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.

Using data to close the gap

This core issues paper is about using evidence to assist in making decisions designed to close the gap in Indigenous student outcomes.

Schools are more and more involved in conversations based around data. Two constant themes running through these conversations are improvement and accountability. How can schools best allocate the resources they control to achieve improved Indigenous student outcomes? Answering this question requires the capacity to interpret and act on evidence about what works. The paper is designed to help build school capacity to take action informed by evidence.
Case study: Reaver’s Point Remote Community School

Reaver’s Point Remote Community School is situated on a narrow strip of land flanked on three sides by the ocean. The school serves an Aboriginal community of around 500 people located approximately 220 km north of the nearest regional town. 91% of its 125 K–Year 12 students are Indigenous and the student attendance rate is just over 80%. The school has ten teachers, a principal, a deputy principal and eight Indigenous teacher assistants. Half of the teachers are very experienced whilst others are relatively new to teaching. The MySchool website identifies the school as very remote with an ICSEA value of 560 compared with the national average of 1000.

The principal Brad Andrews had been at the school for four years. For the past three he has really focused on closing the gap between the school’s National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results and those for the state. He felt reassured by the latest NAPLAN data that revealed a three-year trend showing the gap was getting smaller. This evidence confirmed that changes to how the school operated and to teaching practice had worked.

Reaver’s Point is now a different school to what it was four years earlier, and while celebrating the results with the whole school community Brad publicly acknowledged that there was still more to do.

Action informed by evidence

Taking action to close the gap in Indigenous student outcomes is at the core of What Works support and materials – they are designed to help people in schools take systematic action to improve Indigenous students outcomes. This issues paper builds on previous What Works materials by illustrating how schools can use data to improve their practices and Indigenous students outcomes.

The paper extends the What Works Core Issues 1: Setting Up For Success principle of ‘action informed by learning’ to ‘action informed by evidence’. We learn from data and base decisions and actions on what the evidence says about the gap, and where and how the gap will be closed. This core issues paper is available at:

www.whatworks.edu.au > Publications > Core Issues

The Workbook contains a series of tools and ideas designed to assist development of school action plans to improve Indigenous students outcomes. Section 3 contains useful information on data (titled ‘Some ideas about data’) that complement this issues paper. The Workbook is available at:

www.whatworks.edu.au > Publications > The Workbook
Building school capacity to use data effectively

High levels of data literacy and school capacity to use data effectively are indicated when:

1. A clear **schoolwide plan** guides the development of a culture of data use.
2. There is an understanding of a school’s **current performance patterns**. This requires capacity in the form of knowledge of different types of data, the selection of appropriate data and the ability to make connections among different data.
3. There is a clear sense of school **purpose or direction** informed by the use of evidence. A school needs the capacity to use data to establish goals and measurable targets that everyone in a school is committed to achieving and that raise expectations for Indigenous student outcomes.
4. Data are continually used to **identify gaps** in curriculum, teaching and learning.
5. There is strong connection between the analysis of assessment data and changes to **teaching practice**.
6. There are well designed and resourced **structures and processes** that support teachers in the collaborative use of data to inform practice.
7. **People** in the school are confident and motivated in using data for improvement. This includes school leaders, teachers, support workers and community. Students also play an important role in using data to set goals and monitor their learning.

The following sections explore each of these elements in more detail. The descriptions might be used to gauge a school’s existing capacity to effectively use data and design strategies to build that capacity.

A strong culture of data use

A 2009 Institute of Education Sciences review of research on using data to make decisions about teaching practice recommended that schools ‘establish a strong culture of data use to ensure that data-based decisions are made frequently, consistently, and appropriately. This data culture should emphasize collaboration across and within grade levels and subject areas to diagnose problems and refine educational practices.’ It also recommended that ‘a clear plan for schoolwide data use is essential to developing such a culture.’ A schoolwide data use plan might contain:

- clear descriptions of the purpose, activities, roles, and responsibilities involved in data use;
- clear protocols for the use and discussion of data;
- use of a schoolwide data team that sets the tone for ongoing data use; and
- responsibility for ongoing data leadership.

Understanding existing school performance

A strong culture of data use means that people frequently engage in conversations about how well the school is doing. This requires knowledge of what data and related performance indicators measure, the patterns they reveal and their uses and limitations. **Performance indicators** are measures of performance where the indicator refers to an instrument that assesses and reports student learning outcomes.

Performance indicators can be used for various purposes, including benchmarking. A **benchmark** can be a standard or a point of reference against which a school’s performance on student learning outcome indicators might be compared. For example, the National Minimum Standard (NMS) set at NAPLAN Band 6 for Year 9 is of one type of benchmark; in this case it is the minimum level of learning that students might be expected to demonstrate in Year 9. Schools can also benchmark their performance against national, state or like school performance using the same indicators.

Performance indicators can also be used to establish a baseline from which progress can be measured. As *The Workbook* suggests, ‘Baseline data are a measure of where you are before you take action. Whatever performance indicator you choose, it is vital to know how students are going according to that indicator at

### Commonly used NAPLAN performance indicators

**The mean scale score indicator** for each NAPLAN domain represents the average of all student scores for a cohort as measured on the national achievement scale that ranges from 0 to 1000.

**The percentage of students in NAPLAN Bands** indicator shows the proportion of students in each of the six NAPLAN Bands appropriate to the year level assessed.

**The percentage of students at or above the National Minimum Standard (NMS)** shows the proportion of students in the top five NAPLAN Bands appropriate to the year level assessed (Each year level is assessed across six Bands – the second lowest Band is the NMS for each year level and the lowest Band is below the NMS).
**Using NAPLAN data at Reaver’s Point**

The Reaver’s Point principal was able to reflect on how the school was performing and the extent of the gap in Indigenous student outcomes by looking at NAPLAN data from two years earlier. His reflections had formed one source of information that guided what he did next. He decided that the NAPLAN data at that time would provide the basis for conversations with staff and the community.

Brad Andrews had recognised that while the amount and type of data available to the school initially appeared to be overwhelming, he needed to focus on what mattered. His guiding question in deciding what data to look at had been ‘What do I want to achieve by using data?’. Having a clear purpose had assisted in narrowing the focus on what data to use. He was able to be selective, providing sufficient information for the purpose but not overwhelming people with too much.

Using the NAPLAN mean scale scores and the percentage of students in NAPLAN Bands performance indicators the principal developed an overview of how the school was performing. He benchmarked the school against the National Minimum Standards and the state, national and similar schools performance on the same indicators to reveal the gaps. He identified trends and value-added measures that conveyed positive messages about progress being made by the school’s students. He used this overview to make it easier for others to see the patterns in the data. Brad’s focus on growth demonstrated through evidence that teachers, workers and community had already made a considerable difference and this was cause for celebration.

Figure 1 demonstrates part of what the principal prepared. It depicts the change in the NAPLAN mean score for Writing as the Year 5 cohort progressed through to Year 7 two years later, a measure of value added. It revealed that the school’s mean increased by 33% compared with the state and national means – the latter two having increased by 13% and 10% respectively.

**FIGURE 1: CHANGE IN NAPLAN MEAN WRITING SCORE FROM YEAR 5 IN 2008 TO YEAR 7 IN 2010 AT REAVER’S POINT**
A clear sense of purpose or direction – high expectations and the use of data

A school needs the capacity to translate current performance levels into clear directions. It needs to identify from the data the school’s strengths, gaps and where improvements need to occur. It also requires the ability to establish goals and targets that raise expectations for Indigenous student outcomes. While it might not seem as obvious, part of the capacity to use data is the collective belief among teachers and others in a school that the gap can be closed, that all students can achieve high levels of learning regardless of their backgrounds and starting points. It is acknowledged that while a range of factors such as socioeconomic status, language background, attendance and learning ability can affect the rate at which students learn, they are not justifications for students failing to learn.

The What Works central belief about learning is clear: that the gap can be closed. The What Works position is in complete agreement with the Stronger Smarter Institute’s commitment to ‘changing the tide of low expectations in Indigenous Education across Australia’.

Goals and targets developed from the data play a role in raising expectations. School targets that make it clear what the gap to be closed looks like can be a powerful use of data. Schools with high levels of belief and commitment to what is to be achieved expressed through targets have a greater capacity to improve outcomes than those without.

The Workbook describes a target as a specific ‘what by when’ statement of how you will measure achievement of a goal. In Section 3 of the workbook ‘Goals and targets’ a process for establishing targets is illustrated.
Setting of targets at Reaver’s Point

Using protocols to structure conversations, Brad Andrews engaged teachers and the community in constructive discussion about what they saw in the data overview. His focus questions were ‘What have we achieved?’, ‘Are we satisfied with these outcomes?’ and ‘Can we do better?’. In effect, he was beginning a discussion around raising expectations. He hoped this would translate into high expectations for behaviour and action as well as outcomes.

Brad set about establishing a general schoolwide target based on closing the gap within five years. He wanted the target to be manageable but to convey high expectations. The general target that he developed with the school community was: to increase the percentage of students at or above the National Minimum Standard to 90% in three years. This target would be applied to all NAPLAN domains and year levels. The baseline for the school ranged between 67% and 80% depending upon the year level and NAPLAN dimension being examined.

Using data to identify gaps in curriculum

Each State and Territory provides a service to analyse NAPLAN data at the school level. Each of these data systems enables a school to undertake item level analysis by various student groupings, including Indigenous students. An item analysis report provides information about each item in the NAPLAN tests, including the percentage of correct responses for each item at the national, state and school levels. It contains a description of the skill assessed for each item, and for multiple choice items, the percentage of students who chose each alternative.

Schools can use item level data to identify particular skills or aspects of the curriculum that might need attention. Some questions that might guide diagnosis include:

- What are the differences or patterns in correct and incorrect responses between student groupings?
- For which particular items do the different patterns occur?
- What are the skills being assessed by each of the items highlighted in the patterns?
- What conclusions might we make from these patterns?
- Do the data correspond with what we know about the students and our own school level assessments?
- What are the problem areas that we need to focus on for teaching?

NAPLAN item level analysis at Reaver’s Point

The Reaver’s Point principal completed a NAPLAN item level analysis for the school by various student groupings.

A review of the item analysis data for the school’s Year 9 Reading revealed that while many results for this whole cohort were similar to those of the state and the nation, there were some items for which the percentage of correct responses was comparatively low. Further investigation showed that many of these items were inference type questions. To help identify why students were not getting these questions correct, they looked at actual questions and the most common incorrect responses to them. Teachers decided that activities based on inferring meaning were required to help these students with deeper understanding of texts.

A review of Year 5 Numeracy item responses identified that the skills associated with questions receiving high rates of incorrect responses related to estimation or measurement of area, perimeter and capacity respectively. This information was used to develop strategies and activities for the teaching of Measurement.
Strong diagnostic connections between assessment data and teaching practice

Performance indicators tell us where we are and help us decide where we want to go, but not how we will close the gap. To answer this question a school requires data about Indigenous student outcomes, particularly data that provide more detailed assessment of learning at the classroom and student level. A school also needs to be able to use that data to change teaching practice.

A strong connection between assessment data and teaching practice is a sign of good teaching and capacity. The use of student learning assessment data assumes some broad principles or elements of good evidence-based teaching exists in a school. These elements are involved in the concepts of zone of proximal development and scaffolding – well known to teachers. They include:

- a detailed map of curriculum described in terms of a developmental learning continuum with clear description of learning objectives and indicators of student progress;
- the use of accurate assessment data to know where each student is on the developmental continuum – this identifies the point of instruction where a teacher can support and guide a student’s learning; and
- knowledge of the appropriate teaching responses at the point of instruction, including when and how to use teaching strategies and matched resources, and having the classroom structures, routines, and tools to deliver differentiated instruction.

Here we are focusing upon the use of accurate assessment data to inform teaching. This whole notion could be described as assessment for teaching – the use of evidence to identify the point at which teachers intervene in the learning process to move a student along a developmental continuum (for example, the Australian Curriculum).

One limiting factor with NAPLAN is the timing between the actual assessments occurring and the reporting of results. While NAPLAN data have some important uses, the closer to the point of teaching that assessment data are generated the more useful they become diagnostically to identify appropriate evidence-based teaching actions.

Multiple sources of data should be used to identify and confirm a problem of understanding or skill that is common to many students. In this stage of the process digging more deeply into various data sources can be fruitful.

The use of data in this manner also assists in developing student personalised learning plans and differentiated approaches to teaching.

Processes

Establishing a strong connection between assessment data and teaching practice requires well designed processes. A process is a systematic set of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end. The more that processes and structures are in place to support and guide the use of data the greater the capacity for a school to make effective use of that data.

The emphasis in this paper is on using collaborative approaches. Rather than leaving the use of data to improve practice and outcomes as the responsibility of individual teachers operating independently, professional learning teams (PLTs) enable collaborative work to occur and provide a forum to discuss and challenge the evidence and the effect of practice on the data. Some considerations in designing supportive processes should include:

- How best to build levels of assessment literacy among people in the school. This means ensuring the focus of data use in PLTs is on teaching and learning.
- Enabling PLTs to meet routinely to discuss data, plan and review progress through common meeting time and other resources.
- Establishing clear roles and responsibilities for:
  - the school leadership team;
  - school leaders of literacy and numeracy learning;
  - professional learning teams (PLT), their individual members and their leaders;
  - coaches and mentors;
  - the classroom teaching role and the role of support workers in the classroom;
  - students; and
  - community.
- Developing some clear protocols for discussions.
- Developing guidelines and templates that produce observable action based on data – specifically identifying what will change in terms of teacher practice and student outcomes.
Making data part of an ongoing cycle of improvement

Each of these considerations can be enhanced through a systematic process for using data that brings evidence to bear on teaching decisions and to improve student learning. Such a process can be depicted as a continual cyclical process incorporating the following stages (Figure 2):

- collecting and analysing data about student learning from a variety of relevant sources;
- forming hypotheses or ‘theories of action’ based on the data;
- developing an action plan that specifically describes what will be different in terms of teacher practice and student outcomes;
- testing these hypotheses by implementing changes to teaching practice.

Collecting and interpreting new student performance data to evaluate what has or hasn’t worked restarts the cycle. Such a cyclical process forms a basis for improved student outcomes and also involves work that enhances a school’s data literacy capacity.

Developing an action plan

The Workbook contains clear guidelines for developing action plans that include goals, targets and strategies. These guidelines can be used to develop an action plan for improving Indigenous student literacy and numeracy outcomes. Once data has been analysed to identify areas of student skill or knowledge that need to be addressed action plans should contain:

- clear goals and targets for Indigenous student learning outcomes;
- strategies and actions that address or enhance the factors that affect Indigenous student outcomes – teaching practice and other factors that a school can have some influence on;
- clear role responsibilities, that is, who will do what and when;
- appropriate resource allocations; and
- collection of evidence to gauge progress in terms of the learning outcomes targets set for students and the identification of measurable milestones to assess progress in implementing the strategies and actions.
In effect, Brad Andrews had started to implement a cyclical improvement process that was based on data. However, after the first year, Brad believed there were some shortcomings in the approach that he had used. He identified some of his concerns:

- While the gap was closing, the rate was too slow.
- He wanted teachers to use assessment data that was generated closer to the point of teaching.
- Brad believed he had directed the process too much, and while he needed to monitor what was happening the teachers themselves needed to become more skilled in analysing the assessment data and discussing changes to practice.
- There was limited action planning and teachers were relied on as ‘professionals’ to make the changes individually in their own classrooms. This did not always occur, particularly for some of the more experienced teachers.
- Students themselves needed to be involved so they were clear on the type of learning and the skills they needed to develop.

Where to next?
As a result Brad redesigned some of the processes and structures to further enhance the use of data at the school:

1. He formed three PLTs covering appropriate year levels in the school.
2. He worked with the PLT leaders to develop a role description that focused on leading the PLT in the use of data, changing teacher practice based on that data, and implementing coaching and modelling.
3. He refocused the role of the school’s literacy and numeracy teachers to support the PLTs in their discussion of the data and what appropriate teaching strategies might look like.
4. He had teachers access online testing to provide additional data closer to the point of teaching. This would complement NAPLAN data and the teachers own assessments of student work against the relevant developmental continuums.
5. An action plan for each PLT was developed that contained a term-by-term structure that clearly described what teachers and students would be doing differently at the end of each term.
6. The action plan included an activity based on a four-week cycle. At the beginning, each classroom teacher identified three students from their class – each at a different level of development (high, middle, low). The teacher presented some work from these students to the PLT and identified the student’s zone of proximal development based on the work and other assessment data. They justified their observation by referring to the evidence contained in the student work. The PLT then discussed whether the evidence was sound and suggested changes in teaching practice designed to improve each student’s learning in a specific skill or knowledge area. In essence, they developed Personalised Student Learning Plans. Four weeks later the teacher presented to the PLT the outcomes of the action plan.

Using other student outcome data
Multiple sources of data should be used to confirm and complement NAPLAN. These sources might include: teacher judgments about student learning based on student work, tests, performances, running records, literacy profiles; teacher observation of students performing tasks; the use of online assessment instruments designed to identify a student’s performance level; and student assessment of their own learning and provision of feedback to the teacher. The closer to the point of teaching that assessment data is generated the better.

In addition, each State and Territory provides data measuring other student outcomes such as completion or graduation rates and retention rates. Some provide school- and system-level data that are used to measure student engagement and wellbeing outcomes. Examples of these performance indicators are contained in Section 3 of The Workbook. The cyclical process can also be applied to these student outcomes.
Using other types of data

So far the emphasis in this paper has been the use of outcomes data to gauge existing performance and to assist schools in taking action. Schools can also use information about factors that influence student outcomes, particularly those that are in the school’s sphere of influence. If we can identify specific factors influencing a student’s rate of development then we can put actions in place to improve or enhance them. A simple starting point in identifying what data might be useful is to focus on the classroom – teachers and students.

Teachers

A crucial aspect of teacher capacity is their ability to deliver effective teaching. Various initiatives are being put in place across schools to provide feedback to teachers about their practice:

- peer or collegial observation to provide supportive feedback to teachers about their practice;
- feedback from coaches; and
- feedback from students about teaching and learning.

Most schools have extensive ICT facilities and given some research on the use of ICT to engage Indigenous students, it might be useful to know teachers’ thoughts about their skills and self-efficacy in this area.

It can also be useful to know things about teachers’ capacities and motivations. With regard to teacher capacities the type of information that might be useful would be their knowledge of content and pedagogy, and culture and community along with culturally appropriate practices. Teacher attitudes to Indigenous students education can also be a factor that influences outcomes.

Generating information about teaching practice from multiple sources does need to be undertaken within protocols of what is being observed and how the information will be used.

Students

Students themselves can provide valuable data about teaching and learning. Some schools survey students to gather their opinions about engagement levels, learning confidence, motivation and how much effort they put into work. Students also provide a valuable source of information about their own learning. Many schools explicitly teach students on how to regularly use achievement data to monitor their own performance and establish their own goals for learning.

Each individual student brings with them to the classroom a range of distinctive experiences, attitudes, prior learning and developmental needs that influence their capacity to learn. Some systems and schools gather information about student perceptions of things such as their engagement levels, learning confidence, motivation and how much effort they put into work through survey instruments. The Workbook illustrates one teacher’s approach:

A Year 4 teacher felt that her Indigenous students were not engaging with the activities they were doing in class, so she set out to improve that situation. There were six Indigenous students in her class. To monitor the situation, she and an Indigenous Education Worker (IEW) devised a simple survey of students that could be administered by the IEW. It used a 1 (low) to 3 (high) scale to measure engagement in eight different aspects of a student’s day.

Some other factors that influence student learning outcomes are highlighted in a 2009 ACER report, The achievement of Australia’s Indigenous students in PISA 2000–2006. The report identified three factors that were found to significantly influence Indigenous students reading performance: home educational resources, engagement in reading and academic self-concept. Eight factors were found to significantly influence Indigenous students in Mathematics, including self-efficacy, classroom disciplinary climate and attendance. These provide some insights into other forms of data schools might explore.

The ACER report confirms one aspect of what we know: if a student is not in the classroom then they cannot learn what is intended. Therefore, a student’s pattern and rate of attendance provide vital data to inform action about each student. Schools generally have accurate student absence data and use it in various ways to decide on actions to improve attendance.

Some jurisdictions and schools also combine data from a variety of sources to identify students who are at risk of not making progress. These are developed in

Teacher ‘triads’

Part of the refinements to the use of data at Reaver’s Point was to form teacher ‘triads’. The three teachers forming the triad would identify a common pattern in student misunderstanding from assessment data. They then completed a process where they redefined this as a ‘problem of teaching practice’. They developed agreed teaching strategies to improve student learning and formulated a lesson plan. Each teacher implemented the agreed lesson and was observed by the two other teachers who provided feedback using some protocols designed for the activity.
Analysing absence data at Reaver’s Point

Reaver’s Point analyses absence data to identify students in the 70–90% attendance range. The school and its Indigenous Education Workers then work intensively with families to increase attendance.

the form of a database or spreadsheet that contains a range of data related to each individual student. Information such as absence and attendance rates, literacy and numeracy outcomes (NAPLAN and teacher assessed), suspension data, progress in senior school and other school-generated notes and comments are mapped against each other to identify students who might be at risk. These data are entered for all students and provide information that forms the basis of an Individual or Personalised Learning Plan.

References


Institute of Education Sciences (2009), Using Student Achievement Data to Support Instructional Decision Making NCEE 2009-4067, US Department of Education.

Checklist

Where is our school at? What is the current capacity of the school to use data effectively? This quick checklist will help you identify strengths and where efforts can be focused to improve the use of data. Use the scale of 1 to 5 with 5 representing strong agreement with the statement.

In our school...

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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) 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.
- **Core Issues 9: Using Data to Close the Gap** is designed to help build the capacity of schools to take action informed by evidence.

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.