using the framework of the re-entry program creatively, principals of schools with low suspension rates minimise the antagonism and ill-feeling caused by the suspension per se. By working with the family members and the student, teachers can use suspensions positively to achieve a jointly-supported pathway to behaviour change that is more likely to last.

## Finally...

- Does your school have clear, written behavioural expectations for students, known and accepted by all groups?
- Does your school have a set of strategies to teach behavioural expectations to all students?
- Does your school have a set of strategies for keeping students involved and engaged with education?
- Does your school have clear lines of communication with all the groups involved in the educational process and its outcomes?
- Does your school have a consultative process for engaging all groups in the development, ownership and commitment to policies and procedures? Do your students feel they are getting a fair go? Do their parents/carers feel they are getting a fair go?
- Do your executive, staff, students and parents have high expectations for student academic and social achievement?

## Reference

NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc and NSW Department of Education and Training (2004) *The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education — Yanigurra Muya: Gangurrinyma Yaarri Guurulaw Yirringin gurray [Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future]* Sydney: author.

# What Works. The Work Program

The What Works materials are based on a three part analysis of the way teachers and schools generally work to improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

- Building awareness
- Forming partnerships
- Working systematically

The website ([www.whatworks.edu.au](http://www.whatworks.edu.au)) provides resources to support all of these.

The **Workbook** is the central support for targeted, systematic action.

The '**School and Community: Working Together**' series supports the development of partnerships between schools and their Indigenous communities.

The '**Core Issues**' series, includes

- **Core Issues 1: Setting Up For Success** suggests ways in which schools might best be set up to maximise success for Indigenous students.
- **Core Issues 2: Reducing Suspensions** explores positive alternatives to suspension and ways they can be implemented in schools.
- **Core Issues 3: Literacy** explores questions about what it means to develop genuinely effective literacy.
- **Core Issues 4: Numeracy** tackles important questions about the meaning and importance of numeracy.
- **Core Issues 5: Student Engagement** discusses attendance, participation and belonging.
- **Core Issues 6: Boarding** looks at current practice in this small but growing area of Indigenous education.
- **Core Issues 7: International Perspectives** is a report of the DEST/OECD seminar held in Cairns in May 2007.
- **Core Issues 8: Education and student health: the big picture** looks at some of the health issues affecting Indigenous students and the part schools and teachers can play in dealing with them.

All these and other print materials are available for download through the 'Publications' link on the website, where you can also sign up for **What Works eNews**, to keep in touch with the What Works project.

Experienced What Works consultants are available free of charge to work with schools on the materials.



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