What Works. The Work Program


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.

Successful PRACTICE

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

2nd edition
## Contents

### Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### School–community partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Mount Lockyer Primary School, Albany (WA) 3
- Drouin Primary School (VIC) 4

### Building relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Doomadgee State School, Lower Gulf of Carpentaria (QLD) 7
- Connecting with the individual at Kormilda College, Darwin (NT) 9

### Cultural awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Learning from each other at Yarrabah State School (QLD) 10
- Teaching and learning Torres Strait culture in Cairns (QLD) 12

### Action across a region: Loddon Mallee (VIC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Mildura Primary School (VIC) 15
- Ranfurly Primary School (VIC) 17
- Robinvale Secondary College (VIC) 18

### Real outcomes in remote areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ‘Bound for Success’ in the Torres Strait: Tagai College (QLD) 21

### Structured approaches to literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- St Joseph’s School, Wyndham (WA) 23
- Yarrabah State School (QLD) 26

### Secondary school completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Follow the Dream: An ‘aspirational’ strategy in Western Australia 28
- The Access Program at Swan View Senior High School, Perth (WA) 30
- Imagining themselves, imagining their futures 32

### The early years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Kura Yerlo Children’s Centre (SA) 33
- Queanbeyan South Public School (NSW) 35
- Condobolin Preschool Centre (NSW) 36
Introduction

The first edition of Successful practice was published in 2006, but related to work from the previous four or five years. It included mostly case study material from the What Works website and, like the case studies in general, was intended to provide a sampler, illustrating successful strategies used in a variety of settings around Australia. Those interested in getting more details could follow up by going to the website.

Our hope is that teachers don’t replicate strategies exactly, but rather use them to provide direction and even inspiration for work to improve educational outcomes for Australian Indigenous students. That improvement is the sole reason for the existence of these materials.

This second edition of Successful practice takes a similar approach to the first, providing glimpses of action drawn mostly from case studies prepared for the What Works website since 2006. We again make the point that these materials describe what was happening at a particular place, at a particular point in time. As such, they cannot be ‘up to date’ but they can provide useful ideas and strategies for others to consider.

We also make the point that the material presented here ranges from large scale action across regions to accounts of individual classrooms. Everyone can make a difference in their own setting.

Times have changed since the first edition of Successful practice. In particular, we have seen the following:

- Development of more sophisticated and comprehensive approaches to partnerships between schools and their Indigenous communities.
- Strategic planning receiving more emphasis generally and state and territory jurisdictions developing more explicit goals and targets.
- Longer-term targets expressed in terms of ‘closing the gap’.
- More encouragement for groups of schools to work together.
- The greater use of Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) for Indigenous students.
- Greater focus on data-driven approaches, and the introduction of NAPLAN testing.

This booklet illustrates how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working in schools across Australia have responded to those developments.

Their primary objective, though, has always been to see better educational outcomes for their Indigenous students. The work is not always easy, and we don’t want to give the impression that it is, but these are people who are committed to improvement and know what is achievable.

We would like to acknowledge them again for their contribution and, as previously, thank them for their generous permission to use their own voices and tell their own stories. They are real people working in real circumstances.

We invite you to share some of their experience.
School–community partnerships

You can’t have a partnership without a relationship, and you can’t have a relationship without a conversation. You’ve got to have the conversation. Everything starts here.

In recent years, formal partnership agreements between schools and their Indigenous communities have received more focus, and What Works has been involved in a number of these. You can read about some of them on following pages.

There is no one way to form an agreement, and agreements will differ from place to place. But the key thing is that local school people, students, families and communities are involved in this process.

Why are formal agreements valuable?

- They recognise that everyone involved in education has rights and that they also have responsibilities.
- They provide a shared foundation for making things better.
- They can change relationships for the better, by changing the way that schools do their business and by giving parents, families and communities a bigger stake in what happens there.
- You have a document to which you can refer to check how things are going over time.

What are good agreements like?

- They include clear objectives and actions which will lead to improved outcomes for students.
- They are very clear so that everyone involved knows what is meant. That means writing them in language that everyone can understand.
- They reflect what people have said they will, and can, do.
- They include a regular process that the school and representatives of parents and community can be involved in for checking what has happened over time.

There must be a commitment on the part of all those involved to implement the agreement. This means carrying out the required actions, and making sure the objectives of the agreement are achieved. This is more likely to happen where a wide cross-section of the community has had a chance to be involved.

Don’t rush the process. Good agreements take time. Continuing good relationships are even more important than what ends up being written on a piece of paper — and strong productive relationships take time to develop.
Mount Lockyer Primary School, Albany (WA)

‘The community has a reason for coming to the school.’

In 2008, the Mount Lockyer Primary School community completed a months-long process and signed a school-community partnership agreement. The Principal was Maxine Auguston.

I was at a real crossroads when Marisa [What Works facilitator] contacted me to see whether we’d be interested in developing a school–community partnership. We seemed to have done so much but to me it was still just still a little too shallow.

We had developed very strong relationships with some young mums and in a way that was already a partnership but it was still very school-dominated in that it was more about them doing what the school wanted them to do, rather than them having their say. So the school-community partnership became a way for the community to have a bit more control.

But the beauty of having those other programs in place was we had already done some ground work. So the school-community partnership cemented it and I suppose created a more authentic partnership.

After we finished the partnership agreement we decided that to keep it alive we needed to continue to meet and plan. So when we have a planning meeting in the first week of each term, the community is invited and we usually have about six or eight people coming in. We develop an action plan and each term we tend to look at a component of the partnership that we want to develop. That then becomes the focus across the school.

Our Noongar kids are doing better in the national testing, and we’re getting more kids over benchmarks. Our attendance is good and we seem to have the parents very much on board with that. When I did the stats at the end of last term for our last year’s attendance, we got all 85.5%. A few years ago it was only 78.5% and last year it was 81.7%. So there’s an upward trend in both achievement and attendance.

Cherylene Simpson has been involved throughout, as a teacher at the school and a Noongar community member.

When we signed off the agreement I felt really good because I think it brings the whole school together and gives parents some involvement in decision-making. Before that I don’t think they realized how much say they really did have and how much input they can have towards their kids’ education.

They also found out how to go about saying things. Sometimes our community isn’t very outspoken but with the community partnership they were able to say things and not worry about the consequences of saying it. I think they were more relaxed and they were just able to voice an opinion. They’re really clued up about what’s happening.

The agreement has made a difference to attendance, because it’s all documented and parents are more aware. We keep them informed about kids whose attendance is improving and kids who are going down, so it’s all recognized. It works because we act on it straight away. It’s important that when you bring attendance to parents’ attention you have all the documented statistics there. The school–community partnership has definitely helped with that.

Also, since the school–community partnership agreement we now have IEPs [Individual Learning Plans] for every Noongar kid in the school and those Noongar kids who need extra help are picked up in small group work in maths and literacy. That’s all mixed in with attendance though, because it’s all recorded and monitored at the same time.

The parents know what’s happening and know all the processes involved. It’s all very clear and I think that’s why the community agreement is working here.

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au > Case studies > Working with community > Mount Lockyer Primary School
Drouin Primary School (VIC)

‘We go forward now, we don’t go backwards.’ Lyn Keating

The township of Drouin is in Gunai/Kurnai country in the West Gippsland region, less than 100 kilometres from Melbourne. The population of the town is about 8000. Drouin Primary School is a Prep to Year 6 school, with an enrolment of about 200 students, 22 of whom are Indigenous.

In 2008, relationships between the school and Koorie parents and community were seen to be very negative and counterproductive for the students’ education.

Principal Lyn Keating remembers:

We just did not understand each other and there certainly was not a trusting relationship between us. I only seemed to be making contact with parents about negative things, like behaviour issues. I wanted to make things better, but I didn’t know how to do it.

[At the first meeting] I was very nervous personally and I didn’t want it to backfire. I was worried because the misunderstandings were there, and I thought both sides were guessing what the other side thought, without really knowing.

There could easily have been arguments, but the strategy of the facilitator [What Works facilitator Sandra] was to keep it positive. She asked the parents to think about what the school was doing well and they could think of a lot of things. And I was able to say, honestly, that I’ve made mistakes and that I needed their help to understand Koorie ways better. I honestly wasn’t at all at ease when we started, but it was something I really felt needed to be done. Once I realised that the parents do acknowledge that some things are going well, I felt we had some things in common and we could begin from there.

I think it was honestly the first opportunity the parents had ever had to talk like that. And the way the facilitator teased out the discussion encouraged everyone to have a say so we could all get a clear understanding. I really want to acknowledge her role as an independent third party here.

In between the series of meetings that followed, Koorie Educator Terrylene Marks did a lot of work outside the school, talking to parents and encouraging them to get involved.

There was also a series of meetings with parents to talk through a lot of general issues about schooling. Some people couldn’t attend every meeting, so the facilitator ensured that each gathering began by going over what had already been discussed. The set of What Works ‘Partnerships’ publications for parents and communities were used as aids in discussions.

In one meeting, for instance, the value placed on education by Koorie parents was examined, after it seemed to have been questioned in a previous meeting. That meeting also focused on Koorie students as learners and the role of the school and parents in achieving the best possible outcomes for them. The discussion covered such topics as ‘what we believe our Koorie children need’, ‘how Koorie children learn’, ‘what stops Koorie children from learning’, ‘what we want Koorie children to achieve’ and ‘what needs to be put in place by both the school and the community for this to happen’.

During the process, solutions and suggestions from within the group were encouraged. Parents felt affirmed that their views on education of and for their children were valued, and school personnel felt that their contributions were valued and what they were already doing in the school was recognised by the parents.
Things that were important in the Drouin school-community partnership process

- Leadership of the school needed to be supportive and ready to listen, learn and make changes as a part of this process.
- At each meeting the group revisited information collected at previous meetings.
- Participants were continually given the opportunity to discuss how they felt about the process and affirm their input.
- The focus for all of the meetings was ‘What do we want our school to look like?’ and ‘How we want our children to learn?’ and the group continually examined this in relation to Drouin Primary School.
- The School Council and the wider community were kept informed of the outcomes of each of the meetings.
- The speed with which requests were met was vital in keeping the enthusiasm within the group.
- As a group they worked on what they could achieve and, by achieving small steps, participants remained faithful to the process.
- LAECG support and involvement was vital in the process. Meetings of the group were held regularly at the school and the principal was encouraged to participate to inform members about what was happening in the school.
- The role of the Regional Office staff was vital. Once the process was underway, the main role throughout has been one of providing support by communicating with all parties, ensuring clear and concise records of meetings were distributed, and being involved as much as possible at meetings.
- That community liaison is also important — both by the Koorie Educator based at the school and by the Koorie Education Development Officer (in the regional office).

What Works facilitator Sandra Brogden had this to say:

I think in this situation, people were ready for something ... not necessarily to sit down and talk but they were ready for something. And I don’t know that they knew what it was, because there were such big issues in the school.

In a way, it wasn’t the written agreement in the end that was important, it was the process of building relationships, of people getting to know each other and working together. The process of getting to the agreement takes time, you need to allow the process as much time as it needs. Once you have the written agreement, then it needs to be kept alive, you have to keep working on it.

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au Case studies > Working with community > Drouin Primary School
Building relationships

Even if you are not in a position to be part of the kind of ‘large’ partnership we’ve seen in the previous section, there are other kinds of interpersonal relationships that make important contributions to students’ education. Sometimes these are vital in situations where Indigenous students are a small minority.

**Between teacher and student**

Any teacher knows that a kind of partnership is involved in working with a particular student. When things are working well, so is the tacit agreement between teacher (‘I respect you and agree to help you learn as best I can’) and student (‘I’m here to learn and will cooperate with you to do so’). When things are not working well, one of those statements is probably not true.

**Between teacher and parent or carer**

Similarly, there can be a partnership between a teacher or teachers and an individual student’s parents or carers. These informal partnerships might arise from deliberate efforts by either party, or might develop from informal contacts made outside the school, perhaps at sporting events or shopping centres. Don’t ignore these valuable opportunities to begin conversations. Who knows? They may become important partnerships. Informal contact is core business.

**Between teacher and Indigenous worker**

Another important type of partnership occurs in the school, between teachers (who are most often non-Indigenous) and Indigenous workers. Symbolically and practically, this relationship is at the heart of the success of many Indigenous students at school. It has been said many times that the Indigenous workers are the people who were in the community before most teachers came and will be there long after most teachers have moved on.

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**Indigenous Education Workers**

Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs, with various job titles in different systems) bring particular and specialised knowledge and skills to their workplace, including commonly:

- a deep concern about the future of Indigenous students;
- insight into the problems facing Indigenous children;
- their own experiences and stories, particularly of schooling and knowledge of their community’s understanding of schooling;
- some familiarity with the local Indigenous community; and often
- knowledge about contact points in various Indigenous organisations.

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- some familiarity with the local Indigenous community; and often
- knowledge about contact points in various Indigenous organisations.
Doomadgee State School has an enrolment of close to 300 students from P–10, and there is also a preschool with an enrolment of 40 children. After Year 10, students have to leave the community to continue their schooling.

Roshni Dullaway is a Grade 1 teacher working in partnership with Aboriginal Teaching Assistant, Roslyn George. Here they talk about the experience of working together and how they connect school and community.

Roshni:
Working with Roslyn you learn about the culture and learn to respect it, but at the same time never to lower your expectations. Just because we are outback here the expectations have to be the same. If you come with a low expectation then you’re going to get low results.

I mingle with the community a lot. I don’t go home and shut the door. If you’re the teacher you need to understand a bit about the culture and even the language so that you can work with the children. But I’ve still got a lot to learn.

Roslyn:
I haven’t taken her fishing yet but I’m going to! She likes to see everything that’s going on. My partner runs some cattle and horses and last year she wanted to get out and have a look at that as well. The community likes to get to know the teachers and everybody knows Roshni!

Roshni:
When we’re starting to teach about language we’re aiming for command of Standard Australian English, but we go through stages. First, you need to raise awareness in children that there are many languages around. Then we show that every language is equally valued and respected. But, then we need to separate out those languages so that children know what’s ‘school talk’ and what’s ‘home talk’. Roslyn is my dictionary! Every time I have to say something and the kids can’t understand, then she shows them the two ways to say it. At the end of the day, we want them to be in control and be able to switch codes.

At the moment we’ve got an Australian animals theme and Roslyn wrote all the language needed for the turtle, fish and the
rest of them. The kids love it and they’re seeing how it all fits together. If we do a book we also do a retelling in language and that way they are getting the awareness of making the jump from ‘home talk’ to ‘school talk’ and ‘school talk’ to ‘home talk’. And I suppose we are showing that we are valuing their home talk at the same time.

Roslyn:
We want the kids to feel good about ‘home talk’ but we also want them to be able to switch codes. When I went to school we weren’t allowed to speak any Aboriginal language. Maybe they thought it’d cause a fight or something, but it makes you feel bad.

Roshni:
Teachers sometimes misunderstand. ‘Manners’ is one example. The Aboriginal way is different. You have to be prepared to ask people and find out.

Roslyn:
The ‘English’ way might be to take turns and to say please and thank you all the time, but that’s not in the Aboriginal language. So when a teacher says ‘Where are your manners?’ the little kid doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

I also like to tell the kids how we grew up, because it’s different to how they’re growing up now. I tell them that I didn’t grow up lazy. There were six of us kids and we all had work to do, even when we came home from school. We don’t get cross or anything. We just tell them how we grew up and how it’s different to how they’re living now. Even when I went to high school I had to earn my pocket money. That was all we had.

Roshni:
We have ‘cultural days’, when we invite Elders and they tell stories to the children too. It’s all part of the literacy program and afterwards we publish the stories. Some of them are Dreamtime stories but some of them are about why people moved from Old Doomadgee.

Roslyn:
There was hardly any fresh water around there and they used to walk back and forth looking for it. A few of them ended up walking this distance and then finding this big river and then moving here. The kids listen really close and the Elders are really proud. They tell them not to forget the old stories because the stories are about what’s important now and in the future.
Connecting with the individual at Kormilda College, Darwin (NT)

Kormilda College is a low-fee independent Christian college in Darwin that offers secondary education programs for students aged 13 to 18. An educational priority of the College is to support Indigenous students to access and then be successful in secondary education. Of 800 enrolments in 2003, 240 were Indigenous students who reside in College residences during school terms.

Julianne Willis was Deputy Principal of the College. She spoke about the importance of relationship building.

Over the years, in watching the teachers who are successful with the students and the teachers who aren’t, I think one of the first basic rules is that the teachers who are successful are the ones who build relationships with the individuals, not with the whole class but with the actual individuals. They take an interest in the student, who they are, where they’re from, who they like, who they don’t like, what sorts of things they like to do, what they don’t like to do, how they connect with their family, their mum and their dad, or their auntie or their uncle, whoever is important in their lives, their community, their background. The teacher who tries to connect with each individual is the one who has the basis for success in teaching and learning...

When I first came to this school I think that one of the understandings that we basically operated with was that you worked with a community, and the community could be any number of people, both parents and children, but they were kind of like this ‘group’. It wasn’t specifically with a particular person, it was — if we could talk to somebody in that community that would be good.

We also had a bad misunderstanding I think, and that was that people in a community could represent each other regardless of roles and relationships in a community. Over the last ten years our understanding about Indigenous cultures has increased enormously and our practices have changed incredibly.

Instead of thinking about community groups, we now talk individually with the individual child and their parents or guardians. Much, much more effort is going into actually tracking and make connections with individual parents or guardians. And so you will hear people talking now that over the last couple of years we can actually interact with parents in a meaningful way. Largely, I think the consciousness has just changed at the school, that we are working with the individual parents, with students who have their own circumstances and needs and interests and drives.

There was a concept that it was really difficult to talk to our parents, that they were out there in some sort of void. Now we know that that’s not the case at all. There are still parents that are difficult to connect with, but on the whole we are building our connections with our parents in a really significant way.
Yarrabah State School (see also p 26) Deputy Principal Bernadine Yeatman talked about the implications of cultural difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

It wasn’t until I really started to look at Aboriginal culture that I noticed that there was a marked difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. I initially didn’t realise that there was a language difference. I knew that we spoke a little bit differently to non-Indigenous people but it wasn’t until I read books and worked with a lady who did ESL that I learned that we were actually speaking a dialect or a creole.

And once I was convinced that I was speaking a creole, I had to convince Indigenous staff at the school that they were actually speaking a creole, or what a lot of people term Aboriginal English. I had to do some workshops to convince the Indigenous staff about it.

And that led to developing a package for non-Indigenous staff. I wanted to make the book fit this community. When teachers first come to Yarrabah they are confronted with language difference, but when they read through this book they get to know the areas where there are differences. The sounds are different, the words and the meanings are different. I use the package in cultural awareness workshops for them.

Another aspect of cultural difference is in body language. A lot of our kids get into trouble at school because the teacher is interpreting their body language in a non-Indigenous way.

In the book, I tried to put things in table form, so that teachers can just talk about it, especially about our different world views, how Aboriginal people view education, and even child rearing practices. And one of the main things that I believe a lot of teachers need to know is about the relationships that are in the school and about making connections. My main thing is that, if you do not make connections with every student in your class first, or students in your school, then you will have a lot of behaviour problems. So my big push is that, if you make connections with your students, develop a rapport, they will be more likely to listen to you and respect you. I really push that. Once the children are onside they will do anything for you.

And if teachers know that the family has a powerful matriarch at the top, who has earned respect, then if there are behaviour problems they can get help with that. They can go and discuss it with the matriarch.
### Relationships and social connections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
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<tr>
<td>A child’s family is that of the extended family which comprises father, mother, siblings, aunts, uncles, aunties, grandparents, cousins, in-laws and ‘adopted family members.’</td>
<td>A child’s family is that of the nucleus family which comprises mother, father, and siblings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangements are more fluid – a child’s home address may change quite frequently.</td>
<td>Children should be in the care of their parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In most families, a matriarch is at the top of the family structure, and has a lot of influence or control over most family members. However, I believe that this role is being challenged by ‘dominant others’ (a person’s peers).</td>
<td>In most families a patriarch is the head of the house and usually has the final say in most matters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are expected to have an awareness of family and to figure out their relationship with family members. They are expected to make family connections by visiting relatives, spending the weekend at their homes, going camping with them and so on. Children will not interact positively with someone whom they have not made a connection with.</td>
<td>Children are placed in classrooms as determined by teachers, therefore may have had limited opportunities to connect with the teacher or with some of the other students. Most often, not enough time is allowed for students to build up positive relationships with each other OR for teachers to build positive relationships with each of their students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are to avoid certain families due to family rivalries.</td>
<td>Children are seated or placed in groups that the teacher thinks is appropriate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children are expected to respect people by calling them ‘uncle, aunty, granny or popeye’. The terms ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ may also be used to show respect.</td>
<td>Children are expected to respect a teacher’s position by calling them ‘Miss’ or ‘Mister’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family takes priority over everything else. Eg, if there is a funeral or if there is a relative visiting from afar, children may be expected to stay at home.</td>
<td>School should be a top priority for children if they are to succeed in wider society. Children should be at school every day to learn.</td>
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Teaching and learning Torres Strait culture in Cairns (QLD)

Jeff Aniba-Waia is a Torres Strait Islander and teacher. In 2006 he was working at Cairns West State School. Here is his advice for non-Indigenous teachers.

We need to make the teachers aware of the Indigenous cultures that exist in the schools. You can have an Asian-looking child in there and without you knowing it that person is a proud Torres Strait Islander. Because Torres Strait Islanders were influenced by more Pacific and Asian people coming in ancient times.

So the teacher must first understand something about the background of the learner. It’s important to teach the teachers about where the children are coming from. Another example I use all the time is to say that, in the Torres Strait Islands, people would like to know more about you as a person, not just as a teacher or principal.

They’d like to know about your family, your identity. Maybe you can show them pictures of your family and other things in your life. We’re proud that we want to know you as a person, not just as a teacher.

And that’s important if you want Indigenous people to work with you. If they don’t know you as a person they might say yes or no just to complete the conversation.

It’s good to make the school environment inviting to the eyes of Indigenous parents if you want them to come to the school community. It’s about talking to them, respecting them, but also it could be making the school office colourful and welcoming or having a dark-skinned person there so people can communicate in a language that’s not foreign to them.

Understand that English is a foreign language to our children. And I know it’s a very difficult process but we like to have our children coming out the end of the tunnel educationally equipped just like any other Australian child.

But, at the same time, the child will come out with a strong Indigenous identity. We are trying to paint a person with two different paints. That same person can change in colour like an octopus in its environment. The same Indigenous child will be taken into the Indigenous community as a proudly Indigenous person. And the same Indigenous child will be taken into the western society as a proud westernised Indigenous person. There’s two different beings that we are trying to create and mould.

This person can speak English to the English speaker and speak KKY or their own language to their own people. They will fit into their environment or fit into the western environment. That’s why they are like an octopus changing his colour at an appropriate time.
About Jeff Aniba-Waia

My name is Jeff Aniba-Waia and my clan is Ait Koedal Augadth (or Crocodile). I’ve been traditionally adopted into another clan called Deibau Augadth (or Wild Yam). I come from an island called Saibai, in the Western Torres Strait, close to Papua-Niugini. The language I speak is Kala Kawau Ya (KKY).

At about age ten I was sent to the Boys College on Thursday Island. Then, from there, the boy’s college moved to Bamaga in 1973 when they opened the Bamaga State High School, so that’s where I did my Year 11 and 12. From there I did teaching courses in Townsville and Adelaide.

I went back and taught at Bamaga for five years and then in other islands of the Torres Strait... the outer islands, the eastern islands and the central islands. Then I spent some time in Cloncurry. I came back to Cairns in 2001 and I’ve been in teaching in Cairns West for six years.

To teach about Torres Strait Islander culture you have to be a Torres Strait Islander. And it must come from your heart to deliver that to young children. Children of all backgrounds can respect each other for who they are and through understanding and respect can be proud of their backgrounds. And be multicultural Australians.
In 2007, the What Works team worked with a total of 22 schools in six clusters as part of the Loddon Mallee Region’s Koorie Education Strategy. In 2008, a similar process took place, involving schools that were not involved previously. Both programs took several months, were data-driven and focused on planning, implementation and evaluation of strategic action in schools, using the What Works tools. Teacher time release was provided by the Loddon Mallee Region.

Most schools involved a team of several teachers, together with Koorie Educators, Koorie Education Development Officers [KEDOs] and community members. Principals were often involved as well.

The program was based on the following beliefs:

- Teams from schools working cooperatively and actively to plan action to improve educational outcomes for Koorie students is more likely to prove effective than approaching the task individually.

- Professional learning and the potential to influence educational outcomes for students is enhanced if teachers have dedicated time to reflect and work together and can build their learning, relationships and networks over time.

- The resourcing of professional learning, including materials, intellectual input, facilitation and program management, should be of a high standard and relevant to the purpose defined.

The work of several schools involved in these initiatives is featured on the following pages.
Mildura Primary School has about 100 Indigenous students, in a total population of about 275. The school had four separate teams working on What Works strategic planning, but only one is featured in Table 1.

The Year 5–6 team was concerned about the attendance of a group of Koorie students. Their first step was to examine the attendance data for all Year 5–6 students. It was found that only the following four students had attendance rates less than 90% and those were considered at serious risk of falling behind in their education.

It was agreed that an improvement of 10% for these students by Week 5 of Term 3 would be a good first step and that was set as the initial target. At the same time, however, the team wanted to make the program inclusive of all students, so they made ‘Attendance’ a focus for Terms 2, 3 and 4 in the whole Grade 5–6 Unit.

Initial general strategies were to focus on:

- talking with parents and carers about the issue. It was also hoped to take this opportunity to promote the link between home and school.
- talking with Koorie Educators to promote the program and continue ongoing support; and
- addressing the issue at three-way conferences between parents, students and teachers.

The team believed strongly that the curriculum program must itself be engaging, because an engaging program promotes and encourages high attendance. It was also believed that giving students a certain degree of autonomy would promote attendance.

So the team generated a survey that allowed students to nominate specific activities they enjoy at school and at the same time opened up discussion about what makes it easier or harder to learn.

Student responses overwhelmingly indicated that there was a range of activities that they would like to do at school that were not currently available. These ranged from gardening through sewing to puppet making and fishing. The team realised that providing a range of electives could be motivational for students and, further, that such electives were easily justified as part of normal curriculum guidelines.

Survey results were also analysed further, but the electives program was the immediate strategy chosen. First it had to be publicised, through being announced at various assemblies, discussed with particular classes and promoted through posters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1:</th>
<th>Attendance rate to May 22</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A (male)</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B (female)</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C (male)</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D (female)</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The team was able to organise for six electives to take place, and it was decided to run the program on Mondays, which were seen to be key attendance days. In the end, the offerings were

- Gardening
- Knitting
- Sport
- Experiments
- Cooking; and
- Jewellery Making.

The target group of four students received their first preferences, as did 95% of other students. Student feedback about the electives program has been generally positive, and the attendance data for the four targeted students at the end of the nominated period is illustrated in Table 2. The target was met for two students, and almost met for the other two.

The team believes that their action planning has been successful because allowing students to have some say in their own learning is motivational and provides encouragement and hope to all. As well, they acknowledge the roles of

- good communication with parents and carers;
- positive rapport with students;
- a supportive learning environment;
- enriching and engaging learning activities;
- negotiated learning activities; and
- ongoing positive reinforcement and encouragement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2:</th>
<th>Attendance rate to May 22</th>
<th>Attendance rate at Week 5, Term 3</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A (male)</td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>+19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B (female)</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
<td>+16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C (male)</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
<td>+9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D (female)</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>+9.7%</td>
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</table>

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au > Case studies > Regional and rural > Loddon Mallee What Works planning > Mildura Primary School
Ranfurly Primary School (VIC)

Coming on-time in Preps

Prep class teacher, Angela Mitchell, talks about what has happened in her room.

We have been concentrating on improving our students’ attendance but also trying to focus on getting our kids to school on time. I had a number of students who were coming to school late every day and I wanted an incentive that not only got them to school but also made them accountable to get to school on time. So I sat with my kids and we started talking about why they were coming to school late, and I found that some of it was that they didn’t use their alarm clocks and they didn’t have a set routine in the morning.

Then our Koorie support worker took photos of the students doing ‘what needed to be’ their morning routine. We had photos of the children waking up, brushing their teeth and eating breakfast and we used the photos to make morning charts that were visual and meaningful for the kids. Next we had a good look at the digital clock. It’s all about telling the time in digital format, because those are the clocks kids have at home. It could be on mobile phones or on DVD players. When I started showing them what the digital time looked like, then they made the connections with the DVD player in the lounge room.

The next step was to talk to the parents, which I did as part of our ‘student-led conferences’. The students showed the charts to their parents or grandparents and we went through the charts and asked them whether they thought it would work.

They all agreed to it, but then we negotiated the times a little bit more because each situation was different. Once this was done each student had their own chart with their own photos and times on it that they could take home and put on the fridge.

The next part was setting up the incentive. When the students come to school on time they put up a sticker on their own chart for that day. Then on Fridays I ring [Assistant Principal] Ian and he comes in to see those who have come to school every day and on time all week. They get a sticker on their chests and an extra one on their chart. The children have really responded to the chart and receiving the praise from Ian. They actually compete against each other to get the most stickers.

We even had a prep student who got himself up and dressed and ran to school by himself just so he could get to school on time and get his sticker. His mother came up the school five minutes later to see if he was at school because she couldn’t find him. They want to be here every day and they want to be on time.

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au > Case studies > Regional and rural > Loddon Mallee What Works planning > Swan Hill Primary School
‘Our focus is to make learning happen at any cost.’

Robinivale Secondary College is a 7 to 10 school of 300 students, of whom about 40 are Indigenous.

The What Works team in the school focussed on supporting a group of Year 11 students to continue with and succeed in their schooling.

Julie McMonnies has worked at the school for several periods, beginning in 1981. She is Assistant Principal, with teaching responsibilities as well as junior school management:

This particular project came from a recognised need. The usual suggestion is to look at students who need support in the lower school, and we do a lot there, but we had just had a meeting of Year 11 teachers when Ray [What Works facilitator] came and we realised the need at that level.

We have a group of six Indigenous girls at Year 11. Some of them were starting to have a problem with attendance and one or two wanted to pull out of subjects. They’re coming to the end of the year and we wanted to see whether we could support them so that they could go on with their schooling.

Our overall goal was to improve educational outcomes for our Koorie students but our short term target was to improve the attendance of those Year 11 students by 20% this year. We wanted to support them to do that and to continue to Year 12 next year.

Probably the first thing we did in our action plan was let them know that we were all working to help them get through Year 11 and 12. And they were asked to identify a trusted staff member who could talk to them individually. Then we let our staff know if they had been identified by the student as a trusted person and asked them to make contact with the student and ask them how they were going.

We found out, for instance, that a particular student thought she was going to fail Maths, and wanted to pull out of it, but when we went to see her teacher he said it was just a matter of some catch up and she could pass. So we organised after school tutoring. It was acted on and followed up immediately. We also found out that they all were all quite serious about their ambitions and every single one of them wanted to go onto Year 12.

I think we can say that at least a couple of students probably wouldn’t have gone on to Year 12 without this support. It wasn’t happening for them. There are some obstacles to their success at school and we’re trying to overcome those obstacles.

The most effect we can have is by supporting them to have success at school.

Tess Sampson is a Koorie Educator who has been at the school for 16 years.

There are always lots of questions that bother our kids. Like they’re at school but their minds are cluttered with so much stuff from home life. It affects their learning but I think with us as a team of people working with them, we can pick up when things are not right, just from the body language or the tone of voice. So you can pick up on the mood, but then you bring it back to the learning focus.

When kids are not feeling happy at home they don’t feel happy to come to school
### ACTION PLANNING SHEET

**STUDENT:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>CONTACT STAFF</th>
<th>START DATE</th>
<th>FINISH DATE</th>
<th>STAFF SUPERVISOR</th>
<th>COMPLETED</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. WHAT’S HAPPENING? (staff)</td>
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<tr>
<td>List all the circumstances that we are aware of that are impacting on this student’s performance at this stage.</td>
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<td>2. INTERVIEW STUDENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explain the program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get information from the student re: circumstances/ambitions/trusted staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. LINK TO CAREERS TEACHER</td>
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<tr>
<td>Find out pathway from present to achieving ambition</td>
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<td>4. CURRENT SCHOOL OUTCOMES</td>
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<td>Get information re: current achievement and requirements for each subject</td>
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<td>5. LINK TO TRUSTED PERSONNEL</td>
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<td>Get the trusted staff members to be advised of their place in the program</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACADEMIC REVISION (SURVIVAL) PLAN TO ACHIEVE REQUIRED OUTCOMES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual teachers develop revision plan (survival plan) for each student</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. MEETING WITH PARENT/CARER AND STUDENT TO EXPLAIN PROCESS</td>
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<tr>
<td>To support this process parent/carers need to be informed and supported as well</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. REGULAR FOLLOW UP MEETINGS WITH THE STUDENTS</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is happening? What else has arisen? What can be done? What has worked well?</td>
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and they don’t learn. But with someone like Janelle or me contacting them personally or even picking them up, you make it a little easier for them and then the learning comes more easily too.

Kids have jobs as well, and they have other responsibilities, like looking after younger brothers and sisters. So that makes it hard to do homework.

A lot of parents only went to a certain part of schooling in their lives and unfortunately their memory of school is not very good.

They support their kids, they want them to do well but they don’t always know how to encourage them and support them to do the kind of work you need to get through VCE.

Our kids do know how important education is and they know the struggle it is to get that certificate at Year 12. In a way, they think the future will always be a struggle but as professional people, we’re here to work as a team to try and build their strengths, help them to believe in themselves and give them some direction. At the end of Year 11 they
can give themselves a pat on the back because they’re still here at school.

For some kids it’s building that trust. The people at this school do genuinely care about the kids and their education, and we care as professional people and friends as well.

Janelle Ricker is Koorie Home Liaison Officer and has worked at the school for nine years.

I liaise between parents and the school and basically support students in whatever they need. Parents often need someone to make them feel more comfortable coming to the school or letting the school know that there are things that they have concerns about.

This year I’ve used texting a lot. It’s an easy way of getting a message to a student. It seems to work really well and they will nearly always answer. Often I send kids a text message to say good morning, see you at a school. They’ll text me back and tell me what’s going on. It’s a good start to the morning and it just goes from there. And if during the day they’re not at school, I can text and find out where they are and why they aren’t at school. And often I can get them to come back.

Sometimes, a student might need to go to the doctor, so I’ll pick them up for that, or find out what else is getting in the way of coming to school. It could be uniforms, getting to work placements, getting stuck if they miss the bus… lots of things.

I’ve probably contacted these students every single day.

And if they have appointments about jobs or scholarships or work experience I can help organise it and get them there, because sometimes that help isn’t available at home.

Maybe life’s not good at home at the moment for a particular student so I think it’s the follow up caring that counts. Like it’s not just one day and then it’s forgotten. You are following up all the time, even on the weekend.

When we interviewed one particular student and went through all the things that were happening in her life, we could see it’s no wonder she’s not coming to school. With the right support she’s now back at school. With the right support she’s now back at school but when you look at the big picture you can understand why it’s hard. There’s just so much happening.
Real outcomes in remote areas

‘Bound for Success’ in the Torres Strait: Tagai College (QLD)

‘We’re on about getting comparable outcomes for all kids no matter where they live.’

Bound for Success began with a draft discussion paper in 2005. It was acknowledged that educational outcomes of Indigenous students in Cape York and the Torres Strait were poor and that thorough, considered action was needed to change that situation.

Following consultation with Cape York and Torres Strait communities, Bound for Success strategy documents for the Torres Strait and Cape York were released in 2006.

Responsibility and accountability

Don Anderson was the first Executive Principal of the new Tagai College, established as a result of this process. Tagai comprises all the 17 previously separate schools in the Torres Strait. Here Don discusses what happened and introduces the reasoning behind the new structure.

A key element of the strategy was to establish all the state schools in the Torres Strait under one college umbrella. That means we can establish clear lines of authority and accountability. I keep saying that to build a house you don’t have to know how to drive a nail; you get people who know how to do it. Which means I don’t have to have the expertise but I do have to have a team of people with expertise in their areas that I don’t have. I have very strong beliefs about college structure and it’s about leadership by executive. Authority and accountability have to be defined within the structure.

So we’ve moved from having 17 points of accountability [the 17 principals of the individual schools that make up the College] to a structure which has authority and accountability based on a defined operational structure.

Our Heads of Campus are accountable for the educational programs — how they’re taught, how they’re measured and how they’re reported on. That’s their job. They have a lot of authority within that, but they have specific accountabilities. We’ve put in other structures to make sure they don’t have to be accountable for all the other little things principals usually have to worry about. At the same time, they are supported in the roles they do have.
The thing about Bound for Success is that it’s a comprehensive strategy. We’re on about getting comparable student outcomes right across the Torres Strait and for that we need a standard curriculum, which we’re working on now. That’s how kids are going to get to Year 12. That’s how the secondary components on Thursday Island can impact upon what happens in English in Grade One in the outer islands.

Steve Foster, a Torres Strait Islander, is Tagai’s Associate Principal, Outer Island Campuses and is also responsible for the HR portfolio in the College. He is based at Badu Island, where he has been principal for some time.

Here Steve discusses why the establishment of Tagai College has promoted consistency and accountability.

The Tagai College structure is all about how we can be more consistent and more accountable. When we spoke to communities they were saying, yes, give us that. Don’t talk about it, do it.

The College now has experienced and recognised school leaders making up the College executive with a major focus on accountability for student learning outcomes and quality PD support for staff and community. When we spoke to communities during the community consultation phase they were saying, yes, give us that model. One Elder said ‘Don’t talk about it, do it, if this is going to help our children with their learning.’ It was obvious that if we kept doing the same things we were only going to continue attracting the same results and this wasn’t good enough. Change had to happen.

One other thing that the communities appreciated was that they knew that the executive leadership team at Tagai State College had people with passion, experience and a long-term commitment to this area. Three Associate Principals are Torres Strait Islanders who have been principals in the area for a long time and have a good understanding of the relevant issues. They also knew that Don Anderson as the Executive Principal of the College has vast experience in Indigenous education and continues to have a strong commitment and passion about working with the communities and TSIREC to improve learning outcomes for all students.

A consistent curriculum: scope and sequence

Leanne Fox is Principal, Bound for Success Curriculum. She discusses the Scope and Sequence documents that have been developed.

Initially, we had some very robust conversations about what exactly is the bottom line that we want our students to leave with from knowledge, process and skills perspectives at the end of Year 10. That’s the basis of the Scope and Sequence and it has to be consistent with the other documents in Queensland. In fact, Curriculum Branch has been supportive and instrumental in the writing process.

The philosophical viewpoint in the Scope and Sequence document is that they are statements of the learning that students will demonstrate. So it’s very student focused. It says ‘when I’ve taught this, this is what I will see students doing.’ It was obvious that if we kept doing the same things we were only going to continue attracting the same results and this wasn’t good enough. Change had to happen.

I think the Scope and Sequence does provide clarity, and it is very much developmental. At the same time, we’ve identified opportunities for incorporating local traditions and cultures as well. It’s preparing our kids for the twenty-first century while providing valued and authentic opportunities for that local learning. They’re part and parcel of the curriculum and not seen as a token add-on.
Structured approaches to literacy

This section includes two examples of schools with very detailed, structured and successful approaches to literacy. In fact, they have a similar approach to numeracy and other parts of the curriculum.

St Joseph’s School, Wyndham (WA)

The everyday business of teaching

Wyndham is the northernmost town in Western Australia and has a population of about 800. St Joseph’s is a coeducational Catholic primary school with an enrolment of just under 100 students, predominantly from Aboriginal families.

Key focus and strategy plan

St Joseph’s has a key focus and strategy plan, based on the following beliefs.

- High expectations promote learning and responsibility.
- Quality teaching and learning practices improve learning for all.
- Learning should cater for the uniqueness and giftedness of the whole person.
- Each person has an innate and continual capacity to learn.
- Learning should be meaningful, purposeful and relevant to our lives.

Principal Claire Kelly discusses the school’s approach.

Our overarching focus is always motivation and retention. We say that attendance is actually about retaining the kids’ interest and enthusiasm, not just about filling the seats.

The only way to get them to keep coming to school is for them to achieve success, but that’s only done through hard work. You can make it easy for kids by not having high expectations, but if they’re not learning they’ll be bored and won’t see a purpose in what they’re doing. So they won’t come. And that wouldn’t be doing our job anyway.

We’re a team of people who don’t want excuses to be made for our kids. Some people talk about ‘barriers’ and our response is to say, yes, there are some barriers in relation to living in a remote community, but that’s not what we’re going to focus on. We’re just going to be concerned with getting on and doing what we can. We want our kids to be able to do whatever’s expected of kids anywhere else in the country.

Literacy

The school believes it is developing best practice approaches to literacy learning.

- **Goal:** To enable Indigenous students to attain Literacy skills to the same standard as other Australian children.
- **Target:** Increase by 10% the number of children who are at or above the Statewide Benchmarks for Literacy.
- **Data sources:** School records, West Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA), Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS).
Claire Kelly reading with her students

Claire:

We spent two terms working on our literacy strategy. There were millions of staff meetings and a million informal meetings as well. Then we threw out about two and a half thousand texts. They were old things that were inappropriate but a lot were just not purposeful texts for teaching kids to read. They weren’t going to help our kids become literate.

We believe there should never be a time in your classroom when there’s not a purpose for what’s happening. So there should never be a time that you can’t articulate the reason that a particular kid is reading this particular book today. It might be because she needs support with her fluency and that’s why I’m giving her a book that’s easy for her to read so that’s what she can concentrate on. Or it might be that she needs support with another reasoned strategy. We’re starting to really be explicit about what we are trying to get kids to do.

And the kids know as well. We explain to them what we think good readers and good writers do and we want them to say it back and we want them to believe that that’s who they are. Even in Year 1 they will say things like ‘Miss Claire, good readers don’t talk like robots’, ‘Good readers go back if they make a mistake and check what they’re reading’. We talk about different genres for different purposes and we are about opening those up to kids. For instance, with our Big Books, we’ve listed the features of each one so that teachers have some help with what they can be used to teach and what can be pointed out to the kids in them.

And we do explain to kids that there’s ‘home talk’ and ‘school talk’ and they’re different. But we focus on literacy in Standard Australian English because that’s what will give kids literate power and because our parents have told us that’s what they want for their kids. We believe our first wave classroom teaching needs to be second to none. And then, for the kids we miss, we have our second wave intervention, Reading Recovery as well, and lots of PD for teachers.

Our goal is to enable Indigenous students to attain literacy skills to the same standard as other Australian students. So we’re not saying, it’s okay just to increase by five percent, we’re saying that something’s gone wrong if a kid’s twelve and still not reading at the appropriate level.

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au > Case studies > Literacy > St Joseph’s Wyndham
**Literacy approach**

Each classroom from Year 1 to Year 7 plans for four two-hour literacy blocks across the week. Literacy is taught in two-hour dedicated literacy blocks — one hour writing, one hour reading. Speaking and listening to Standard Australian English will permeate all rich learning activities.

We believe best practice literacy teaching and learning can be achieved following a whole group-small group-whole group structure.

**Hour one**
- Whole group focused reading.
- Small group focused Learning Centres with a reading focus.
- Whole group focused shared time — led by quality questioning by the teacher, focused on children’s use of SAE.

**Hour two**
- Whole group focused writing.
- Small group focused Learning Centres with a writing focus.
- Whole group focused shared time — led by quality questioning by the teacher, focused on children’s use of SAE.

We believe for best practice literacy teaching and learning to occur the following teaching strategies need to be employed in the classroom: Language experience; reading aloud to children; shared reading; guided reading; independent reading; modelled writing; shared writing; guided writing; independent writing; quality reading-focused learning centres; quality writing-focused learning centres.

**Details of whole group focused time**
- Reading (10–15 minutes): Reading to/shared reading (books, poems, charts).
- Writing (10–15 minutes): Modelled/shared writing.

This element of the classroom program sets the scene for small group work providing an initial teaching focus and a specific teaching of the visual information of print — including direct instruction in phonics, spelling and high frequency words. This is teacher-directed time.

**Details of small group focused time**
- Guided reading (30–40 minutes): Learning Centres in operation for the rest of the class.
- Guided writing (30–40 minutes): Independent writing and activities to extend students’ understandings of grammar and spelling.

The small group teaching focus allows teachers to operate two guided reading lessons and either two guided writing lessons or one guided writing lesson and roving conferences in each one hour block.

**Details of whole group focus shared time**

Concluding section for both reading and writing sessions. Students reflect and articulate what they have learnt — oral language (10–15 minutes each for reading and writing).
Yarrabah State School (QLD)

‘We need to have focused strategies in place. An ad hoc approach won’t work.’ Terry Davidson

Yarrabah is on the coast, about 60 km south-east of Cairns and beyond the Yarrabah Range. The school population of over 500 students is entirely Indigenous, making it one of the largest Indigenous schools in Queensland.

Literacy and staging

Terry Davidson was principal in 2006. She spoke about a component of Yarrabah’s comprehensive approach to literacy.

We organise home groups generally according to social groupings and behavioural and other factors. We don’t create low achieving and high achieving classes. We’ve got a range of social, academic, behaviour and attendance patterns represented in every class.

But, four days a week, for two sessions of work a day, they make what we call a ‘journey’ for literacy and numeracy. In Year 1, we keep the students together because that’s the first year of their schooling, but after that they make a ‘journey’. So in the primary school, Stage 1 will have students from Years 2 & 3, Stage 2 will have mainly students from Years 4 & 5 and Stage 3 will have mainly students from Years 6 & 7.

In those groups the kids get quality, explicit teaching time with a team of teachers focused on them in their ability groups. And the intent is to fill everybody’s gaps and lift everybody, because when you’ve got an enormous range of kids we found it’s impossible for a teacher to give those kids the quality that they need.

Within each group there is, of course, still a range of abilities, but it’s a narrower range.

Into that arrangement we add the Learning Support teacher, so instead of the typical learning support model of taking students out of classes and working with them one-on-one or in small groups, the learning support teacher is the journey group teacher for the most challenged group of kids. Instead of having four teachers at that stage level there will be five, so that the number of students per journey group is reduced.

We chose reading comprehension as our focus for literacy journey because our data showed us that, although we had students who could read at higher levels, they weren’t necessarily comprehending at those levels of text. They’d become good decoders but they weren’t comprehending what they read.

In the secondary campus, we’ve embedded a literacy line in the timetable. So every day on that line we timetable the secondary school literacy groups to be taught by the secondary teachers. Every teacher is on that line, enabling small group focused teaching. Most of the groups are either decoding or reading comprehension groups, with one that’s at a higher entry level. We’re finding that the new Year 8 students are achieving quite well, which suggests that the staging approach is having an effect on literacy levels. These students have achieved at higher levels than some of the Year 9 and 10 students.

This approach also provided an opportunity for the secondary teachers to come together for collaborative planning outside of their specialist subject areas. Previously, they didn’t have to plan anything together, but now they need to plan for their literacy groups. So it’s had a really productive spin-off in that way and the teachers have engaged with it really well.

This year, as with each year, we’ve tried to have an Indigenous person working alongside a non-Indigenous person in classrooms and that’s a purposeful strategy, acknowledging that the Indigenous person knows the students’ language and cultural background, and the non-Indigenous person adapts the curriculum program acknowledging that. We try and incorporate those differences in perspective into teaching and learning programs.
In Indigenous schools, the expectations are for quality education and, in order to achieve that, we have to acknowledge what the students bring and what the students’ needs are. We need to have focused strategies in place to address that. An ad hoc approach won’t work.

**The use of data**

**Terry Davidson explains**

The benchmarks we set are the minimum expectations we have for students’ reading levels, and we’ve got a process in place where we monitor progress at the end of semester one and the end of semester two. We use a variety of standardised tests and every teacher is involved.

We then use that information to identify those students who have made little or no significant improvement and target them for intervention.

We have layers of intervention. First, there are the adaptations that the teacher can make at the classroom level. Education Assistants are attached to classrooms, which gives us opportunities for grouping students as well. We use our tutors to target individuals or very small groups for more intensive intervention. We also use short-term intensive interventions like Reading Recovery and, at the moment, we have three Reading Recovery-trained teachers providing programs for Year 2 students.

We’ve also correlated achievement with student attendance, so that we can then have a look at the data in terms of how a student is engaging with the school. There’s actually an equity issue here that is also considered because if a child is consistently not attending, of course they won’t achieve to their potential. But we don’t want to only direct resources towards those children at the expense of those who attend regularly but aren’t making expected progress.

There are always exceptions to the rule but, for the vast majority of students — the better the attendance the better the results.
Secondary school completion

The proportion of Indigenous students completing Year 12 is still half that of non-Indigenous students\(^1\) and a COAG target is to at least halve that gap by 2020. Two examples from Western Australia illustrate approaches that are assisting Indigenous students to complete school.

Follow the Dream: An ‘aspirational’ strategy in Western Australia

‘I’d always known that there were talented Aboriginal kids who we were losing from Year 7 onwards. So how do we keep them at school?’

Follow the Dream is designed to help Aboriginal students to reach their career potential by graduating from high school and achieving university entrance. The program is currently being delivered to more than 600 students in 10 metropolitan and 15 regional centres. It is not an alternative to school, nor is it a school-based retention and participation program. Participants attend school as normal. The program is complementary to existing educational activities for Aboriginal students.

The program provides students with

- tutors to assist with homework, study habits and goal setting;
- an individual education plan;
- a mentor to review their school progress and general wellbeing;
- regular updates on academic performance;
- educational excursions to develop confidence and skills;
- a safe and supported environment to study after school, equipped with computers and educational resources;
- career guidance; and
- regular contact with parents and teachers regarding academic progress.

Each host school has a full-time Follow the Dream coordinator, but students may come to the Learning Centre from a variety of other local schools.

Learning Centres are central to students’ experiences of Follow the Dream. Most Learning Centres are on the premises of the host school, but a few operate off-campus. Each student agrees to attend the Learning Centre after school on at least two afternoons each week, typically between 3:30 and 5:30 pm, and coordinators and parents also make commitments to their roles in supporting the student. In their time at the Learning Centre, students get specific assistance with their school work from ITAS (Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme) tutors.

Lorraine Tunbridge is Follow the Dream coordinator at Girrawheen, a low socioeconomic area in metropolitan Perth.

Each week, I try to focus on three particular kids and, during that week, I make sure that I’ve spent some time thinking particularly about them, about where they are at.

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the moment, where they’ve been and how they can move on. Of course, the particular kids change from week to week.

Tim Gray is Follow the Dream coordinator in Broome.

I had a lot to do with teaching some of the Follow the Dream kids when they were younger and I’ve enjoyed the opportunity to work with them in an aspiration program. Over fifteen years or so I’ve seen at best just one or two Aboriginal kids passing their TEE [Tertiary Entrance] each year, which obviously isn’t the greatest strike rate. But at the same time, I know lots of kids do have the ability. So I’ve seen Follow the Dream as an opportunity to really boost the numbers of kids who are aspiring to excel academically.

The consistency that’s required of kids, in terms of attendance and keeping up with work, is one thing we’re always concentrating on. Academically, the kids who are doing TEE have oodles of potential and ability, but they have to maintain that consistency.

Chrissie Parry is Follow the Dream coordinator at Lockridge, also in metropolitan Perth.

Very few Aboriginal kids had finished Year 12 in the past in the four schools I work with. In fact, most didn’t stay to Year 12. But, in the three years of Follow the Dream, about six students have already completed and qualified for tertiary entrance and another five are studying for their TEE at present.

In the beginning, I talked to [parents] about the fact that there were plenty of Aboriginal kids out there who were high achievers but that there had never been a situation where these kids had been supported with a special program. Perhaps they might just be sitting there quietly, not demanding attention. So I suggested that with some one-to-one attention, and a bit of a push, these kids could do incredible stuff.

Advice from coordinators

Five Follow the Dream coordinators provide the following advice.

• Be genuine, honest and clear with people. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

• Be down to earth, friendly and prepared to have a laugh. But, remember that you are running an important program for the kids, and you’ve got to set a standard in behaviour and attitude to work.

• Make good professional judgements about the tutors and the resources you put in. Kids are relying on you to do that.

• You’ve got to care and you’ve got to deliver results. Aboriginal people might forgive a lot, but if you don’t deliver for their kids...

• Be available for Aboriginal families. When a family member comes to see you, you stop what you’re doing. If you need to visit parents in the evening, then you make time to do that.

• Don’t be the person who is expected to solve every issue with an Aboriginal kid in the school. But be as helpful as you can, without neglecting your main role.

• Avoid possible isolation by maintaining contact with other Follow the Dream coordinators, whether by phone or in person.

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au > Case studies > Senior secondary > Follow the Dream
The Access Program at Swan View Senior High School, Perth (WA)

‘...a disciplined rapport, that’s the thing.’

Swan View Senior High School is in the eastern suburbs of Perth and has about 780 students. About 140 of those are Indigenous, meaning that Swan View has the highest Indigenous population of any metropolitan government school in Western Australia.

The development of the Access Program in 2003 has seen retention rates of Indigenous students to Year 12 reach 80%. The cohort of Indigenous students in the school now expects to have the chance to graduate with the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE).

Geoff Holt was the first coordinator of the Access Program. At first, he found institutionalised factors and alienation working against the success of the students.

I came up with the idea of an Access Unit to encompass notions of inclusivity and equity and with the backing of the principal, the students, the AIEOs and the parents, we got the thing off the ground. Basically, the haemorrhaging of the students was so chronic that even sceptical people were prepared to give it a go.

I was determined that the approach would be based around achievement of secondary graduation with all the rigour and integrity that that involves. I was especially mindful of the fact that a lot of people would just be saying, ‘oh those kids will be going in there but they won’t be working, they’ll just be messing around’. Some people couldn’t believe that they’d be engaged.
So I went to the Curriculum Council [Board of Studies etc, in other parts of Australia] to talk to the moderators about cultural differences and how to engage students in an integrated, project-focused curriculum. They were very enthused, but their main concern was about whether that would be comparable in quality terms.

The integrated areas were English, Maths, Health and Information Technology. Health was a priority and we were really keen to have IT processing skills applied to projects, so eventually we came up with a Health Forum project. There were also two days of workplace learning per week at the same time.

When the moderators [at the Curriculum Council] saw the work that they’d done they were very impressed. Some of it was well above the required standard.

At the start, there was still a lot of student resistance (like not working, wanting to put music on, wanting to play games, wanting to walk around when they should have been in class) because it was so entrenched in them. We managed to counter that by having a fairly strong set of house rules that were very explicit and based on no swearing, no putdowns and mutual respect for one another.

Thankfully, I got on well with the students. I had a disciplined rapport, that’s the thing, and we were able to start to slowly turn around the resistant behaviours. I looked at it quite philosophically: that the resistance is a manifestation of the alienation they’re feeling. One thing that cuts through all of that is whether the kids can see that you’ve got integrity.

Younger Aboriginal kids’ expectations of school changed once it became apparent that the Access kids were still there, they were still going and it was clear that they were going to graduate. They saw the Access kids, alpha males some of them, staying on and succeeding and suddenly there’s a critical mass scenario. And then they have the expectation that this is what we do, after Year 10 we go into Access and we finish at the end of Year 12.

The perceptions of other people changed when they finally started to see the results, and Indigenous retention rates surpassed those of non-Indigenous people within the school between Year 8 and Year 12. And then we attracted a lot of support that had been very difficult to achieve in the beginning.

When a program is successful, people always want to duplicate it. The Access Program worked very well in one context. But I’m not sure that just because something works in one place, it’s going to work somewhere else as well. Thinking like that ignores all the critical factors, it’s too simplistic. My experience is that it’s about establishing what are the needs of that particular community, how you can engage people and how you can respond. That will lead to a different scenario in each case.

But it’s got to be about high expectations, high standards, it’s got to be based on respect and it’s got to have integrity on a personal level. Once you lose that integrity my experience says that people in the community will see through it straight away.
Imagining themselves, imagining their futures

We include here some details from a research study by Antonio Mercurio and Linda Clayton at the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA). Although some years old now, their findings are as relevant as ever.

The study was designed to reveal the perceptions and ideas of Indigenous students who successfully completed their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). Mercurio and Clayton interviewed 16 Indigenous students who had been successful at Year 12 level.

Sixteen Indigenous students shared with us their thoughts and feelings about how they dealt with their ‘moments of truth’, and how their families reacted to their news. They graphically recounted their stories of ‘receiving the results’.

What we heard from successful students was a range of emotions — apprehension, fear, delight, satisfaction, exhilaration, relief, and at times, disappointment. In these stories, the students narrated their avoidance tactics and their anxiety. What is clear from these stories is the great symbolic importance of the senior secondary certificate to the students, their families, and their communities; and to the way they imagined themselves, and to the way their families and communities imagined them.

The awarding of a senior secondary school credential, such as the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), or its equivalent around Australia is a public act. It is a public recognition of those who are ‘capable’, ‘passed’, ‘completed’, ‘finished’, or ‘have graduated’. This is a rite of passage leading to further education, training, work, and citizenship.

Mercurio and Clayton dealt with several research questions, two of which were answered as follows:


2 ibid, p 101f.
Kura Yerlo Children’s Centre (SA)

‘When people say that Aboriginal children are behind the eight ball in terms of literacy outcomes, we can say “Look at what’s happening here!”’

Kura Yerlo Inc. is a community-managed Aboriginal organisation at Largs Bay in the western part of Adelaide. In the Kaurna language, Kura Yerlo means ‘by the sea’.

Tina Couzens-Quitadamo identifies as a Kirraeewurrung woman from the Western districts of Victoria, and was Childcare Director at Kura Yerlo for over six years. She talks about the positive effects of a pre-literacy program.

We always tried to incorporate literacy activities but the big change came when DECS [the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services] allocated us a 0.8 teaching position. This was due to our high number of Aboriginal enrolments and consistent attendance.

It has enabled us to focus intensively on literacy learning opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal three year olds (as DECS required). In our setting we don’t exclude the four and five year olds who want to participate but we report to DECS on three year olds.

We saw a need for literacy programs for our children, and consultation with families told us that they saw particular literacy needs as well.

A highlight has been ‘Indigenous Readers are Achievers’. We engaged a couple of hub schools nearby and through our Youth Worker and their Aboriginal education workers, asked some of their Indigenous students [‘Big Buddies’] to come across once a week and work with small groups of our Aboriginal children on literacy activities.

The visiting students were from Grades 4, 5 and 6 and we organised it so that what they were doing was seen as part of their regular school work. We were able to talk to their teachers about curriculum outcomes and everyone was satisfied that it wasn’t just an excuse to get out of school.

They saw that, although their students were going off-site, they were doing meaningful tasks that contributed to their own curriculum outcomes and we were able to map those onto the SACSA [South Australian Curriculum Standards Authority] framework.

So each week the Big Buddies were given a literacy task to go away and work on. They would get an envelope personally addressed to them, and inside would be a short letter telling them about their task for the next week. They felt really special because it was personally
addressed to them. They would then usually go over the letter and prepare the work with the AEW or resource teacher in their own school. Then the next week they would bring that back and work with their own little group of children.

We felt that we were extending what has always been a cultural component of Aboriginal families, which is that you have a responsibility to someone younger than yourself. We worked with that idea. And we took it very seriously. Each of the Big Buddies had to sign a commitment contract and they had to write letters about themselves so we could display them in the kindy. Then on the day they first came we pulled the names out of a hat to allocate them to a small group. Sometimes we would change it around a little bit if we felt some of our children particularly shouldn’t be together in a small group.

Usually we had four or five groups and each group had four or five children. They’d be spread around the room and a teacher was always there in the background to help out if necessary.

The Big Buddies attended nearly every week and there was hardly anyone who stayed away. And our children couldn’t wait! They would be anticipating the sessions, asking ‘When does my Big Buddy come? Is it Tuesday yet?’ And that in itself gives you a chance to have a literacy-rich conversation about days of the week.

Our kids did little evaluations of what happened. We sat with them and helped them with the evaluation sheet. And we maintain individual maps showing kids’ progress in literacy.

Sample letter to Big Buddies

Read more about these ideas at: www.whatworks.edu.au > Case studies > The early years > Kura Yerlo Children’s Centre
Queanbeyan South Public School (NSW)

The importance of pre-school

Some years ago, Paul Britton was principal of Queanbeyan South Public School. Research at the time showed that of 400 kids in local pre-schools only four were Aboriginal. Something had to be done.

That meant that very few of our Aboriginal children had been to pre-school before they came here and some were up to two years behind other kids in their academic development.

I thought we could do something about that because it wasn’t a lack of intelligence, it was just a lack of prior experience. And so we set it up ourselves [the play group and pre-school], with funding from the Department of Community Services.

We always give priority to Aboriginal children, but we take others as well because our Aboriginal parents say ‘look we don’t want our kids brought up in a vacuum.’ One of our Aboriginal parents says ‘it’s not a black world, it’s a white world and we’ve got to educate our kids so that they can manage and succeed in a white world. That’s the reality.’ It seems to work. Everyone knows there’s a wider context.

I think we’ve always known that if we want to make things better for Aboriginal kids we need to work on non-Aboriginal kids as well. And that’s been like a bit of a policy right across the school. When Aboriginal children have a special event going on they always take a non-Aboriginal friend as well. We’ve pushed multiculturalism because that gives every child a chance to be proud of their heritage. In doing so it is quite natural to acknowledge the original cultural heritage in this country. The Aboriginal people own the heritage here, it just fits. And nobody says Aboriginal children are getting special treatment. There are benefits for all kids.

One of the extra benefits of the play group and pre-school has been that more Aboriginal parents will come up to the school. We know that sometimes people don’t get involved because it’s an alien or a strange environment to them. But a lot of parents start off in that very informal play group setting and they come through with their children. Because they start off being involved at a non-threatening level they see that they can have an input and that continues when the kid goes on to school.

This school is like a microcosm of society. That’s what’s great about it. This is what the world is like, with all these cultures. And we’ve got a huge number of Aboriginal kids, which is great because their culture is unique to this country.
Sue Green was a long-term coordinator at Condobolin Preschool Centre. Having achieved high levels of Aboriginal participation at preschool, she discusses the factors involved in attendance and successful transition from preschool to school.

I’d always been concerned about the poor enrolments of Aboriginal children but I suppose the real commitment came when my children were at the primary school and I did relief teaching. I could see the Aboriginal children failing and my children’s Aboriginal friends not succeeding at school. Yet I’d had those children at preschool and they were doing quite well, but for some reason they just weren’t doing well at school, they were getting into trouble and disrupting the rest of the class. When I would have them over at my house, they were still like those little three and four year-olds that I had at preschool. We tried to employ people from the community so that there is always someone here, a familiar face that the children will recognise, or somebody else that the children might know (often it might be an auntie, cousin or community friend). Half of the workers these days are Aboriginal.

About half the students come to the centre in the centre’s Tarago van. One of the main factors of getting the kids here is having that transport — to be able to say we’ll go and pick the kids up and bring them home. We did a survey of parents about access and the one thing that will improve access and attendance for children, and their answer was — the bus. That was the biggest thing.

You don’t always get to see the parents. But if we didn’t have the bus and we left it to the parents to bring them, would we have those children regularly attending? I don’t think we would get them as regularly. We haven’t got the transport in the town. The parents haven’t got the transport.

We ran the transition to school programs here at the preschool. I had an Aboriginal assistant, also employed by the Department of Education, and we would both work from the preschool. We would pick up the kids in the morning using the preschool Tarago and bring them into the preschool to provide them with the preschool program. What it also did was help the preschool. A lot of the Aboriginal parents decided to enrol their children and extend their enrolment for the whole day.

The following year the assistant and I actually went over to the primary school [across the road] and worked in the Kindergarten room some of the time to keep the children familiar with what was happening and to have familiar staff and people there at the primary school. We worked on the literacy and numeracy targets as well as following up what was happening in the classroom.

What you need are familiar things — songs, games, approaches to what’s happening I think — and that comes from having familiar people as well. That’s what really provides the comfort zone. It’s the security. Also, I think that the parents need to feel secure about where they’re leaving their children, and if the parents don’t feel secure then you won’t get the children coming along.

Flexibility is the key, both from us here and the primary school. That, and willingness to take a chance on trying a different program.

It depends a lot on how all of the staff, that’s primary and preschool, approach the program in the first place. If they are positive and inspired by the opportunity to do it, that’s great. But if they’re not well informed, involved and understand what we want to achieve, I’ve found they often remain negative.
What Works. The Work Program


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.

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