What Works.  
The Work Program  
Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Success in remote schools

A research study of eleven improving remote schools

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Acronyms used in this publication

ACER  Australian Council for Educational Research
AEO  Aboriginal Education Officer
AEW  Aboriginal Education Worker
AICS  Aboriginal Independent Community School
AIEO  Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer
APY  Anangu Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara
DEEWR  Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
EAL/EAD  English as an Additional Language/English as an Additional Dialect
ICSEA  Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
ICTs  information and communication technologies
IEW  Indigenous Education Worker
NAPLAN  National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NARIS  National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools
NCS  National Curriculum Services
NTCET  Northern Territory Certificate of Education
PBL  Positive Behaviour Learning
PLCs  professional learning communities
PLP  Personalised Learning Plan
PYEC  Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Education Committee
RSCAM  Remote Schools Curriculum and Assessment Materials
SBA  School-based Apprenticeship
SIDE  Schools of Isolated and Distance Education
SAE  Standard Australian English
VET  vocational education and training
I am pleased to introduce this report of the What Works research into success in remote schools.

The What Works team from National Curriculum Services undertook this research in eleven remote schools. These and many other remote schools are doing great work and achieving success under circumstances that are often very challenging. It is important that we share their strategies with other schools so that they can benefit from this experience.

The findings presented in this report are valuable because they offer unique insights into the practices and behaviours that have resulted in improved outcomes. They reinforce the things we know work well, like the importance of:

- strong school leadership;
- quality teaching and workforce development;
- adopting a high expectations culture; and
- engaging with parents and others in the local community.

These factors were built into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan because educators and communities told Education Ministers how important they were. What Works shows us that schools are implementing these factors in different ways to suit their local circumstances.

I hope that through reading about the journey of these eleven schools, educators and communities will be inspired in their own journey to build bright futures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

This research contributes to a growing evidence-base of what works to get better outcomes in remote schools. I congratulate the What Works team for its work and commend the report to all with an interest in closing the gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and those of other Australian students.

Peter Garrett AM MP
Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth

July 2012
Executive summary

Remote and very remote schools face significant challenges in attaining outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that are commensurate with all students. A critical aspect of the challenge is getting the mix of factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes together in a balanced, comprehensive and sustainable manner in a remote context.

While the challenges are significant, there are schools in remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that record successful outcomes for their students. This study reports on eleven remote or very remote schools located in South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland and New South Wales. Ten were identified by the National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools (NARIS) as improving schools. The eleventh school was nominated by the Aboriginal Independent Community Schools of Western Australia. The schools had demonstrated sustained improvement in National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) literacy and/or numeracy outcomes and attendance rates.

What Works researchers visited each school to observe and identify the practices the schools use to influence the various community, school, classroom, teacher and student-level factors that have potentially contributed to their improved performance.

Some common themes encapsulating the high-frequency actions used among the schools emerged from the information gathered.

It is clearly evident that school leadership, especially that of the principal, performs a critical role in the improving outcomes.

It is clearly evident that school leadership, especially that of the principal, performs a critical role in the improving outcomes. In all eleven schools principals’ actions are guided by a core belief in the learning capacity of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. They are not satisfied by their students performing at levels around those for similar schools and aim for achieving outcomes that at least mirror those for the state or territory. They recognise and value the importance of incorporating student cultural identity in school operations, in particular into teaching and learning. They combine their beliefs, goals and values with effective instructional leadership by guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvement in whole-school practices and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. While each of the principal’s actions are similarly focused and extensive, each of them simply views him or herself as performing the role of a principal. The principal’s role can be seen in all of the common strategies and high-frequency actions discussed in this report.

Of course they cannot do it alone. Profound approaches to school–family–community partnerships are evident in each of the eleven schools. The two-way dialogue observed between school and community is evidence of the depth of understanding and respect in the relationships. At each school the dialogue is based on shared assumptions: that school and community cultures have much to learn from each other; and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous ways of thinking, learning and
communicating should be respected in decision making. Engaging in authentic two-way dialogue with families and community has created a shared vision for students and agreed ways of achieving it.

A universal observation emerging from the eleven schools is that each has built a school culture focused on high expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These cultures include:

- strong, shared core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and learning;
- shared vision statements that describe high expectations of student outcomes;
- agreed norms based on positive relationships among all involved in student learning; and
- a strategic orientation complemented by a focused and manageable improvement agenda.

High expectations are not confined to students; they applied equally to all the adults involved in the schools.

Each of the schools has established whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy teaching that describe an instructional model expected to be seen in each classroom. These models include:

- revision of previous learning;
- discussion of learning intentions for the class;
- the use of whole-class and small group learning; and
- lesson conclusions involving whole-class review of what has been learned.

The instructional models provide support to teachers and also act as accountability mechanisms for the school to ensure that agreed practice is actually happening in classrooms. They are characterised as evidence-based and incorporate the use of focused teaching, assessment data and explicit teaching. The schools work to make learning content challenging, accessible, engaging and culturally responsive.

A range of strategies and actions is used by all schools to recruit and retain appropriate teaching staff, provide effective induction, monitor performance and provide ongoing professional learning. The primary emphasis of these strategies and actions is to influence teacher capacity and practice to deliver the whole-school pedagogical approaches developed by each school. They involve a mix of teacher support and accountability mechanisms such as professional learning, performance planning, and coaching and modelling.

Students are undoubtedly at the centre of activity in all of the eleven schools. Another set of high-frequency interventions observed in the schools is designed to respond to specific student-level factors viewed as critical by the schools in supporting literacy and numeracy achievement of their students. These interventions are designed to include, engage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and enhance their capacity to learn. They include:

- targeted attendance building;
- transition and pathways programs at various stages of learning;
- parent relationships and meetings;
- Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs);
- Special Education services, addressing student health and wellbeing factors; and
- an array of other initiatives.

These common strategies and high-frequency actions are grouped into seven themes emerging from the research project (see Figure 1).

The seven themes do not represent discrete stand-alone strategies. In effect, what was observed in the schools was a coherent and comprehensive set of strategies and actions designed to act on various levels, all intended to improve student learning. Common actions addressing whole-school factors (e.g. school culture) that influence outcomes were observed across the sites. The development of whole-school teaching approaches is designed to influence classroom factors. These are complemented by each school’s actions to engage students directly and increase their participation, that is, using targeted interventions to address various student-level factors.

It is suggested that this coherence in approach has been a significant contributor to the improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes recorded by the schools. Coherence also possibly distinguishes the endeavours of these schools from previous efforts to achieve improved
outcomes. The coherence is underpinned by some core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ capacity to learn and recognition of student cultural identity in school culture and teaching and learning. The belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are as able to learn as their non-Indigenous counterparts and that higher standards can be achieved is evident. Recognition of student cultural identity is seen as important in promoting positive self-identity and connection to schooling in students.

In addition to representing high-frequency actions among the schools, the seven themes also serve other purposes.

- They represent a coherent and comprehensive strategic thinking and planning framework used in each school to achieve improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

- They can be used in the form of an ‘improvement map’ to identify where action might be taken.

- They appear to be transferable to other locations to chart a pathway to improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

The schools recognise that more is to be done to attain outcomes for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that are commensurate with all students. They demonstrate how it can be done.
Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools
Research project overview

Which practices and behaviours have driven improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes in remote school settings?

**Methodology**

The research model was developed from some fundamental principles derived from the extensive national experience of the What Works program in working for improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. These principles are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must be given respect.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ cultures and the relevant implications of those cultures must be respected.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must be taught well.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must participate consistently.

The What Works knowledge base of the challenges and responses facing schools in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes was complemented by other knowledge generated through National Curriculum Services school improvement projects and a range of research findings, to develop a model to direct the research. The model identified a range of factors potentially contributing to the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

What Works researchers visited the eleven remote or very remote schools and mapped the strategies and actions being used by each school to influence outcomes. Individual school reports were reviewed and common strategies and high-frequency actions were identified.

**Key questions**

The primary question formulated to guide the project was:

- Which practices and behaviours have driven improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes in remote school settings?

In addition the project was interested to identify where each school had started and the pathways they followed in their endeavours to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. As a result the What Works researchers used two additional guiding questions:

- What have been the starting or entry points from the range of practices?
- What have been the pathways the schools followed to achieve and sustain improved outcomes?

A fourth question was developed to gauge whether the common strategies and high-frequency actions might be transferable to other school contexts. The fourth question was:

- Are these practices transferable to other contexts?
The schools

Government school systems in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory were approached through NARIS to identify two remote or very remote schools that had demonstrated sustained improvement in literacy and/or numeracy outcomes and attendance rates. The Aboriginal Independent Community Schools of Western Australia also nominated a school for the project.

The schools had high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments, generally close to 100%. NAPLAN data revealed the schools were ‘closing the gap’, with means above similar schools and gains in mean scores greater than similar schools’ gains. An increase in the proportion of students at or above the National Minimum Standards is also evident across the schools.

While NAPLAN means were above similar schools’ means and improving, they were generally below those for the state. While schools considered the improvements they have achieved as pleasing they are committed to a goal of performing at a level comparable to mainstream levels of achievement.

All schools had comparatively high to very high and improving attendance rates. Some had attendance rates higher than those recorded for the state.

**Goonoo Goonoo Central School (NSW)**

Goonoo Goonoo Central School is located in the remote town of Goonoo Goonoo in NSW. Students are drawn from the immediate township and surrounding area. Enrolment includes Kindergarten to Year 12. The school has an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 580 and enrolments of 56 students, of whom 98% are Aboriginal. There are 37 K–6 primary students and 19 Year 7–12 secondary students.

**Lightning Ridge Central School (NSW)**

Lightning Ridge Central School is a Kindergarten to Year 12 school, located in the remote mining town of Lightning Ridge. The school has an ICSEA of 803 and an enrolment of 400 students, of whom 45% are Aboriginal and a further 5% are English as an Additional Language/English as an Additional Dialect (EAL/EAD). The current enrolment consists of 250 primary students and 150 Year 7–12 students.
Shepherdson College (NT)

Shepherdson College has an ICSEA of 590 and 98% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment. It is located in the community of Galiwin’ku on Elcho Island, 550km northeast of Darwin. The population of Galiwin’ku is approximately 2200 and Djambarrpuyngu and Gupapuyungu are the most commonly spoken Yolngu Mata languages; there are up to 12 additional languages spoken in the community. It can be accessed via regular passenger air transport services and has an all-weather airstrip. The College provides education for over 500 students from early years to senior years, and educational services to seven Homeland Learning Centres. These centres are varying distances from Galiwin’ku with varied accessibility (often seasonal), and deliver education to small groups of students unable to attend the central school. There is close interaction between the school, Homeland Learning Centres and the community.

Urapunga Primary School (NT)

Urapunga Primary School is approximately 300km southeast of Katherine, in the Aboriginal community on Urapunga Station. The population of the community is approximately 100 and the main languages used are Kriol and Aboriginal English. Urapunga School is part of the Katherine Group. The school has approximately 35 students and an ICSEA of 569, with 97% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment.

Pormpuraaw State School (QLD)

Pormpuraaw State School is located in the remote Aboriginal Community of Pormpuraaw on the Western side of Cape York Peninsula. The school offers classes from Pre-Prep to Year 7 for an enrolment of approximately 105 children. It has an ICSEA of 584 with 96% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment.
Yarrabah State School (QLD)

Yarrabah State School is a multi-campus school comprising three separate campuses. It has an ICSEA of 601 with 100% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment. A Pre-Prep campus is located 500 metres from the Primary campus (which includes the school administration), with the Secondary campus (Years 8–10) located about 4 km away. Total student enrolment for 2010 was 435 full-time equivalent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, making it one of the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools in Queensland. Yarrabah is a coastal community in Far North Queensland. It is situated on the southern shore of Mission Bay about 60 km southeast of Cairns and beyond the Yarrabah Range. It was founded in 1871 as an Anglican Mission. The community of Yarrabah has a population of approximately 3500 residents.

Ernabella Anangu School (SA)

Ernabella Anangu School is one of nine Anangu schools situated in the far northwest corner of South Australia in the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. The Ernabella, or Pukatja, community is in the eastern Musgrave Ranges, west of the Stuart Highway. It is situated approximately 440 kilometres southwest of Alice Springs and just south of the Northern Territory border. Ernabella is approximately 1400 km by road from Adelaide. The Pukatja community consists of about 500 people and is the biggest community on the Lands. The school has an ICSEA of 533 and 100% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment. 142 students are enrolled at Ernabella from reception to Year 12 with 95 primary and 47 secondary students.

Mimili Anangu School (SA)

Mimili is an Anangu community on the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in the northwest of South Australia. The Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Lands are held on freehold title under the terms of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands. Entrance to the APY Lands is dependant on having a permit. The majority of the 60 students at Mimili are Anangu and their first language is Pitjantjatjara or Yankunytjatjara, as this is usually the language spoken at home. The students are only formally introduced to English when they start school. The school has an ICSEA of 580 and 100% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment.
**Dawul Remote Community School (WA)**

Dawul Remote Community School is located 110 km southwest of Kununurra on the Great Northern Highway in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It is situated on Doon Doon Station, an Aboriginal-owned cattle station of approximately one million acres (formerly Dunham River Station). The population of Doon Doon varies, with an average of 70 adults and 35 children. The school has a 100% Aboriginal student population. Most students and community members speak Kimberley Kriol and Aboriginal English and adults are competent Standard Australian English (SAE) speakers. The school's ICSEA is 593.

![Dawul Remote Community School](image)

**Menzies Remote Community School (WA)**

The heritage-listed Menzies Remote Community School, with an ICSEA of 649, is located 130kms north of Kalgoorlie and caters for students from K–12. The current school population of 32 is 95% Aboriginal with Wangkutha the dominant local language. The school has three primary classes and includes an early childhood centre and a high school class.

![Menzies Remote Community School](image)

**Kulkarriya Community School (WA)**

Kulkarriya Community School is an independent community-run school with a current enrolment of approximately 75 from K–10. It is situated on the Noonkanbah pastoral lease, transferred to the Yungngora Association in 1976. The settlement of approximately 250 people is located on the Fitzroy River, 170km southwest of Fitzroy Crossing. The student population is 100% Aboriginal and all speak English as their second or third language. The school has an ICSEA of 579.

![Kulkarriya Community School](image)
REMOTE SCHOOLS PROJECT

SCHOOLS

1. Mimili Anangu School
Mimili (SA)

2. Ernabella Anangu School
Ernabella (Pukatja) Community (SA)

3. Pormpuraaw State School
Pormpuraaw (midway Weipa/Karumba) (QLD)

4. Yarrabah State School
Yarrabah via Cairns (QLD)

5. Urupunga Primary School
Urupunga/Rittarangu Community (NT)

6. Shepherdson College
Galwin’Ku Community, Elcho Island, East Arnhem (NT)

7. Dawul Remote Community School
Doon Doon Station, Kimberley Region (WA)

8. Kulkarriya Community School
Yungngora Community, Fitzroy River Valley (WA)

9. Menzies Remote Community School
Menzies, Goldfields (WA)

10. Lightning Ridge Central School
Lightning Ridge (NSW)

11. Goodooga Central School
Goodooga (NSW)
Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools
Seven common high-frequency themes

While each of the eleven schools was located in its own distinctive context and had adopted strategies and actions in response to that context, some high-frequency practices were observed across the eleven settings. These common approaches are presented in the form of seven themes. Each of the themes has been described in more detail, using a structure of an overarching strategy and some common actions that illustrate the theme and strategy.

1. **Leadership is critical**

   It was evident that school leadership, in particular the principal, performs a critical role in achieving improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. Each leader’s strategy, emanating from a core belief in her/his students’ learning capacity and valuing their cultural identity, has been to guide, support, direct and sustain improvement in whole-school practice and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. Some common leadership actions observed across the eleven schools included:

   - conveying a clear vision based on high expectations for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, articulating how the school will achieve that vision and working in partnership with community and staff to achieve it;
   - providing instructional leadership;
   - acting as effective strategic thinkers and planners;
Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools
demonstrating a profound understanding of the school’s relationship with families and community;
displaying high capacity, commitment and belief and viewing their role as a privilege;
guiding, directing, supporting and sustaining improvement in all of the common strategies and high-frequency actions identified in this research project;
consistently modelling the practices and behaviours they want to see in the school;
identifying and working on a manageable number of priorities; and
designing distributed, empowering instructional leadership structures.

2. Profound understanding of the importance of school–community partnerships
A profound understanding of the importance of school–family–community relationships for student outcomes is particularly notable in every one of the eleven school–community settings. A common theme emerging from the schools was when schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities work in partnership, students get better results from their education. A broad strategy observed in each school was to engage in two-way dialogue with families and community to create a shared vision for students and agreed ways of achieving it. Some common actions observed across the eleven schools included:

- engaging in authentic two-way dialogue based on a shared vision, positive relationships and respect for cultural identity;
- recognising families as first educators and welcoming them into the school, using various forums designed to ensure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice is heard in the school;
- connecting leadership within the school and leadership within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, often through principals using key community members as mentors;
- establishing partnerships and relationships that describe the school vision and ways of achieving it;
- extending the concept of two-way dialogue into school operations (e.g. two-way teaching and two-way teams); and
- providing purposeful and appropriate ways for Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs) to act as a bridge to the community.

3. School cultures built on high expectations for all students
High expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes was a consistent theme. School cultures include strong, shared core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and learning, shared vision statements that describe high expectations for outcomes for students and agreed norms based on positive relationships. High expectations are not confined to students; they apply equally to all the adults involved in the schools. A common strategy of building a school culture focused on high expectations for students was evident, with high-frequency actions including:

- building some agreed core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and learning;
- developing shared vision or purpose statements that describe high expectations outcomes for students;
- establishing agreed school norms based on positive relationships among all involved in student learning;
- taking a strategic orientation to school planning and decision making;
- pursuing a focused improvement agenda;
- developing whole-school frameworks for teaching and behaviour that both guide practice and provide internal accountability process;
- designing organisational processes to achieve the school’s vision for its students;
- creating a positive and welcoming environment; and
- building working relationships with other agencies.
4. Coherent whole-school approaches to evidence-based literacy and numeracy teaching

Effective evidence-based teaching was a consistent theme across the schools. All schools had a strategy designed to develop and implement a whole-school framework for literacy and numeracy teaching in every classroom across the school. The frameworks describe an instructional model that is expected to be seen in each classroom. They are designed to provide support to teachers and also act as an accountability mechanism for the schools to ensure that agreed practice is actually happening in classrooms. More specifically, the common actions included:

- developing whole-school instructional approaches or frameworks to guide literacy and numeracy teaching;
- use of focused teaching;
- use of assessment data and information;
- use of explicit teaching;
- creating positive classroom relationships and orderly learning environments; and
- ensuring school organisation and resource allocation that is aligned with desired instructional practice.

5. Building and sustaining teacher capacity to deliver whole-school practice

All schools worked to ensure fidelity in implementation of the agreed whole-school approaches to good teaching practice through supporting teachers and accountability mechanisms. The broad common strategy was to build and sustain teacher capacity to deliver whole-school practice. More specifically, the common actions included:

- actively and strategically recruiting and managing teachers to match with school and community needs, including ‘home-grown’ solutions;
- highly valuing the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers;
- supporting non-Indigenous teachers in responsive relationships with the community;
- professional learning approaches aligned with desired teaching practice;
- allocating responsibility for leadership of learning;
- using collaborative two-way teacher and education worker planning;
- using coaching and modelling to build capacity; and
- using performance review and professional development processes to build capacity.

6. Empowering, supporting and engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enhance their learning capacity

Another set of high-frequency interventions observed in the schools was designed to respond to specific student-level factors viewed as critical in supporting the literacy and numeracy achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Strategies designed to include, support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and enhance their learning capacity were ever-present. More specifically, the common actions included:

- targeted attendance building;
- transition and pathways programs at various stages of learning;
- building parent relationships through meetings and sharing information;
- use of PLPs;
- accessing support for students with special needs;
- use of homework programs; and
- interventions to enhance student health and wellbeing.

7. Making learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive

Each of the schools recognised the relationships among the content being learned, student engagement and motivation to learn and learning outcomes. Strategies designed to make content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive were evident. Some common actions related to this strategy included:

- focused teaching;
- culturally responsive teaching; and
- the use of information and communication technologies (ICT).
Leadership is critical

‘The significant change that has occurred at the school can be attributed to the appointment of a new principal in mid-2008. He identified fundamental areas of concern, undertook a review of practices and led, with staff and community input, the decisive implementation of whole-school strategies to address issues impacting on the achievement of student outcomes. His leadership is credited by staff and parents as changing attitudes and practices toward a focus on high expectation around student performance, behaviour, staff conduct and teaching practices.’

(Research notes)

It was clearly evident that school leadership, especially leadership provided by the principal, performs a critical role in achieving the improvements that had been recorded. Principals’ actions were guided by a core belief in the learning capacity of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – that all their students are able to learn to higher standards, and that the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students can be closed. They were not satisfied by their students performing at levels above those recorded in similar schools and aimed for achieving outcomes that at least mirrored those for the state or territory. They value the importance of incorporating student cultural identity in school operations, in particular in the teaching and learning process, recognising that such an approach promotes positive self-identity and connection to schooling. They combined their beliefs, goals and values with effective instructional leadership by guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvement in whole-school practices and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

Their beliefs are translated into a clear vision of what they want the school to achieve, based on high expectations for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These strongly held beliefs enable them to think and act strategically. They articulate how the school will achieve the vision and lead the implementation of whole-school approaches to teaching practice and positive relationships. They design processes to ensure consistent implementation of these approaches across the school and allocate resources in line with achieving the vision. They demonstrate a profound understanding of the role of the school in the context of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and families, working with others and in partnership with the community to achieve the vision. They display high capacity, commitment and belief, view their role as a privilege and display high levels of commitment and energy.

Observations from each of the eleven schools made it very clear that school leadership performed a critical role in guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvement in practice and in student outcomes in their school. Although the quote at the start of this section is from one school, the themes contained within it were common across all of the schools. These themes applied equally to newly appointed principals and those who talked about sustaining practices of previous principals.

The common, high-frequency, high-intensity actions observed in these remote principals are woven through all of the common strategies identified in this report.
They demonstrate what is universally acknowledged about school leadership, that it is a critical factor in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. For example, resource sheets produced for the National Closing the Gap Clearinghouse by Helme and Lamb (2011) and Mulford (2011) point to leadership as a key strategy for increasing engagement, achievement and school completion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Mulford, for example, suggests research shows that sustainable school reform is best achieved when teachers and school leaders:

- understand what is happening in the broader community and the implications this has for schools (being contextually literate);
- run their schools in ways that respond positively to their community (being organisationally savvy); and
- act with others, pursue a consistent vision over time, focus on areas they can influence, use evidence to support change and use a range of leadership styles (being leadership smart).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 states ‘It is important that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are taught by high-quality teachers in schools led by effective and supportive principals who are assisted by a world-class curriculum that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.’

This recognition of the critical role of leadership also provides some pointers to what school leaders actually do in the eleven schools. A school leader needs to be able to see how the school and community operates as a whole, monitor the individual elements and the relationships among them over time and act on the elements to achieve improvement.

Principals in the schools brought a varied range of backgrounds to their roles. While many were very experienced, some were new to the role. Some had EAL/EAD backgrounds, some had extensive remote school experience and some had long experience in other fields. While their actions were similarly focused and extensive, each of the principals simply viewed her/himself performing the role of a principal as it should be. The observations of the commonness to the roles across different contexts support the picture of the critical role performed by principals.
Leaders convey a clear vision based on some core beliefs and high expectations for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The school leaders displayed a core belief that all students are able to learn to high standards, given support and good teaching, and that the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students can be closed. This core belief was demonstrated through words but, more importantly, through actions.

Leaders in each of the schools were effective strategic thinkers and planners

Clarity about what they wanted to achieve enabled the school leaders to be strategic. Their vision provided a platform for them to articulate clearly how the school would achieve that vision.

In effect, they owned a broad ‘theory of action’ enabling them to identify and act on the school, classroom, teacher, student and community-level factors that they knew would influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. Their thinking was framed around ‘if we do this, then student outcomes will improve.’

By focusing on these factors, principals primarily acted as instructional leaders in guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvement in teaching practice and in student outcomes in their school.

This clear focus influenced their observable actions and behaviours:

- They shared and communicated their vision.
- They were able to work with others to achieve it.
- They were creative and flexible.
- They were able to seize opportunities that fitted with their theory of action.
- They were able to design processes and allocate resources that supported achievement.
- They were able to avoid distractions caused by many competing programs and initiatives with which schools are often confronted.

If it didn’t fit, they didn’t do it.

Principals demonstrated a profound understanding of the school’s relationship with families and community

Each of the principals demonstrated a profound understanding of the role of the school and its relationships with the community. They viewed the school and community as a whole, regularly engaged in meaningful and open two-way dialogue and had an observable presence in the community. A substantial amount of their time was spent in the community. They worked with parents and community to develop a shared vision for the school in the community context.
What Works. The Work Program

The school leader’s role in guiding, directing, supporting and sustaining improvement can be seen in all of the common strategies and high-frequency actions identified in this research project.

School leadership’s hand was clearly evident across all of the common strategies and high-frequency actions identified in this research project. Leaders developed a shared vision for the school, worked with others to establish goals and targets that described high expectations outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, established positive relationships among all parties within the school and in the community.

They consistently held conversations with the community and were not prepared to accept simply that things were going well. They constantly checked for understanding and agreement about school directions and actions. They understood what was happening in the broader community and the implications this had for the school.

They viewed the school and community partnership as being about connecting leadership – leadership within the school and leadership within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. They saw it as vital to identify leaders within the community and the school, and worked together with them to support the process of having the conversation, building relationships and forming partnerships. Most principals had sought out such a leader to act as a mentor and guide.

The leader’s role

There is not a component of the school in which the huge positive impact of the principal of Mimili is not evident.

From the gentle direction of the principal at Goodooga, staff came to a realisation that there was a need for a consistent and whole-school approach to teaching Mathematics. Teaching was not consistent or sufficiently explicit and record keeping was not as good as it could be. It was also felt that new and graduate teachers required a program to follow. There is now a consistent, team-planned and very explicit approach to teaching Mathematics. Students are grouped according to ability; data is carefully collected and demonstrates a significant improvement in student outcomes.

A common feature across all schools visited was:

- the existence of clear and understood processes designed by the principal for implementing initiatives; and
- the ability of staff to describe the process used.

They commonly followed a set of steps such as:

- identification of need;
- identification of baseline data;
- consultation;
- professional development;
- resourcing;
- persistence;
- time; and
- review.

Working with community

The Dawul principal believes community is important. She is conscious that the community is happy to accept her contributions and so actively seeks ways to open meetings to ensure wide input. Her inclusive style leads to the high status the community gives the school. The principal believes her role with the community is the key to success, a view shared by community members. ‘Parents were happy with the school but not involved, they are now involved in decision making, in their children’s education’. There is clear evidence of understanding of the role of the school in community and its limitations. The principal is careful not to engage with community politics but at the same time ensures the school plays a key role in the life of the community.

The Mimili principal with the Apangu coordinator spends on average eight to nine hours per week in the community talking to families about their children’s attendance and learning. Her engagement with and respect for the leadership of all stakeholders is possibly the key point.

The Shepherdson College Director’s belief in the importance of community pervades the whole college operations. It can be seen in the governance arrangements with the cultural advisors and in outreach programs for the homelands, young mothers and disengaged clan groups. Importantly, it is observable in how teachers and assistant teachers work together in planning and teaching.

The Working with community and the leader’s role sections provide detailed insights into how school leaders effectively engage with their communities and implement strategies to support school improvement.
They led development of whole-school approaches and frameworks designed to guide practice. They designed and implemented processes and structures to ensure that consistent application of the agreed whole-school practices occurred. These processes were clearly aligned with achieving the school’s vision for its students.

**Leaders consistently modelled the practices and behaviours they wanted to see in the school**

Consistent leadership modelling of desired practices and behaviours in the school was clearly evident at each of the eleven schools. This modelling covered positive relationships and interactions, including the type of teaching that should occur in the school.

**Modelling desired behaviours**

Each morning at a whole-school assembly at Urapunga, the principal models the approach to learning for the day that will occur in classrooms. At the end of the week the principal leads a whole-school review of the week and identifies actions for the following week.

At Dawul, leadership is best characterised by the principal consistently modelling her philosophy of inclusivity and belief in the capacity of her clients. The principal has been a trainer in behaviour management for schools in the Kimberley. This is reflected through her modelling to all staff of a quiet, determined student management style resulting in high levels of attention by students.

The Goodooga principal spends most of his break times out in the yard greeting students by name and identifying trouble spots and demonstrating the principles behind Positive Behaviour Learning.

**Priorities at Kulkarriya**

The school has addressed five main concerns during the past three years, with all five encapsulated in the school–community partnership.

1. **Attendance** – Absences were common and the school now has attendance rates better than similar schools and the state.

2. **Literacy** – There is now a structured, intensive approach to improving literacy instruction and NAPLAN reading, and writing results are now above similar schools.

3. **Numeracy** – Previously there was no whole-school approach to numeracy teaching and the school now has a whole-school structured, focused approach to improving numeracy instruction. NAPLAN numeracy results are now above similar schools.

4. **Teacher quality and retention** – Teachers were staying for an average duration of one year or less. This impacted heavily on the school budget and on the sustainability of programs.

5. **Training and support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff** – The school now has two Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) performing purposeful roles in each classroom and is equipping them with the skills to be effective teacher aides.

A general commonness reflecting the themes in this report was evident in the priorities pursued by principals. Examples included consistent whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy, attendance, positive behaviour, relationships and staffing.

**Distributed, empowering instructional leadership structures**

While a range of leadership structures reflecting school size, context and systemic differences were evident, some common elements were observed in terms of role, shared responsibility and leadership group structure.

All approaches to leadership structure start from clear role descriptions for leaders, emphasising instructional leadership, with positions and responsibilities reflecting the key priorities and strategies being used to achieve the school vision.
Leadership structures could generally be described as flat and distributed and were most evident, for example, in allocating roles to lead improvement in literacy and numeracy, and in other strategically important areas.

Principals deliberately pursue actions to empower staff in leadership roles. Examples include co-leadership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and developing the notion of all teachers as leaders. As one teacher in a smaller school described the role: ‘the staff know where everyone is at, there is no one leader.’ Ernabella Anangu School has a Principal and an Anangu Coordinator who share the leadership within the school.

Leadership style

The introduction to this section described the critical role of leadership in terms of guiding, supporting, directing and sustaining improvement in practice in their school. In effect, these terms represent different approaches to leadership, depending on the context and what the leader wants to achieve. In some contexts guiding change might be more appropriate than simply supporting change.

The What Works researchers observed various leadership styles in use that reflected context and leadership intent. What was clear was the common focus on improvement in instructional practice across the school.

Leadership succession planning

Some instances of leadership succession planning were observed across the schools. These included a strategically planned approach, with the outgoing principal implementing a nine-month succession plan for the school’s next principal. This involved recognising the leadership potential and capabilities of a staff member and providing a mentor role to that person in developing leadership skills and opportunities.

Leadership styles at various schools

One observation across four schools was of a predominantly young staff led by an experienced leader who emits a sense of calm and quiet strength and someone who can be relied upon when things get difficult. These are principals who speak of normalising what they do, who know students by name and who are on a respectful first name basis with many elders, parents and community members, and who spend much of their time during breaks in the yard mixing and talking with students.

The Menzies principal uses an affiliative/democratic leadership style to manage her school. She supports and empowers her staff to use individual skill sets and the power of a team to lead the school forward. Her approach to leadership is evident in the way she speaks – the use of we/us, praising her staff for doing the work and minimising her own role – and results in a shared vision and whole-school planning and pedagogy.

According to Daniel Goleman’s leadership descriptors, the Goodooga principal is best described as being a combination of a visionary and affiliative leader, moving his staff in a collaborative fashion towards a shared vision, telling them where to go but not how to get there, yet managing to create a harmonious environment in which staff work. The principal openly shares information, hence giving knowledge and power to others.

Consistency at Shepherdson

Various actions are used to drive consistency of practice across the college.

One of these can be seen in the leadership roles and responsibilities structure. While the College Director believes in allowing his assistant principal primary and assistant principal secondary to run their own departments, it is within a well-defined framework and he has a clear vision and ensures that programs comply with that vision.
Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools
Profound understanding of the importance of 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.’ Louise Bye, Assistant Director, Aboriginal Education and Training, NSW DET

What Works experience has shown that where schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities work in authentic partnership, students get better results from their education. It’s that simple. Observations drawn from the eleven schools confirmed this.

A profound understanding of the importance of school–family–community relationships for student outcomes is particularly notable in every one of the eleven school–community settings. The degree to which arrangements between the schools and community are formalised varies, for example, from a community-owned school to larger government schools that serve various clans. However the common observation is that all schools practise authentic engagement with community as part of the way the school operates, and that the school and community are in unison and working together for improved student outcomes.

This can be seen in: authentic two-way dialogue based on respectful relationships and shared assumptions about school and community cultures learning from each other; respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous ways of thinking, learning and communicating in decision making; recognising and welcoming families; making connections with community leadership. In many cases these relationships are formalised through school–community partnership agreements.

Common actions

A common theme emerging from the schools was when schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities work in partnership, students get better results from their education. A broad strategy in each school was to engage in two-way dialogue with families and community to create a shared vision for students and agreed ways of achieving it. Some common actions observed across the eleven schools included:

- engaging in authentic two-way dialogue based on a shared vision, positive relationships and respect for cultural identity;
- recognising families as first educators and welcoming them into the school, using various forums designed to ensure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice is heard in the school;
- connecting leadership within the school and leadership within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, often through principals using key community members as mentors;
- establishing partnerships and relationships that describe the school vision and ways of achieving it;
- extending the concept of two-way dialogue into school operations; and
- providing purposeful and appropriate ways for IEWs to act as a bridge to the community.
A broad strategy in each school was to engage in two-way dialogue with families and community to create a shared vision for students and agreed ways of achieving it.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 advocates a two-way approach to community engagement that results in interaction of school and community in locations both in and out of school, which will build social capital in the school community to enable authentic engagement and connection.

**Engaging in authentic two-way dialogue based on a shared vision, positive relationships and respect for cultural identity**

Authentic two-way dialogue is a strong feature at each of the settings, practised through engagement and continual re-engagement with community and families.

Forms of engagement vary across the school settings through context-specific governance arrangements and school-community initiatives. Kulkarriya Community School, for example,
is a community-owned school governed by a community board. The Anangu people have a formalised agreement between the SA Minister of Education, Anangu Education and the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), giving PYEC Policy and Operational control of education on the APY Lands. At Lightning Ridge a strong Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group guides Aboriginal issues and builds a relationship between the school and community. In other settings arrangements were less formal but still authentic.

Schools were often viewed as a learning centre for the whole community, again with students as the focus. It was also evident that challenges in sustaining the relationships exist. These include addressing difficult issues such as attendance and changes in personnel over time.

Recognising families as first educators and welcoming them into the school

Observations confirm the extensive What Works experiences and approaches to partnerships described in the publication Conversations > Relationships > Partnerships – A Resource for School Staff (NCS – What Works. The Work Program, 2009):

‘To be successful, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need to feel connected, comfortable and confident when they are at school. This is most likely to happen when parents and community members feel that way too.’

The schools recognise families as the first and foremost and continuing educators of their children, welcome them into the school and willingly share information about student progress. Again, this is consistent with What Works experience:

‘What young people learn at school is secondary to what they learn at home. If the interests of families and schools are aligned and there is trust and mutual support between home and school, opportunities to build success are improved. The responsibility for making improvements in education using various focused outcomes must be a shared one. This will only happen when Aboriginal families become more familiar with, confident about and engaged in the work of schools – and when, in turn schools become more knowledgeable about, engaged with and respectful of the backgrounds, lives and aspirations of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.’

A community and culture that support learning and develop their own learning are a community and culture that are primed for educational success.

It was evident that each of the schools recognised that responsibility for making improvements in educational outcomes must be a shared one. They had instituted activities designed to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to become more familiar with, confident about and engaged in the work of schools. They organised forums designed to welcome family and community into the school and to share information about student learning and progress, effectively building accountability to the community. Schools also took steps to become more knowledgeable about, engaged with and respectful of the backgrounds, lives and aspirations of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Each of the schools presents some form of symbolic recognition of community and clients across the school. They use various forums designed to ensure the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice is heard in the school. They work to develop community pride in the school and, importantly, work with families to understand student progress and plan how further improvement in learning can be achieved. Cultural identity is reflected in various ways, through the curriculum, the school environment, celebrations and events.
Connecting leadership within the school and leadership within the community

School and community partnerships are about connecting leadership – leadership within the school and leadership within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Principals see it as vital that leaders are identified within the community and the school and that they work together to support the process of having the conversations, building relationships and forming partnerships. School and community working together is about learning, sharing and building skills and shared knowledge. Principals spend significant time in the community making these connections.

To improve outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students the schools recognise that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice must be heard. Where schools and communities work together the same message about education from home and school is delivered – making learning relevant both at home and at school. Parents and community being aware of and having an understanding of what is happening in schools is one of the most important ways to support the child’s learning at school.

Various co-leadership and co-governance arrangements are observable across the schools.

Establishing partnerships and relationships that describe vision and ways of achieving it

More than one community member in different locations made remarks similar to ‘we are stronger about who we are with a shared vision.’

While some variation in terms of formal arrangements was evident, all of the schools had effective two-way relationships with the community and parents and caregivers. This reflected a common belief that collective knowledge and wisdom were needed to meet successfully the challenges the schools face. The features of these partnerships included shared vision, trust, respect and positive two-way dialogue.

Although formal agreements vary according to local context they generally incorporate common elements:

- a preamble describing the parties to the agreement;
- some aspirations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and
- some goals and agreed responsibilities for the parties involved.

Extending the concept of two-way dialogue into school operations

The two-way dialogue with community stood out. However the concept of ‘two-way’ was not just confined to engagement with the community, it pervaded how the school was organised and operated, for example, in two-way approaches to teaching and learning and in two-way staff teams.

Providing purposeful and appropriate ways for IEWs to act as a bridge to community

Schools recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and IEWs, particularly those from the local community, are well positioned to understand the experiences and cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Leadership at Kulkarriya

The Kulkarriya agreement has a specific section on Leadership which states:

‘The next generation of Yungngora leaders are groomed at Kulkarriya school.’

The school community commits to:

- respecting the elders of Yungngora Community;
- ensuring that everything the school does is a preparation for future leadership;
- caring for each other;
- accepting responsibility;
- working hard;
- looking after school property; and
- being ‘Strong and Skudda’.
Over a number of years, there has been a trend for Anangu to seek greater involvement in school issues and policy/curriculum directions. In line with a request from Anangu people and with the SA Department of Education, and Children’s Services policy on community involvement in schools, this movement was formalised for the APY Lands in an agreement between the Minister of Education, Anangu Education and the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC), giving PYEC Policy and Operational control of education on the APY Lands.

Individual communities and their Governing Councils play a strong role in decisions associated with the education of their children. It is part of the responsibility of the principal and all staff to ensure that this link between school and community is maintained and developed so that genuine empowerment of the community in matters relating to education and school occurs. This is seen as a great thing. The schools and community both view the school as a learning centre for the whole community.

The principal ‘downplays’ the details explaining the respect the community has for her, but the fact many Wati (initiated men) return to secondary education with support of elders is one indicator of this.

Menzies school has a real partnership with the community and, as one parent stated, ‘The teachers are honest and tell us when our kids are good or mucking around and then we can help’. Another parent said this is ‘like a family school and my family can come into the school at any time’. The school takes into account issues of unrest and/or concern in the community and assists the students and the parents to address the problems.

The breakfast and ‘sip and crunch’ programs are well received by the parents.

By providing information sessions on literacy and numeracy, and training programs available for parents both at school and also in the Aboriginal Corporation building, the community is empowered to assist the students and in some cases to further the education of the parents.

The principal also assists in organising appropriate training opportunities through Midwestern Education and Economic Development Aboriginal Corporation (MEEDAC).

Engaging parents and the community at Yarrabah includes provision of community programs including out-of-hours access to educational programs and facilities such as computers, along with whole-school celebratory events and the development of shared space for community in the school. The school community engagement officers work with parents and community on a regular basis. The principal ensures the decision making process includes consultation with parents and community on plans or initiatives that have a significant impact on what happens at the school. Feedback from the school’s Parents & Citizens (P&C) President reflected that this consultation is authentic and that parents feel respected that their opinion and input are sought. Consultative forums include contact with groups such as:

- students;
- Yarrabah P&C – an active group of parents who meet on a monthly basis;
- Local Consultative Committee – a reference group made up of staff, parent and community representatives who filter all decisions, including consultation processes and data collation/analysis, surrounding the implementation of National Partnerships strategies;
- representatives of other groups who support students at risk in the school and their parents;
- Yarrabah Shire Council; and
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives and community elders.

The Dawul principal has a strong sense of engaging community in all aspects of the school, and to the community ‘owning the school’. She spends a significant amount of energy building community ownership in the decision making. While one parent noted ‘we are happy for the principal to make the decisions’, the principal is very conscious of the pitfalls associated with falling back on such responses and keeps working the parents until she believes she has an agreed way forward. A formal agreement has been concluded and there is clearly a high level of good will between the community and the school, a characteristic for a number of years. The test of the relationship may well come when the older leaders of the community pass on their responsibilities. Engaging younger families is more challenging. Steps include a 0–4 program with young mothers, and changing the style of meetings to ‘get togethers’ (learning circles) as a vehicle to encourage greater meaningful participation.

The principal uses a set of questions developed by the Stronger Smarter Institute, the Engoori model for meetings. These questions are designed to access collective knowledge and wisdom to meet successfully the challenges schools and community face.

Examples of successful two-way dialogue between school and community

... ‘like a family school and my family can come into the school at any time’.
It is universally clear that each of the eleven schools possesses a school culture focused on high expectations for students. This observation reflects the general and long-held understanding that school culture is an important school-level factor that influences student outcomes. For example, ACER (2011) findings from a longitudinal study of primary school students’ literacy and numeracy skills confirm that ‘developing a school culture in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel included and supported to learn are key aspects of closing the gap in educational achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.’ Helme and Lamb (2011), writing in the context of secondary schooling, cite research in Australia and overseas that points to some broad strategies shown to be effective for increasing engagement, achievement and school completion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. One of these strategies includes ‘building a school culture that acknowledges and supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families.’

While ‘acknowledging’, ‘including’ and ‘supporting’ pointed to by the research are key aspects of the eleven school cultures, in each case they are seen as critically important contributors to achieving a shared vision for the school and community. In each of the schools it is obvious that high expectations of success for students are central to their shared vision. The eleven schools confirm another general understanding, that clear purpose and high expectations are critical school-level factors for improving student outcomes.

**Common actions**

High expectations was a consistent theme observed through a strategy of building a school culture focused on high expectations for students. More specifically, the common actions observed in the cultures of these schools included:

- building some agreed core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and learning;
- developing shared vision or purpose statements that describe high expectations outcomes for students;
- establishing agreed school norms based on positive relationships among all involved in student learning;
- taking a strategic orientation to school planning and decision-making;
- pursuing a focused improvement agenda;
- developing whole-school frameworks for teaching and behaviour that both guide practice and provide internal accountability processes;
- designing organisational processes to achieve the school’s vision for its students;
- creating a positive and welcoming environment; and
- building working relationships with other agencies.
In very simple terms, a school’s culture is the way things are done. The way a school does things reflects some basic ideas, assumptions and beliefs shared by the school members, common purpose, the values and norms that guide behaviours and actions in the school, and the observable artefacts and practices in a school (e.g. Schein, 1992). Each of the eleven schools shares similarities from all these aspects of school culture. As with Ernabella, each school works to ensure everyone is on the same page, with students written in big type.

The common thread through all the cultures is high expectations for student outcomes. High expectations were not just confined to student outcomes, they applied equally to the adults involved in the schools.

While two of the schools are part of the Stronger Smarter Institute1 program, all display the same commitment to ‘changing the tide of low expectations in Indigenous Education across Australia’ through ‘high expectations’ leadership to ensure ‘high expectations’ classrooms with ‘high expectations’ teacher/student relationships. These high expectations play out not just as words or statements; in each of the schools high expectations are observable in the consistent actions and behaviours of adults and students in classrooms, across the school and in relations with community.

The role of leadership, development of the school culture and the improvement pathways followed by the schools have gone hand-in-hand. School leadership has been involved in creating or sustaining a high expectations culture, reflecting the pathway mapped for the school. All three are bonded to a clear focus on improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

Each school culture is inclusive, supportive and respectful of families and community. The importance of positive relationships is reflected by discussion of this element in the previous section of this report.

Core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and learning

A prevailing core belief that all students are able to learn to high standards and that the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students can be closed is common to the schools. While each of the schools acknowledges that a range of contextual factors such as socioeconomic conditions, language background, health, attendance and learning ability can affect the rate

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**One People, One Agenda, One Talk**

Yarrabah’s statement of purpose – developed in consultation with parents – is to improve outcomes for ALL students and to be ‘a united community achieving excellence’. The vision is to be:

- One People (comprising Yarrabah community, Yarrabah school community and Yarrabah students);
- with One Agenda (an explicit improvement agenda); and
- united in One Talk (unified for student success).

The school clearly outlines its beliefs and values and the expectations for staff who work at the school.
at which students learn, they are very vocal and make it abundantly clear that these are not justifications for students failing to learn.

The schools do not fall into the trap of ‘a belief among teachers and the broader community that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less able to learn than their non-Indigenous counterparts because of their ‘external’ situation’ (Sarra, 2008). Equally important as such a belief among teachers were the efforts to engender high expectations about learning.

### Communicating values and expected behaviour

At Lightning Ridge, a set of values and expected behaviours is displayed in all classrooms and around the school both as lists and within a tortoise shape designating a local totem.

To build awareness of this program in the community the school used the newsletter, sent notices home, and after extensive consultation with elders, large turtle totems (totemic animal for Yuwaalaraay people) were painted at many locations around the school to display school rules.

At Yarrabah, the mood, and vibe, of the school is upbeat and there is constant reinforcement of students’ positive attributes, successes and the behaviours that are expected.

The school leadership team, administration staff, classroom teachers and support staff consistently model this. It is also visible in messages around the school and in written and verbal communication to the community.

### Strategic orientation based on a shared high expectations vision

High expectations for students provide the keystone for strategic thinking and planning at each of the schools. For example, school vision statements describe expectations in terms of achieving high standards of learning for all students. More specific goals and targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students complement these statements of purpose. Together, the school vision, goals and targets describe school strategic intent, focused on literacy and numeracy improvements, but also including other academic, wellbeing and pathways outcomes. They reflect the core beliefs about student learning, often make it clear what the gap to be closed looks like, and identify how progress would be measured.

### Taking a strategic thinking orientation to school planning and decision making

These clear statements about what the schools want to achieve for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also provide clear guidance for deciding on how they are going to achieve it. The schools’ strategic orientations are represented in school strategic plans and annual implementation plans.

Strong and clear intent and planning have enabled the schools to be strategic in their decision making. ‘How will this help us achieve our vision, goals and targets for students?’ has been the key question to be answered when making resource allocation decisions. School answers are clearly illustrated in each section and theme discussed through this report.

### Pursuing a focused improvement agenda

A common characteristic is that the schools translate their vision into a very strategic improvement agenda. They effectively have a ‘theory of action’ on how they are going to achieve what they want to. The emphasis is on a manageable number of strategies each year (around three) that focus on what is important to achieve the school’s vision. All schools have school improvement or strategic plans that describe unambiguous strategies reflecting the strategic thinking that has occurred. The improvement agenda was communicated in a variety of ways to the whole school community.
**School norms based on positive relationships**

A notable common characteristic of school culture that emerged from the eleven schools is norms based on positive relationships among all stakeholders, in particular between teachers and students. This stands out as one of the strong high-frequency factors across all schools, with these norms used to guide the way members of the school community behave and expect others to behave. The norms establish some clear 'non-negotiable' expectations across the school.

These norms and expectations are particularly relevant for establishing an orderly learning environment in classrooms and across the school generally. A majority of schools had moved to more positive student management approaches as a key initiative integral to their improvement pathway.

Observations from each of the schools revealed consistent modelling of these positive relationships in classrooms and across other school operations.

These observations correspond with the findings of the ACER (2011) longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ literacy and numeracy learning, which revealed student ratings of school climate (e.g. the learning environment and teacher-student relations) were significantly related to literacy and numeracy achievement.

The observation is also consistent with findings of another ACER (2010) report on contextual factors that influence the PISA achievement of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This report suggests

‘a supportive environment, which included a climate characterised by high expectations and positive teacher-student relations, can be a positive influence on students’ performance, whereas disruptive behaviour and negative attitudes towards school may not only be associated with low academic performance, but may also factor in the decision to withdraw from school.’

Notably, this suggestion applied to all students, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The What Works research findings indicate that norms of positive relationships appear to be a critical factor contributing to improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes in each of the eleven schools.

**Whole-school frameworks designed to guide practice and provide internal accountability**

A common school strategy is the design and use of whole-school approaches in core areas, for example for teaching and learning and student management. In essence, these ‘frameworks’ describe some key processes by which the school intends to achieve its vision, goals and targets.

**The What Works research findings indicate that norms of positive relationships appear to be a critical factor contributing to improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes in each of the eleven schools.**

The whole-school approaches are designed to provide guidance about what good practice should look like in the school. In addition they are ‘mandated’ and as a result provide a framework of accountability within the school. Various formal and informal processes complement the frameworks and act as internal accountability mechanisms. Examples included staff performance and development planning and approaches to team planning.

These whole-school approaches to pedagogy and positive relationships are described and illustrated in more detail in other sections.

**Schools designed and organised to support high expectations**

Schools might convey a sense of high expectations but unless they organise in a way that reflects those high expectations and that enables the important things to get done, change and improvement do not happen. This was evident in the research schools and, while each of the schools has its own distinctive way of organising to achieve its strategic intent in its own context, similarity in the broad way they do things is clearly a critical element contributing to the improvement they had achieved. This was seen in:

- a range of approaches, including ‘quarantined’ time blocks for literacy and numeracy;
- regularly scheduled teacher planning sessions; and
how students and teachers were grouped and resource allocation in general.

A positive and welcoming environment
Litter and graffiti-free environments, with attractive classrooms and foyer entries, clearly identified that many or most or all of their students are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The symbolism of these practices is very important.

Relationships with other agencies
The schools have relationships with an extensive range of agencies working with the school on various fronts to manage health and wellbeing, family and community support and disengaged youth. While recognising the vital importance of these relationships, a feature of the schools’ approach is to ensure that they work, but not at the expense of their core business. Schools protected their teaching and learning time.

Conclusion
The What Works research findings made it clearly evident that each of the schools has a school culture designed to get the important things done. The schools are unambiguous about what is important – high expectations for student outcomes, particularly by improving each student’s literacy and numeracy levels. This clarity in vision is complemented by similar ways of doing things, including embedding positive relationships and establishing frameworks and processes designed to achieve the school’s intent for its students.

In effect the eleven schools have established some necessary settings or pre-conditions for improved outcomes, and these appear to have contributed to the improvements the schools have achieved. However, establishing settings is not the complete story from the eleven schools, and additional common practices that appear to have led to improvement are explored in the following sections. These are related to practice in the classroom.

The What Works research findings made it clearly evident that each of the schools has a school culture designed to get the important things done.

Working with other agencies
Other agencies working with Dawul school include the following organisations:
- Wunun Foundation;
- Wunan Workforce Development;
- Kimberley Mental Health;
- Kimberley Group Training; and
- the Diversion team from Corrective Services.

The staff from these agencies work with the school and community to prevent juveniles falling off the tracks.

The school has a twice yearly visit from the school community nurse and Ear, Nose and Throat specialists visit once a year.

The school carefully considers requests from agencies to ensure that programs don’t cut across core business. Sporting bodies provide after school programs for example.
Coherent whole-school approaches to evidence-based literacy and numeracy teaching

Research has clearly demonstrated the critical relationship between teacher quality and student outcomes. To help identify what teaching practice is occurring in the schools, the project’s research model depicted the classroom as consisting of three elements: the teacher, the student and the content, as well as the relationships among these three elements.

Representing the classroom in this manner allowed What Works researchers to identify what classroom practice looks like in each of the schools, by focusing on the instructional role of the teacher and the role of students in learning the intended curriculum. It also guided observations about pedagogy, that is, how teachers and students interacted and engaged with each other and the content.

While specific programs varied in each of the schools, one consistent theme emerged. Each school has adopted a coherent whole-school approach to teaching and learning, particularly for the key areas of literacy and numeracy.

Whole-school approaches or frameworks for teaching practice – instructional models

While these coherent whole-school approaches varied in prescription, all were designed to provide guidance to teachers about what good literacy and numeracy teaching should look like in the school. Some were school-developed and others were system-level frameworks. Common characteristics of these frameworks were descriptions of:

- the framework as a school strategy designed to improve student learning outcomes;
- what was expected for program delivery, for example, mandated programs and time allocations to literacy and numeracy;
- what teaching practice should look like;
- teaching focused on the developmental needs of students;
- a process that outlined the steps to be followed in planning, teaching, assessing and using the assessment to inform further teaching practice;
- expectations of what teachers should do in each of the steps; and
- EAL/EAD approaches.

Effective evidence-based teaching was a consistent theme achieved through a strategy of supporting the implementation of focused teaching practice in each classroom. More specifically, the common actions included:

- developing whole-school instructional approaches or frameworks to guide literacy and numeracy teaching;
- use of focused teaching;
- use of assessment data and information;
- use of explicit teaching;
- creating positive classroom relationships and orderly learning environments; and
- ensuring school organisation and resource allocation are aligned with desired instructional practice.
These frameworks describe an instructional model that is expected to be seen in each classroom. They include a common classroom sequence or routine covering steps such as revision of previous learning, describing learning intentions for the current class, the use of whole-class and small group learning, and concluding with a whole-class review of what has been learned. The frameworks provide support to teachers and also act as an accountability mechanism for the schools to ensure that agreed practice is actually happening in classrooms.

**Focused teaching**

A key aspect of the whole-school approaches is focused teaching, that is, teaching focused on the learning needs of each student. While different terminology was used across the school settings, some broad-focused teaching concepts were evident in the approaches. These included notions such as the ‘zone of proximal development’ and ‘assisted development’ (Vygotsky, 1978), ‘scaffolding’ (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) and ‘gradual release of responsibility’ (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983).

Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development describes the range or zone where learning can be facilitated for an individual student. The teacher’s critical role is designing and organising instruction so that it is focused in this zone, with tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult. Complementing this is Vygotsky’s notion of assisted development, premised on the view that learning is maximised when a ‘more knowing other’ is able to structure learning tasks aligned with the needs of the learner and assist them with the learning. Scaffolding means providing the right type of support at the right time, revealing to the learner how to move from what he or she can currently do independently to a higher level of functioning. Gradual release of responsibility completes this picture, depicting teaching as moving students towards independent learning using some broad phases of teacher responsibility, shared responsibility, and finally student responsibility.
What Works. The Work Program

In many cases, the focused teaching approaches represented movement away from teacher-centred approaches to personalised and evidence-based practice. The common processes involved a teaching and learning cycle that consists of using assessment data to identify what students know and can do, what they need to know, planning teaching and learning sequences, teaching, and then assessing whether the new learning has been acquired. Then the cycle begins again.

Use of assessment data and information

These focused teaching concepts assume that schools have access to accurate assessment data and information about student learning and are able to use the information to inform teaching practice. What Works researchers noted a connection between assessment data and teaching practice in each school. As a result, existence of a personalised evidence-based instructional approach was a common emerging theme, although the schools did differ in the stage to which the practices had developed. Observations included schools and teachers using:

- ‘maps’ of curriculum content describing a developmental learning continuum, including clear descriptions of learning objectives and indicators of student progress;
- assessment data to locate each student on the learning continuum, identifying the point of instruction where the teacher can support and guide a student’s learning; and

Data and feedback

The use of assessment data is prevalent at Urapunga. Parents want to know how their child is performing against state/national norms. The principal’s ICT skills are such that data management is excellent and readily available in formats suitable for parent and teacher use.

Particular care is taken to identify where students new or returning to the community are in their literacy and numeracy skills, so that their performance can be appropriately targeted and tracked. Data underpins classroom practice and therefore forms the basis for principal–teacher dialogue. There is highly effective use of ICT in this process as it enables presentation of material in a variety of useful formats. Of particular note is the careful tracking of itinerant students.

Student feedback in the Maths program at Goodooga was very powerful. At the end of each lesson students were required to reflect on:

- their work;
- the level of the instruction;
- what they had learned; and
- what they now need to learn.

The teacher and other students would then ask individuals to explain why they said what they did. This formed the organisation for the next day’s work even if this meant regrouping of students. The researcher commented ‘this was the most powerful student reflection I have seen.’
knowledge of appropriate teaching responses at the point of instruction, including when and how to use teaching strategies and matched resources (for example, the use of explicit teaching and levelled texts), and having the classroom structures, routines and tools to deliver differentiated instruction.

Curriculum maps describing developmental learning continuums included system, local and school-level documents. Examples included the NT Remote Schools Curriculum and Assessment Materials (RSCAM), the NSW Quality Teaching and Learning model, the WA Aboriginal Literacy Strategy and the Kimberley Literacy Profile.

Each school used NAPLAN data such as mean scores, proportions of students at, above and below standards and item-level data to identify particular skills or aspects of the curriculum that might need attention. All schools recognised that while NAPLAN data have some important uses, the closer to the point of teaching that assessment data are generated the more useful they become diagnostically to identify appropriate evidence-based teaching actions. Examples of assessment linked to the curriculum maps being used included Best Start Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Programs, Aboriginal Independent Community School (AICS) Numeracy, Probe, Kimberley Literacy Profiles, Running Records, PM Benchmark. The use of student feedback about their own learning was evident.

Illustrations of teaching responses and the use of matched resources at the point of instruction were plentiful at each school. In the case of matched
resources, a common illustration was the use of levelled texts, particularly PM Benchmark readers. Reading Recovery was a common literacy intervention strategy used in the primary schools. Shepherdson College’s use of the NT RSCAM is illustrative of some comprehensive approaches evident in most schools. The RSCAM targeted resources are designed to support the required teaching, learning and assessment for each term of each year (Pre-school to Year 9). The resources are packaged using:

- a learning design framework;
- strategies known to make a difference to student learning and that include diagnostic tasks and tools;
- scope and sequence of exit outcomes;
- teaching routines;
- digital resources; and
- units of work linked to student work samples.

Differentiation within and across classrooms was a common teaching response to assessment data. In one school, students were grouped into classes based on assessments, regardless of age. Teachers used data to form in-class groupings and/or groupings across classes, based on developmental learning needs.

One researcher reported a general observation across four schools of ‘teachers who are active in the classroom, who use explicit teaching during class lessons and do not waste opportunities for students to learn.’

As indicated, schools were at different points in the movement toward personalised learning and use of feedback, and for all schools they represent a next level of challenge in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

**Explicit teaching**

A frequent and common observation was the use of explicit teaching. This approach involves explicitly telling and directing student attention toward producing specific learning outcomes, with content broken down into small parts and taught individually. It might follow steps such as setting a purpose for learning, telling students what to do, showing them how to do it and guiding their hands-on application of the new learning.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 advocates explicit teaching for both literacy and numeracy. Much educational literature highlights explicit teaching as a relevant instructional approach in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings, for example in the learning of specialised Mathematics language, in modelling of SAE, and explicitly teaching students to code-switch. As with other teaching responses, including modelling and demonstrating, explicit teaching in the schools was practised within a structured framework to provide scaffolding towards learners’ independence.

Other characteristics of the classroom learning environments observed included teachers actively engaging students in their own learning by:

- informing them of the purposes of their work, tasks which were meaningful and authentic; and
- using modelling, explanation, discussion and explicit teaching as required and processes designed to move students toward self-regulation and independence.

**Whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy instructional practice**

The whole-school frameworks and focused teaching themes are illustrated in the literacy and numeracy programs used at each school. Each school had effectively ‘mandated’ its programs and approaches, establishing clear expectations that the programs would be used in each classroom.

While literacy programs were diverse, they exhibited characteristics of the three aspects of curriculum maps, use of assessment data and matching resources and teaching responses to student learning needs.

Numeracy teaching at some schools also illustrated different strategies thought to be effective in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to learn numeracy, including explicitly teaching mathematical language and relating mathematical problems to traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.

**Tackling the EAL/EAD and SAE challenge**

The remote settings meant that most students arrive at the schools speaking an Aboriginal dialect, Kriol,
Recognition of the challenges has meant a focus on native language, oral SAE language learning, and teaching English as an additional language approaches. Schools did vary with regard to the use of SAE, Aboriginal English or local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in the classroom, with the main difference occurring in the early years. Some insisted on SAE and others used the first language in the early years, although all did address the issues mentioned above that needed to be addressed in an EAL/EAD context.

Positive classroom relationships and orderly learning environments
As indicated, each of the eleven schools had deliberately worked on building a school culture...
characterised by positive relationships and these approaches were evident in classrooms. As mentioned, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student ratings of school climate, including teacher-student relations, are significantly related to literacy and numeracy achievement.

Two of the What Works fundamentals are that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must be given respect, and students’ cultures and the relevant implications of those cultures must be respected. These form a basis of positive and respectful classroom relationships. These and other aspects of positive relationships will be evident in practice, high expectations in the classroom and specific initiatives related to classroom management, and how an orderly learning environment is created and sustained.

One researcher commented that common observations across schools included calm classrooms and playgrounds and fun, where laughter is a feature in each school.

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**The use of languages**

**Urapunga** has a two-year integrated curriculum to maintain student and teacher interest. The teaching methodology is heavily reliant on EAL/EAD. Some use of Kriol occurs with the Aboriginal staff to explain concepts that are lost. SAE is only used in the school when requiring maximum exposure and practice during key learning times. Numeracy and Literacy classes are dedicated to 9.00am to 12.30pm.

While two teachers have Reading Recovery training it is the graded material that underpins the school’s program. It is therefore seen as a core program rather than an intervention tool. Teachers are instructed to ‘always’ use SAE with the students.

Students are provided with literacy backpacks in which they can take books home. Parents/carers are encouraged to listen to their children read every afternoon. Homework reading consists of PM Readers in plastic waterproof folders.

At **Stepherdson** early childhood classes learn to read and write in their first language. At the same time they are also learning to listen to and speak English through the Walking Talking Texts (EAL/EAD) program. They learn maths through hands-on activities based on the Northern Territory Curriculum Framework and Count Me in Too.

The middle primary students continue to develop their literacy skills and socio-cultural understandings through first language with the Walking Talking Text program. EAL/EAD literacy rotations help the students further build up their skills in phonics, sight words, reading and writing. Each class is supported by the Senior Teacher in EAL/EAD strategies, literacy and maths.

Upper primary caters for student in Years 4–6. There are five classes and students are allocated classes based on attendance, learning styles and relationships. There is a daily literacy program for English and Yolngu Matha. Blocks of time are dedicated to the teaching of English and Yolngu Matha. Literacy rotations (reading, spelling and writing and handwriting) enable daily exposure to these activities, which cater for the needs of sporadic attendees.

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**Positive Behaviour Learning**

Positive Behaviour Learning (PBL) is a relatively new initiative at Goodooga and is just being implemented. Historically, the school has had major behaviour issues with some students and as a result used a strict assertive discipline model. There is now a sense of calm across the school and although the assertive discipline model is still being used, progressively and carefully it is being replaced by the PBL program.

Staff visited schools using PBL (the current principal and some staff had attended schools where it had been successfully implemented) and a professional development program was provided on PBL.

The school’s welfare policy has been revised using PBL principles and signage is being prepared with the assistance of students. A whole-school approach to the PBL program is being adopted, with consistent interpretation across the school.
School organisation and resource allocation aligned with desired instructional practice

It was evident that each of the schools was organised around achieving success in important areas such as literacy and numeracy learning. This organisation was reflected in how resources were allocated to all of the common themes identified in this report. Specific examples included:

- a coordinator being appointed to ensure fidelity of Accelerated Literacy and all teachers committing at least 90 minutes per day to Accelerated Literacy;
- how students are grouped;
- quarantined time devoted to literacy and numeracy; and
- hour-long team planning sessions at the end of each day as a critical component.

Schools acting to influence classroom practice directly

Representing the classroom as a triad – the teacher, the student and the content – allowed What Works researchers to identify actions that schools had taken to influence directly each of the three elements and strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student learning outcomes.

The schools recognised that they had some control or significant influence over these three elements, and it was evident that each had acted to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes directly in doing so. Strategies and actions were designed to influence teacher capacity and practice to deliver the whole-school pedagogical approaches through recruitment, induction, professional learning, support and accountability mechanisms. The schools also

Aligning organisation and resources with the school vision

Goodooga now has a consistent, team-planned, explicit and evidence-based approach to teaching Mathematics. Students are formed into groups based on previous outcomes and developmental needs; teaching and learning occurs and further assessment data are carefully collected to demonstrate where improvement in student outcomes is achieved. Some of the steps taken at the school included the following.

- A staff consensus was reached that a whole-school Mathematics program which ran from K–8 would be sourced.
- A whole-school decision was taken to implement the Go Maths program.
- Significant resources were purchased to support the program’s implementation, including activity materials, syllabus documents, units of work and assessment and evaluation materials.
- Baseline data was collected to establish student current levels of achievement.
- PLPs were developed for all primary students, with numeracy as a focus.
- A daily Mathematics block was implemented within the primary section and additional staff made available to facilitate smaller groups.
- All staff including Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) received training in the program.
- The whole K–8 team are utilised to support smaller student groupings. The teaching is very explicit, activity-based and visual-learning based with a sense of fun and enjoyment and records are carefully maintained.
- Mathematics learning centres have been established in each of the primary classrooms and in the year 7/8 Mathematics classroom.

Both the current and former Pormpuraaw principals worked hard on making connections with other agencies and stakeholders in the community, whilst at the same time being clear that the core business of the school is the teaching of literacy and numeracy. It was identified that this approach has placed the school at odds with some agencies or groups wishing to bring programs to the school that may impact on the school’s literacy and numeracy timetable. Whilst not completely inflexible, the school takes the view that these periods of the day are quarantined from disruption. In the school’s view this maintains routine for students and reinforces a message that the school is focused on improving the outcomes of its students.
Kulkarriya was concerned about literacy learning and building student capacity to become independent readers. There is now a structured, intensive approach to improving literacy instruction and NAPLAN reading and writing standards are above like schools. Features of the whole-school approach include the following.

- The school/community agreement listed literacy improvement as a priority.
- NAPLAN data was and is analysed to identify learning needs.
- Training of all staff is made available and is expected in Accelerated Literacy (AL). This program has been adopted across the school. AL is the foundation program that all staff are expected to use before adding additional activities/structures.
- Support visits from the AICS office were organised by staff responsible for implementing AL across these schools.
- At least one hour of the daily two hours of literacy is devoted to AL and all staff are expected to follow the program.
- Targeted purchasing of appropriate resources supports the program.
- Books have been levelled; modelled reading and the hearing of individual reading occur daily.
- Reading Recovery has been introduced as an intervention program.
- Phonological awareness is explicitly taught.

recognised their relatively strong control over how curriculum content is delivered. They also acknowledged a responsibility to create a learning environment that incudes and supports each student’s capacity to learn.

The strategies and actions schools used to influence classroom practice directly are discussed in the following three sections. The sections describe school actions designed to build teacher and student capacity and make content accessible, engaging, culturally appropriate and challenging.
HIGH-FREQUENCY THEME 5

Building and sustaining teacher capacity to deliver whole-school practice

Given the relationship between teacher quality and student outcomes, What Works researchers were interested in identifying how schools worked to develop staff capacity.

A range of strategies and actions designed to recruit and retain appropriate teaching staff, provide effective induction, monitor performance and provide ongoing professional learning were evident across the schools. The primary emphasis of these strategies and actions was to influence teacher capacity and practice to deliver the whole-school pedagogical approaches developed by each school. They involved a mix of support and accountability mechanisms.

Actively and strategically recruit and manage teachers to match with school and community needs, including ‘home-grown’ solutions

Staffing is a key challenge for remote schools – both attracting and retaining teaching staff. This importance is recognised by the focus of NARIS on joint recruitment, screening, and selection and retention strategies to build a quality leadership and teaching workforce in 173 remote and very remote schools across Australia (NT, QLD, NSW, SA, WA).

Each system has a range of incentives in place for teachers to take up remote appointments. There is a range of ‘risk’ and ‘protective’ factors (Sharplin, 2009) that might be acted on by schools and systems through incentives designed to enhance quality of worklife and ultimately improve the retention of teachers in remote areas. These factors are related to:

- geographic and community environment;
- appointment and relocation processes, including the quality of accommodation;
- tenure and workload;

Common actions

All schools had in place strategies designed to support good teaching practice across the school. The broad strategy was to build and sustain teacher capacity to deliver whole-school practice.

More specifically, the common actions included:

- actively and strategically recruiting and managing teachers to match with school and community needs, including ‘home-grown’ solutions;
- highly valuing the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers;
- supporting non-Indigenous teachers in responsive relationships with community;
- providing professional learning approaches aligned with desired teaching practice;
- providing leadership of professional learning;
- using collaborative two-way teacher and IEW planning;
- using coaching and modelling to build teacher capacity; and
- using performance review and professional development processes to build teacher capacity.

- workplace and work role factors;
- relocated family;
- separated family; and
- teacher professional and career challenges.
The many system incentives related to these factors were identified as very helpful in recruitment and retention. It was also no surprise that individual motivations were primary reasons for leaders and teachers taking up remote school positions, in many cases personal motivation prevailing over incentives.

A general observation across the schools in the project was that positive school, geographic and community environmental factors were important motivators for teachers. Some of the geographical locations were sought after, and communities were generally relatively stable. School reputations also played a part.

Recruitment and induction

The reputation of the Dawul school attracts good teachers and so there is little concern about the quality of new appointments. The principal believes however that the community should have a say in principal replacements.

On his appointment, the Shepherdson College Director identified recruitment of the right teachers as one of the most critical elements needed to lift the school from a dysfunctional state with little community engagement. During the first year, five teachers sent their CVs for consideration. In 2011 the College received 47. The College Director personally interviews applicants against some key criteria. Teachers who did not fit the profile were encouraged to move on.

Team teaching underpins all of the College’s programs and teachers are only selected if they understand and show a willingness to work in partnership.

The Mimili principal has strong connections with Flinders and Melbourne Universities, with almost half of the Flinders students on practicum placements in the Homelands going on to work in the Homelands. She sees student teachers as a key and is particularly keen to see how new staff mix with community, the pupils and other staff and adapt to the accommodation. If they can shine in this context she is very confident they will make successful teachers. As the reputation of the Mimili School has grown the principal has little trouble attracting and keeping better teachers. There is a positive spiral:

- great leadership;
- better teachers;
- better outcomes and behaviour; and
- better retention and appeal to better teachers.

The principal’s effort and focus on recruitment, induction and professional development are obvious. This appears to generate great respect and loyalty to the school, community and principal.

Over the past three years the Pormpuraaw principal has been selective in appointing teachers who are prepared to adopt the agreed directions that are in place at the school. Whilst the appointment of teachers to remote schools follows an identified system process, the principal and other staff have developed networks with schools and clusters in other parts of the state to help identify teachers who have a potential interest in teaching at the school. Where vacancies have arisen, opportunities have been provided by the school, for teachers who are considered to fit the profile of the school, to visit for a trial period prior to accepting a position.

This arrangement has been successful in ensuring new staff are aware of the situation in which they will be living and working. Pormpuraaw has been fortunate in attracting teachers with prior experience and/or who are prepared to stay for a 3–5 year period. Teacher feedback highlights that prime reasons for staying are due to being supported by a strong leader whose priority is on teaching and learning, being in a school which experiences success and having the opportunity to contribute to decision making around the policies that are implemented.

Yarrabah has an exemplary staff induction process that comprehensively provides new staff with a cultural and historical appreciation of Yarrabah and an understanding of the EAL/EAD linguistic and social conventions that students bring to school. The program is delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of staff. It includes real stories and personal family histories that provide details about the community to assist new staff members to understand the context in which they are working. The package is informative and appropriate in the content that is delivered and, in the opinion of the What Works researcher, has a powerful reconciliatory message that provides opportunity for reflection and action.
It was also evident that schools and their principals worked hard to get good people to the schools. Approaches to recruitment were strategic and creative, with principals endeavouring to match potential staff with the school context and what they wanted the school to achieve. Many schools had explored ‘home-grown’ solutions, employing and supporting the training of local community members.

The processes and structures used by the schools had addressed some of the recruitment challenges, resulting in a general increase in the period of time teachers were staying at the eleven schools.

In addition to extended time stays, the school recruitment and induction programs assisted in helping to prepare teachers adequately to teach literacy and numeracy to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These processes included the recruitment screening, and importantly, the use of the whole-school frameworks for teaching. In addition, quality teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires teachers to understand and empathise with the home and cultural backgrounds of their students, and schools had actions in place to support teachers in this aspect.

Principals also performed a critical role in managing existing staff, at times requiring difficult conversations with staff members about improving performance.

**Highly valuing the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers**

What Works experience points to the potentially important role performed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and IEWs. The challenge is, ‘schools need to think about how Indigenous workers can be most effective, and the personal and professional support they may require.’ (NCS, 2010)

All of the schools had clearly thought through the strategic roles these valued staff members should perform.

They recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and IEWs, particularly those from the local community, are well positioned to understand the experiences and cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers are also ideally placed to utilise their cultural understandings to provide appropriate scaffolding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. An added benefit is the potential to perform as role models for achievement and education in general. In recognition of this context, most of the schools had high-value and highly valued Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff included classroom teachers and some co-leadership positions. Although the number of registered Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers was small, schools and community advocated strongly about their roles. Many schools had plans in place to develop and support members of the local community to become teachers. Succession plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to take on leadership positions were also evident in some schools.

The importance of IEWs was evident across all schools. IEWs performed highly valued roles, and made high-value contributions to student outcomes. They were active participants in planning and classroom teaching and learning, had important intervention and support program roles, provided some links to community and played valuable EAL/EAD roles in classes.

Significant resources had been devoted to IEWs, their numbers, their roles and their development, reflecting the important potential and actual contribution they made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

**Supporting non-Indigenous teachers in responsive relationships with community**

All schools had arrangements in place to develop teacher understanding of the broader community and cultural context and how to respond to this context. Part of this understanding includes using education practices that are culturally relevant and context-specific. Schools had practices in place

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The importance of IEWs was evident across all schools. IEWs performed highly valued roles, and made high-value contributions to student outcomes.
The Mimili and Ernabella Anangu schools employ a substantial number of Anangu workers, significantly more than allocated in the school budgets. Mimili employs 13 workers compared with a 1.5 budget allocation; Ernabella, 11 compared with a 3.2 formula allocation. This is enabled operationally through local decision making and by having a global budget to redistribute funding to what strategies work. This fiscal commitment clearly highlights the importance leadership puts into this strategy.

The employment at Anangu where English is a foreign language is critical. The issues of community are not seen as the domain of Anangu staff only however, and staff are supported to visit and work in the community for both positive matters and issues of concern. The Anangu Coordinator and AEWs in the school are available to share their knowledge with staff concerning the cultural background of students and to offer advice concerning student welfare from a cultural perspective.

Yarrabah has an explicit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment strategy and commits significant system-allocated and National Partnerships resources to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members in all classrooms throughout the school. This is recognition of the importance that the school places in having students taught and supported by educators and workers who live in the Yarrabah community. The success of this strategy is reflected through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people currently comprising 35% (has previously been around 50%) of the overall workforce. The Early Childhood Centre is staffed entirely by local community members. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander positions include Deputy Principal, Head of Curriculum, classroom teachers, School/Community Engagement Officers, I EWs, Office Administration, School Wide Positive Behaviour Support Staff.

Classroom teachers demonstrate to line managers how they make use of I EWs in their classroom. Advice is provided during induction and ongoing support is made available on how teachers and I EWs can work effectively together.

Empowering I EWs has been a recent priority at Lightning Ridge. I EW roles were traditionally limited and not linked to whole-school strategies; they received limited professional development and their roles were not structured to have a significant positive impact on student outcomes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff now have regular professional development specifically designed for them and participate in the whole-school teacher professional development, particularly in the areas of Positive Behaviour Learning, a multi-literacy program and data analysis.

Dawul relies on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to ensure relevance in the program and to build the goodwill that is clearly evident in the community. While SAE is the classroom language in the upper school, home language is used in the early childhood program. The staff is predominantly Aboriginal (from the community including two registered teachers) and school staff and community members see that as a strong feature of the school and a reason for the very high staff stability. The principal considers the school is a community of leaders and supports their development in the areas they lead. She has a medium to long-term succession plan that supports Aboriginal teachers to build the required skills and capacities to take on school leadership.
Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools

Anangu schools

There is a huge commitment to professional learning for Anangu and Piranpa (non-Anangu) staff. This begins at recruitment and never stops. Apart from curriculum leadership by the principals and explicit direction being set, clear and dedicated roles are described for both Anangu and Piranpa staff.

A coordinator is dedicated part-time to training of Anangu staff. This includes training in traditional language and cultural learning for Piranpa. All staff members are supported to learn language and are taken on regular recreational/cultural camps. There are young teachers who speak the language and play in the local football competition.

The scaffolding for young teachers to engage with the community is notable. If there is a critical issue, the principal may decide to take the class while the teacher visits family. This is a highly effective and empowering strategy under the principal's stewardship.

Professional learning approaches varied, and were tailored to suit the remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts of the schools, the
to support teachers in developing appropriate knowledge about the background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and teaching capacities designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students acquire literacy and numeracy skills.

Building and sustaining staff capacity to deliver desired whole-school teaching practice

Effective recruitment and induction are parts of the enhancing teaching capacity equation. Another is building and sustaining teacher capacity to deliver the whole-school teaching practices discussed earlier. This common strategy included the use of professional learning communities, ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ approaches, teachers and IEWs working as teams and planning together, coaching and modelling, and performance review and professional development planning.

Professional learning

Professional learning approaches varied, and were tailored to suit the remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts of the schools, the
experience level and roles of teachers and IEWs and school size. Formats also varied, including the use of in-house expertise, external experts working ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ with teachers in schools over extended periods, the use of social networking and out-of-school events. The common point was that professional learning was targeted on supporting teachers in building their capacity to deliver the whole-school approaches being implemented. Resource limitations meant professional learning needed to be strategic.

Recent initiatives across the systems in which the eleven schools are located have emphasised the importance of professional learning communities (PLCs). Both formalised and informal approaches to PLCs were observed among the schools. In smaller settings the whole school was the PLC, and in larger schools formalised year-level groupings were used as a structure for the PLCs. ‘Teams’ was often used to describe teachers and IEWs working together for planning purposes.

Researchers observed some commonality about how PLCs were structured, their roles, their leadership, their processes for using assessment data and examining student work and improving teacher practice including leadership, their planning for improvement and accountability systems being used. They all had a clear focus on improving teacher practice and student learning outcomes, with their structures and processes reflecting this focus.

Leadership of learning

The section in this report devoted to leadership highlighted distributed instructional leadership structures as a feature of the schools. This was illustrated in leadership of professional learning through PLC and team leaders and whole-school leaders of literacy and numeracy. Each school had specific roles allocated to the leadership of learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy. These leaders’ roles were described as ensuring the fidelity of implementation of the whole-school approaches to teaching practice. In the leadership terminology used in the report, the leader’s role was to guide, support, direct and sustain teachers in implementing the desired pedagogy.

Planning

A key element of teacher professional learning and capacity building observed was teachers planning teaching and learning experiences. Aspects of planning included whole-school professional learning frameworks, routine and regular meeting times, and planning together.

Schools generally used a mix of yearly, term-by-term, and more frequent planning sessions. At some schools planning between the classroom teacher and the IEW occurred on a daily basis. Informal daily discussions were also evident in the smaller schools.

Coaching and modelling

Various approaches to coaching, modelling, mentoring, observing and demonstrating as professional learning were evident at the schools.

Performance review and professional development

The existence of formalised performance review and professional development planning processes varied across the schools. In general teachers participated in defined performance management and accountability processes. One illustration was a requirement for teachers to submit planning for each Key Learning Area in Week Three of the school term, for consideration and feedback from the principal. Planning evidence and discussion needed to demonstrate:

- what they are doing in their classroom;
- how they are implementing teaching and learning programs; and
- the progress being made by their students.
Examples of teacher planning in practice

Yarrabah’s approach to teaching literacy is outlined in its English program Year 1–10. The document outlines the expectations of teachers in relation to year-level plans and specifies the intended teaching and learning, as well as the assessment tasks for each term. Year-level plans include ensuring:

- Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework’s English ‘Ways of Working’ for beginner, elementary and lower intermediate are substantially addressed at least once a year;
- specific points of each Knowledge and Understandings organiser are planned for and explicitly taught;
- relevant text types are taught at the appropriate level;
- relevant language features are taught so that students can understand, interpret and construct chosen texts;
- a balance of treatment of text types is undertaken i.e. reading for enjoyment, analysing language, interpreting texts and constructing texts; and
- assessment and monitoring opportunities are aligned and consistent across year levels.

Using the year-level plans as a framework for planning, teachers are required to plan explicitly, on a term-by-term basis, English units of work that reflect the expectations of the year-level plans and include:

- an exemplar of the major assessment that will be undertaken – analysed to show the essential features upon which judgements will be made;
- a sequence of lessons;
- explicit teaching emphases that provide a guide to making judgements; and
- resources and adjustments for individual and small-group learning.

Shepherdson College has a ‘planning for teaching’ approach that includes methods to make content engaging and relevant. The hour-long team planning session each day is a critical component to meeting this objective. The observed session consisted of input from the staff of the Literacy Production Unit, followed by the teaching teams working on the implications for their classroom practice. All of the teachers observed were seen to be listening to and engaging their Assistant Teachers in meaningful dialogue. Teachers and Assistant Teachers operate in a seamless fashion that is the result of modelling, appreciation of the cross-cultural contexts operating within the school, the time given for shared planning and the joint professional development approach.

Coaching and modelling

At Pormpuraaw coaching of colleagues on the implementation of the key teaching approaches used in the school is provided by experienced and ‘expert’ teachers and the principal. This could include individual classroom visits, demonstrations, provision of feedback as well as whole-staff professional development and ‘master classes’ to extend teaching skills and understandings.

The Dawul approach is more informal. The principal makes excellent use of the expertise of each of her staff, such that one of her staff describes the school leadership frame as follows:

‘the staff knows where everyone is at, there is no one leader – we each see ourselves as leaders among leaders’.

The same teacher felt that

‘in other schools the expectation was that you would look after yourself – here we care for each other’.

The principal’s method of monitoring other teachers is more informal than formal. There is a daily ‘how are you going?’ backed by more formal conversations at the start of the year and during planning.

The size of Urapunga lends itself well to staff interacting and observing each other’s practice. The school is an open book with all staff taking responsibility for each child. The principal frequently models where he wants the teaching program to go.
Empowering, supporting and engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to enhance their learning capacity

Students were at the centre of activity in all of the eleven schools. The previous sections of this report highlight the strategies and actions used by the schools to influence various community, school and teacher level factors that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. For example, building a culture that promotes good teaching and positive relationships, and that improves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes, is important at the school and classroom level. These factors work for a majority of students.

Another set of high-frequency interventions observed in the schools was designed to respond to specific student-level factors viewed as critical by the schools in supporting the literacy and numeracy achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These interventions were designed directly to empower, engage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and enhance their capacity to learn.

In effect, what was observed in the schools was a coherent and comprehensive approach acting on various levels at the same time, with all designed to improve student learning. The development of whole-school teaching approaches, positive and engaging learning environments and content that is focused on learning needs was complemented by each school’s actions to engage students directly and increase their participation.

Some of the general types of student-level factors that influence learning outcomes are illustrated in the ACER report, The achievement of Australia’s Indigenous students in PISA 2000–2006 (ACER 2009). The report identified three factors that were found to influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ reading performance significantly:

- home educational resources;
- engagement in reading; and
- academic self-concept.

Eight factors were found to influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students significantly in Mathematics, including self-efficacy and attendance.

Illustrations of how the schools addressed these types of factors and others were plentiful across the eleven schools. Challenges related to student self-efficacy and academic self-concept were being addressed by providing success in learning experiences through focused teaching approaches. It was clear that the schools acted on their responsibility to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve consistent participation in schooling through promoting,
Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools

Targeting improved attendance

**Kulkarriya** has moved from high absences to a point where the school now records attendance rates better than those for the state. The school’s strategy has incorporated the following actions.

- A school community agreement has been developed highlighting student attendance as an issue for the whole community to address and to own. High expectations of school attendance are the norm.
- Commonly known processes are in place to track attendance.
- Regular classroom-based and whole-school attendance awards and celebrations occur with community and parents in attendance.
- A list of students with unexplained absences is posted at the local shop. Students listed are not permitted to enter and the whole community is responsible for getting the students to school. The elders within the community strongly support this approach.
- The local community office lists the students who have been at school and on time all week.
- The school and community have adopted the slogan ‘kids who are not at school are not learning’.
- Community wardens ensure that students do not wander the community at night.

**Yarrabah** school’s ‘ABC’ encapsulates a clearly stated and highly visible Explicit Improvement Agenda. The ‘A’ stands for Attendance, with a simple message of ‘Every Day Counts’ encompassing the importance that is placed on attendance. Key actions include:

- Attendance Strategy (Every Day Counts);
- SSE (Supportive School Environment); and

A research paper completed by a Yarrabah community member identified a variety of barriers that impact on children attending school on a regular basis within the Yarrabah Community. The paper posed some questions for parent/carers, the school and other service providers as follows.

- What are we doing for our kids, and are we addressing the issues that our kids are facing? If we are addressing the issues, how are we doing so?
- What do we lack that prevents us from dealing with these issues, and what do we need to help us to deal with the issues that are affecting our children’s school attendance?

The research prompted stakeholders to find community-based solutions and strategies as a matter of priority. The school’s Attendance Strategy outlines the whole-school approaches adopted to promote full attendance and encourage students with excellent attendance or who are showing significant improvement. The strategy includes rewarding students publicly for great attendance and targets families within the community who require extra support to get their children to school. Development of four School Community Engagement Officer positions who work with other major community groups – including health, police, council and the justice group – aims to improve the overall school attendance.

The attendance framework outlines targets that the school is working toward achieving for the period 2011–2013. The targets identify an improvement of 6% per year to lift the school to the same level as all Queensland schools. It also identifies the whole-school approaches that are implemented and the specific roles and responsibilities expected of the Principal, Deputy Principals, Heads of Department, Administration Officers, Teachers and Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff.

The **Dawul** school design to address attendance includes the following elements.

- Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) does a daily car run to check up on students who are not at school and brings them to school if no excuse is provided for them not to be there.
- Roadhouse will not serve children during the school day.
- There is an expectation that parents make their children attend school. Community members check up on students if they are not at school and/or ring the school to let them know.
- Students are tracked through ringing around local schools when they leave Doon Doon.

Dawul has a system for tracking and follow-up of students who are mobile, gone to other centres or finished school. This may be helped by the small intimate nature of the community but it remains an excellent example of the total role of a school in a community.
encouraging and supporting high attendance rates. Other actions include:
- engagement and motivation strategies;
- personalising learning;
- providing pathways;
- supporting students at various transition points;
- catering for special needs; and
- case management arrangements.

Targeted attendance building strategies
What Works experience is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must participate consistently and that adequate levels of participation will only be achieved by active encouragement from home, the provision of a welcoming and accepting climate in the school and engaging students in successful learning experiences.

Student engagement with school is undoubtedly a major factor in promoting attendance. However reasons for poor attendance are often complex and patterns can become established prior to starting school. Each of the schools had targeted attendance-building actions in place, designed to operate at various levels and address the range of factors that contribute to low attendance rates. These included whole-school, community, individual student and family-focused approaches.

It is worth noting that the outcomes of these schools’ actions have been improved and relatively high attendance rates have been achieved, with some schools recording attendance rates better than those for their state.

Examples of school readiness
The Families as First Teachers – Indigenous Parents Support Program (FaFT-IPSS at Shepherdson is an early learning and family support program for families with children 0–3 years (prior to school entry). There are 230 children between the ages of 0 and 3 on the island.

The program provides opportunities to engage families and the community in giving their children the best start to life, including:
- a morning playgroup from Monday to Thursday in a central location;
- camp-based play groups (Monday–Thursday);
- parent workshops;
- bush trips (incorporating nutrition workshop and bush medicine);
- books in homes;
- home visits;
- support for individual parents (through FaFT-IPSS, Clinic and Department of Children and Families (DCF) referrals); and
- community events to highlight 0–3 year olds and families (such as Children’s Week, Families Week)

Each element of the program aims to empower families to support and promote parental knowledge of early childhood development and learning, parenting skills and focusing on nutrition and hygiene. Staff work with many community agencies to deliver the program and maximise resources and strategically approach key issues. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are critical to the operation and success of this program and receive ongoing training and support to empower them to work effectively within their community.

Dawul has an Early Childhood 0–4 Project which has been conducted on Fridays for mothers and their young children. Enthusiastic parents have continued the program on their own behalf awaiting a replacement of a staff member.
Transition and pathways programs at various stages of learning

Transition and pathways programs designed to support students at the various stages of learning, between birth and post-school destinations, were evident in the schools.

Early childhood

Enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student readiness for school is a national priority based on clear evidence showing this will contribute to improved outcomes. The schools’ increased activity is a reflection of the importance of this student level factor.

Although limited by resources available to operate in the early childhood stage, most schools had taken action to address readiness for school, ranging from formal programs through to informal play groups.

The schools’ actions were intended to promote early engagement with learning, provide a strong foundation for future educational achievement, encourage the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of children from birth and support children in their transition to school.

Primary to secondary

The primary to secondary transition stage presents a challenge to all of the schools, and particularly smaller primary schools, where the pathway involves movement to a larger population centre.

The general concern expressed by smaller schools and communities was conveyed in a view that moving to secondary schooling in another location was generally not successful. Some schools were supporting a handful of secondary students while not being resourced to do so.

Secondary pathways

Helme and Lamb (2011) indicate that research in Australia and overseas points to broad strategies that have been shown to be effective in secondary schools for increasing engagement, achievement and school completion among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Two of these are:

- school-wide strategies that work to maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes, including: broad curriculum provision, quality vocational education and training (VET) options; school absenteeism and attendance programs; and quality career education; and
- student-focused strategies that directly meet the needs of students at risk of low achievement or early leaving, including: targeted skill development; mentoring; school engagement programs; welfare support; and intensive case management.

The schools with secondary components worked hard to provide a breadth of pathways for their students, many achieving successful outcomes.

Characteristics of approaches to pathways included:

- a focus on lifelong programs;
- developing pathways which only had work, further training or university outcomes;
- offering as broad a range of specialised subjects as possible.
Secondary pathways

At Shepherdson College the Middle and Senior secondary years become even more complex because of the breadth of student needs from homelands to Middle Years to Senior Years to adult learners and at-risk school leavers. The College response to transition issues is to focus on lifelong programs. The school counsellor advised that students were not succeeding if they went to boarding school. The training options provided by the school are directly linked to the limited employment opportunities on the island.

The principal through judicious negotiations with building contractors and the Department has been able to resource the school with ‘motel’ accommodation complete with an industrial kitchen. These facilities will become excellent training facilities when the contractors vacate them. The secondary department at the school is also in the early stages of building aquiculture teaching capacity and has begun a small boat construction enterprise.

The college supports the Literacy and Numeracy needs of students while trying to engage them in age-appropriate activities that will provide them with sustainable skills to be active and engaged citizens and community members. This includes a variety of teaching and learning strategies that include EAL/EAD-specific pedagogy.

The college teaches a range of specialised subjects. In some cases this reinforces students’ community or cultural knowledge in a way that allows them to achieve academically, e.g. Art, Music and Dance. Other courses expose them to new subjects that contribute to sustainable skill areas, e.g. Science, Tech Studies and Information Technology.

The college seeks to create a learning environment that engages, motivates and extends secondary-aged students, whose attendance has not prepared them for the rigour of secondary studies.

It also provides options for completion of secondary education, the Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCET) in the Territory, and looks for pathways into employment for students of an appropriate age. This is being facilitated in the school at present by a School-based Apprenticeship (SBA) scheme with Territory Alliance and they are looking to expand this into other areas of employment available in the community. They are focusing on small enterprise programs, Rich Tasks, VET and programs providing sustainable living skills in the community.

At Menzies, the SIDE (Schools of Isolated and Distance Education) is accessed by the secondary students and is carefully and positively supported by the principal. The principal ensures that all Year 10 students undertake work experience in Kalgoorlie – students, with support, prepare their résumé, write the letters and make contact with the desired organisation. The principal also organises continuing work experiences for the Year 11 and 12 students. The principal has a slogan she shares repeatedly with all the secondary students and that is ‘to be a useful member of society is a pathway to the future’. In 2010 one of the students received the Australian VET award. The principal actively sources traineeships for the students.
Personalised Learning Plans
The use of PLPs was common across the schools. Much of the content of these was generated from the focused teaching approaches described in an earlier section. PLPs were often complemented by other plans where students were tracked on multiple indices and career planning.

PLPs have been developed for all Goodooga students from Kindergarten to Year 10. The plans are detailed and are linked to syllabus outcomes. Parental involvement has been established in the plans and support provided from the Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO), classroom teachers and school executive. The PLP development can be described as amicable and successful, documented and regularly revised and updated.

Support for students with special needs
Despite remoteness, schools had special education programs in place, and did have access to a range of external supports.

Homework programs
At Goodooga, Aboriginal tutors are involved with the after-school homework program at the youth centre established in a new building within the school grounds. The program’s effectiveness is enhanced by the tutors’ familiarity with the teaching strategies and expectations in place at school. They are able to explain curriculum initiatives to visitors, indicating a close involvement in the curriculum and professional development programs.

PLPs have been developed for all students and the homework centre provides support in these. Most students attend the centre after school, complete their homework requirements and are then in other activities. Some of the school tutors are also involved in staffing the facility.

Interventions to enhance student health and wellbeing
Health and hygiene receive attention through a range of programs across the schools. Examples include teachers supervising the cleaning of teeth and hand washing and nose blowing lessons are regular. A range of wellbeing programs, for example Kids Matter, are also provided by the schools.

Special Education
Each Ernabella room (as with all Kimberley schools) has a sound field amplification system to help with instruction due to hearing issues. As well as the class teacher there is also an AEW allocated to each class to assist both the teacher and student with understanding each other. The school receives support from the Agangu Education Services. This support includes the Support Services Team, comprising Guidance Officer, Hearing Impairment Coordinator and Speech Pathologist who visit regularly to assist the students with their health and wellbeing.

Lightning Ridge has a real resource-backed commitment to supporting special education students. It timetables separate secondary and primary special education classes, and uses case study teams of specialists and teachers and accelerated programs.
Making learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive

The research model depicted curriculum content as a third element of the classroom where schools could act to influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student learning.

While theme six describes initiatives designed to engage students through addressing various student-level factors, this theme is specifically related to the role of classroom content in engagement. Researchers were particularly interested in finding out about how teachers in each of the schools tailored curriculum content to engage and motivate students.

The importance of focused teaching in identifying appropriate levels of challenge for students is indirectly highlighted by the ACER (2010) examination of students’ attitudes, engagement, motivation and beliefs, and their relationships with PISA performance. ‘Indigenous students were found to be at a disadvantage in a number of these areas’, for example, ‘Indigenous students reported significantly lower levels of confidence in their abilities to handle tasks effectively than their non-Indigenous peers, with lower levels of self-efficacy.’

The previous discussion of focused teaching as a common theme reveals that the schools have processes in place that lead to student engagement in learning. The whole approach implies that students become engaged in learning when the experience matches their needs. Importantly, if educational experiences stimulate student interest and result in success then this engenders further motivation and engagement. This is further enhanced when students have an active voice in the learning process.

A second key aspect of the content and engagement relationship generally evident at the schools was culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching assumes that learning will be promoted when the concepts and skills taught are placed within a frame of reference that is meaningful to the student. What Works experience identifies as proven strategies ‘making regular use of the culture, life experiences and knowledge of students to make connections with other curricular content’ and ‘using teaching materials that deal with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in an accurate and relevant way as a conventional part of the content of the curriculum’ (NCS, 2010)

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 confirms the line of action undertaken by schools, describing ‘a sense of cultural and linguistic identity, and the active recognition and validation of Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages by schools’ as critical to student wellbeing and success. The Plan also points out that

‘curriculum and pedagogy that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives will support attendance and retention.’

One aspect of the schools’ responses has been to engage students by integrating home languages in the classroom, often by the use of IEWs and supporting other teachers to develop an understanding of Aboriginal English and local languages.

**Information and communication technologies**

Researchers also inquired about the use of ICTs as techniques to promote engagement and learning and as learning outcomes. While schools generally had access to high levels of technology the use of ICTs did vary across the schools, dependent on a range of factors such as internet reliability and teacher capacity.

Researchers noted the following, in different contexts.

‘Rich information and communication (ICT) environments where electronic whiteboards and other ICT equipment are capably and appropriately used.’

‘Every classroom is fitted with an electronic whiteboard. There is also a computer lab, two class sets of laptops, a set of Nintendo DS machines which are used as learning tools.’

‘All staff are trained in the use of electronic whiteboards and the connected classroom and the Aboriginal support staff are able to use them with the students.’
The researchers were interested to identify where each school had started and the pathways they followed in their endeavours to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes, again to see if there were common elements among the schools.

Two of the guiding questions were:

- What have been the starting points for improvement from the range of practices?
- What have been the pathways followed to achieve and sustain improved outcomes?

While the schools were situated in different contexts and differed to some extent in the initial priority issues to address, there were common landmarks on the improvement pathways they had mapped. In general, the priorities were similar across the schools and the pathways eventually covered similar territory. They reflected the seven common themes identified in this report.

It would appear that a common starting point has been to focus on two fronts – raising expectations and engaging with community – and then cover all of the seven themes described in this report. However this did depend on the context. The very nature of some schools meant that active community engagement was already happening, and high expectations about behaviour and an orderly learning environment existed. In these contexts raising expectations about what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can achieve became a starting point, followed by the development of whole-school approaches to instruction.

Some illustrations of the various starting points and pathways can be ascertained by the following illustrations (and other examples provided throughout the report).

### Improvement pathways at Menzies School

#### Theories of action

- If staff relate positively to students and have high expectations then students will meet the level of expectation.
- If what you are doing is not working then keep trying something else and success will come.
- If we are all involved then we will all own the success or the problem.
- If you are empowered you will make it work and grow as a professional.
- Teaching is hard work but if you consistently teach explicitly then students will progress.
- If you plan carefully and allow sufficient time the desired change will occur.

#### Priority areas

The school addressed four main concerns during the previous five years through an in-school action research approach and success is beginning to be noted.

- **Behaviour management** – The school was using an assertive discipline model. High numbers of suspensions and student misbehaviour were evident. A structured positive behaviours program is now in place and beginning to achieve success.
- **Attendance** – Absences were common and often prolonged. The school now celebrates attendance better than like schools and the state.
New, short-term and, in most cases, inexperienced staff – The school now has 75% staff retention and has in place processes to mentor and develop young teachers with a curriculum available for immediate use on appointment.

Record keeping and literacy standards – Data was loosely collected for accountability purposes and literacy standards were inconsistent. The school now has a well-planned longitudinal data collection and tracking process and students sit the NAPLAN. Reading, writing and numeracy standards are now above like schools, although not yet above state means.

Improvement pathways at Dawul Remote Community School

Three years ago:
- expectations were at (and compared with) like schools rather than state performance;
- literacy and numeracy work was not targeted at each child’s level;
- teaching was at class rather than individual/small group level; and
- students were not trained as independent learners.

Now there are:
- high expectations;
- explicit teaching;
- independent learning supported by strong behaviour management strategies;
- strong focus on the purpose of learning – need for education for employment, training and higher education;
- use of SAE only in the upper classrooms; and
- well-developed program for 0–4 children and their parents every Friday.

Improvement pathways at Pormpuraaw State School

The influence and leadership style of the principal has been pivotal in the change in school culture at Pormpuraaw and the improvement in student learning and engagement. Whilst he left in June 2011 to take up an appointment at another school, the vision he had for the school, the direction that was set and the practices that were implemented remain and are embedded in current practice.

The strategic change agenda for which he was responsible included:
- identifying what was happening in the school and assessing if it was effective;
- implementing approaches that would address student need;
- setting high standards of student expectation and teacher performance;
- supporting implementation of approaches that would assist the school in ‘catching up’ performance until the majority of students are at mainstream or near mainstream levels;
- motivating and supporting staff to teach with a sense of urgency in supporting ‘Closing the Gap’;
- informing and consulting the community on changes and expectations; and
- providing advocacy, through justifying to system personnel the pathway the school was implementing, including enduring initial criticism (until progress could be demonstrated) and responding to external queries about the methodology the school chose to adopt.

The strategic approach also included implementing a succession plan for the school’s next principal. This involved recognising the leadership potential and capabilities of a staff member at Pormpuraaw and providing a mentor role to her in developing leadership skills and opportunities.
A fourth research question was designed to gauge whether the common strategies and high-frequency actions might be transferable to other school contexts. The fourth question was: ‘Are these practices transferable to other contexts?’

Given the commonness of the seven themes identified in this report, it would appear that much of what has been achieved in the eleven schools is transferable to other locations.

The seven themes provide a strategic thinking and planning framework that could be used in the form of an ‘improvement map’ to identify where a school might take action to chart a pathway to improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

**A lesson for other schools**

*Shepherdson College* is a large complex college servicing a population of 2200 people from 15 clan groups. It highlights the pivotal role of the school in a community that has many competing interests that can inhibit the Commonwealth and Territory’s goals of closing the gap on key wellbeing indicators.

Underpinning the range of programs are a few key points that can and should be evident in all schools and particularly remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools. These are:

- an abiding belief in working in partnership with the community;
- valuing the teaching team;
- clear and informed pedagogical practices;
- recognising education as a lifelong process;
- having the right team;
- being flexible and innovative while maintaining high expectations and a clear vision;
- respecting and acknowledging culture;
- good resourcing; and
- strong work ethic of the principal.
Bibliography


Endnotes

1 www.strongersmarter.qut.edu.au

2 The term teacher is used to include registered teachers and also other adults, in particular, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers, along with community members who might be involved in classroom teaching and learning.

3 www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Glossary?a=E&t=StANDARD+AUSTRALIAN+ENGLISH

4 While the term classroom includes rooms with walls in a school, it also includes other settings. For example, Shepherdson College provides educational opportunities to remote homelands communities within Arnhem Land. Classes range from Preschool through primary and into upper secondary. Visiting teachers are based and supported by the hub school of Shepherdson College at Galiwin’ku and fly into the homeland schools. All homeland schools have a resident Assistant Teacher and a combination of Assistant Teachers and Tutors. Homeland students are provided with educational support and cultural opportunities outside their homeland. In addition, the College currently provides a separate learning area for a clan.
What Works. The Work Program

The What Works. The Work Program has been operating in Australian schools for over ten years. The program is all about helping people in schools take systematic action to improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

What Works. The Work Program is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

The National Alliance for Remote Indigenous Schools (NARIS)

NARIS (http://nationalallianceremoteindigenousschools.com) was formed in January 2010 under the leadership of the Northern Territory and originally included Queensland and Western Australia. The alliance was later expanded to include South Australia, New South Wales, the Stronger Smarter Institute and the Australian Government. NARIS is focused on working together to create a high quality, committed and sustainable remote education workforce for over 170 remote schools located in 100% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities across Australia.

In order to pursue the NARIS agenda, the Steering Committee is working towards advancing specific policies and strategies focused on the attraction, development and retention of quality teachers and leaders. The rewards of this collaborative approach are already evident, with people working together on solutions and sharing best practice. In 2011, two national conferences for teachers and leaders in NARIS schools were hosted to officially launch the NARIS and to generate understanding and commitment from stakeholders on the values and agenda of the alliance.

In June 2011, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) committed new funding for the Teach Remote initiative of $5M over the next two years commencing July 2011. As a flagship initiative under the NARIS, Teach Remote takes a systemic approach towards achieving a quality education workforce. Each project comprises representatives from each NARIS jurisdiction, working together to contribute to the fourteen national projects that will be implemented across jurisdictions.

The results are starting to look very promising.

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What Works. The Work Program

The What Works materials are based on a three part analysis of the way teachers and schools generally work to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: Building awareness; Forming partnerships; and 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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: Using 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 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.