What Works. The Work Program: CORE ISSUES 1

What Works. The Work Program is a set of resources designed to help schools and those who work in them improve outcomes for Indigenous students. The ‘Core issues’ series is an attempt to distil some topic-based key directions for practical action.

Setting up for success

Setting up for success, the first in this series, is about shaping school structures to make sure what needs to be done gets done.

This is especially important for Indigenous students. Enrolment data indicate that there are few schools in Australia (about 4 percent of the total) where Indigenous students are in the majority and where their particular needs are being attended to as a matter of course. On the other hand just on 70 percent of Indigenous young people are attending schools where they represent five percent or very often less of their school’s population. That means, to make a difference, a special effort is required by the 4,600 Australian schools they attend.

If your school has joined the Dare to Lead coalition it is committed to making these important differences:

• in the primary years, a 10 or more percent improvement in literacy performance levels at Year 5 over a period of three years, and
• in the secondary years, a 10 or more percent improvement in completion rates of recognised Year 12 courses (including embedded VET modules and courses) over the same period.

The achievement of these improvements requires focused attention.

While it may be useful for other schools as well, the content of this guide is targeted particularly at schools of the second type, that is where Indigenous students are in small minorities.

Schools organise themselves in different ways, and you might have better ideas about how to achieve the central ideas contained in the headings. But those ideas themselves are crucial if success is to be achieved.
Supportive leadership

**Indicator:** Your school’s leadership provides positive, public and consistent support.

The power of leadership is well established in school effectiveness research.

We are aware of the enormous number and range of demands on school leaders’ attention and time. However we also know that where school leaders display a consistent public interest in an issue, encourage attention to it and acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes, the achievement of success is considerably more likely than where these factors are not present.

The success of your school’s Indigenous students (even, and perhaps especially, where they are present in small numbers) is precisely one of these issues, one of the most urgent in Australian education.

Here is a checklist for school leaders.

- Are you as a leader actively involved in supporting and promoting the effort of improving outcomes for Indigenous students?
- Have the nature and purposes of the intended actions been made well known and efforts been made to establish joint ownership across the whole staff?
- Have clear, realistic but challenging targets for improvement been developed?
- Have action plans been developed which define tasks, assign responsibilities and establish timelines?
- Have the resources necessary to support the change process been provided?
- Has assistance, where required, from sources beyond the school been sought and provided?
- Is data about what is really happening within the school being collected and used as a basis for monitoring progress?
- Are successes, on any scale, noted and celebrated?

A senior person responsible

**Indicator:** A member of staff, preferably a senior one, has specific responsibility for the learning and progress of your school’s Indigenous students.

A common strategy to provide for the education of Indigenous students is to assign responsibility to an Indigenous teacher, education worker or aide, either formally or by default. If that person is party to the school executive’s planning, monitoring and organisation processes with appropriate power to effect the course of events, that may be an excellent arrangement. Experience suggests, however, that circumstances like these are rare.

To maintain the focus on this issue as a mainstream concern, a good arrangement is to have this role as one of the school’s defined positions of responsibility (with appropriate benefits/allowances). A committee should then be established, made up of at least one member of the school’s executive, classroom teachers who have the most contact with the school’s Indigenous students, Indigenous staff and community representatives where appropriate (remembering that this is a professional task and responsibility, and that the task of developing and maintaining community relationships is another major task.)

This group should concern itself with at least the following issues:

- the effective induction of new students, and transition arrangements to other locations as they are required
- planning for the progress of the student group (What Works materials will help directly with this process.)
- monitoring of both individual progress and the progress of the group as a whole
- ensuring the existence of appropriate forms of cultural support and acknowledgment
- attendance and welfare issues
- processes of parent/caregiver contact, and
- providing information, leadership and professional learning to other school teams. In some schools, such groups also audit and monitor the content of the curriculum and school practices and events for their reflection of the significance of contemporary and past Indigenous cultures and issues.
A working plan

Indicator: A planned and consistent approach has been developed and is operating.

The requirement is for a coherent, comprehensive and working plan for improvement achieving improved outcomes.

The elements of this plan that matter are:

• the active role of community partners to this process
• general goals related to the performance of Indigenous students
• clear and time-bounded targets for improvement
• strategies designed to achieve those targets
• assigned responsibilities
• data collection procedures, and
• monitoring and review procedures.

During the past few years we have noted the wide variety of ways in which the What Works materials are used. Given the diversity of circumstances of schools with Indigenous students in which use has occurred — big schools, small schools, metropolitan schools, schools in provincial towns and remote areas — that is entirely understandable.

However, it is worth re-iterating that one of the primary functions of the materials is to support the development of plans of this nature. The What Works materials are all about helping people in schools take systematic action to improve outcomes for Indigenous students. Nothing else.

The Workbook and guide for school educators

The Workbook contains a series of tools and ideas to assist planning for improved outcomes for Indigenous students. It provides a process to develop an effective working plan.

What Works website

The What Works website is a comprehensive collection of What Works resources, including the ones listed on the back of this publication. You will also find lots of examples of the action other people have taken.
**A working partnership**

*Indicator:* Ways of effective two-way communication between school personnel and students’ parents/care givers are operating.

Relationships between people working in schools and Indigenous communities is a crucial issue and too complex to treat in a sentence or two here.

However, the bare minimum as the basis for a partnership is effective two-way communication about the primary function of the school, the education of individual students. It is no news to say that the support and interest of parents or care givers provides a crucial contribution to this process. The history of education in this country suggests that special efforts may need to be made to cultivate this interest and support among people who have had damaging and unsatisfactory experiences of schooling.

Communication with parents/care givers is another task often left to Indigenous teaching staff or aides/workers. If the task of improving outcomes is to be taken seriously this responsibility must be shared more widely.

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**Action informed by learning**

*Indicator:* There are structured professional learning opportunities for all staff which inform and support your efforts.

It is a vote of confidence in education — the work of schools, our work — to say that one of the best and most important uses of professional learning is to help resolve issues and improve the performance of individuals, teams, faculties and other groups, and the school as a whole.

Speaking broadly, there is a great deal to be learnt about improving the educational performance of young Indigenous people — about focus, about the key issues, about inter-cultural relationships, and about the contemporary and historical issues which affect this work so powerfully.

Schools have shown time and time again that it is possible to do better by, and with, this group of young people and their communities. The foundation of this improvement has often been something as simple, and as complex, as the establishment of better personal relationships between school and community personnel.

Time and opportunity to learn, which is structured into teachers’ professional work is an important building block of improvement. Some of the ideas which we have seen working and working well include:

- Establishing contact with the schools or other learning institutions that your students come from and go on to.
- Visiting other schools to see what they are doing, and asking others to visit your school.
- Inviting visiting experts, including successful school leaders from elsewhere to speak and/or conduct workshops.
- Increasing the level of community contact with a view to learning more about local history and current community operation.
- Deliberately spending some time with Elders.
- Participating in more formal cultural awareness training programs.
- Soliciting expert help/guidance on specific issues, e.g. forms of literacy or numeracy learning, or setting up enterprise activity.
- Conducting your own small scale research projects on issues that matter in your context. These might include case studies of the performance of particular individual or groups of students.
- Running, or participating in, cultural visits and tours. Think about how you might learn your way to succeeding.
1. Engage a What Works consultant
Contact our National Office to discuss having a facilitator visit your school and assist you to work through the material.

2. Audit your situation and performance
What are you currently doing to support Indigenous students?
Use the spidergram in the Workbook: How well are you doing?
What are you doing well? What can you improve on? What issues are of concern?
Use your own and comparative data.
Use the checklist in the Workbook.

3. Develop your plan
Use the process contained in the Workbook. Have a close look at the sections on goals and targets.
Make sure your plan has:
- **Targets** describing what you intend to achieve (with performance indicators, relevant baseline data and progressive results)
- **Strategies**. Check these regularly for effectiveness. Check the website for ideas and help about the topics you are interested in.
- **Assigned responsibilities**: what? by who? by when?
Make sure you have a data collection process in place. It doesn’t need to be complicated, just make sure that it tells you the sort of things you want and need to know related to what you are trying to do.

4. Monitor and review your progress on a regular basis
Collect and review data. The importance of this process can hardly be overstated. Good decisions can only be made on the basis of information.
Check you plan for continuing relevance and where necessary, revise it.
What Works. The Work Program

The What Works materials are based on a three part analysis of the way teachers and schools generally work to improve outcomes for Indigenous students: Building awareness – Forming partnerships – Working systematically.

The website (www.whatworks.edu.au) provides resources to support all of these.

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

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

The ‘Core Issues’ series, includes

- **Core Issues 1: Setting Up For Success** suggests ways in which schools might best be set up to maximise success for Indigenous students.
- **Core Issues 2: Reducing Suspensions** explores positive alternatives to suspension and ways they can be implemented in schools.
- **Core Issues 3: Literacy** explores questions about what it means to develop genuinely effective literacy.
- **Core Issues 4: Numeracy** tackles important questions about the meaning and importance of numeracy.
- **Core Issues 5: Student Engagement** discusses attendance, participation and belonging.
- **Core Issues 6: Boarding** looks at current practice in this small but growing area of Indigenous education.
- **Core Issues 7: International Perspectives** is a report of the DEST/OECD seminar held in Cairns in May 2007.
- **Core Issues 8: Education and Student Health: The Big Picture** looks at some of the health issues affecting Indigenous students and the part schools and teachers can play in dealing with them.
- **Core Issues 9: Using Data to Close the Gap** is designed to help build the capacity of schools to take action informed by evidence.
- **Core Issues 10: Personalised Learning Plans** aims to assist teachers and schools to deliver effective personalised learning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

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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