

What Works. The Work Program: CORE ISSUES 10

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

Using Personalised Learning Plans

This Core Issues paper aims to assist teachers and schools to deliver effective personalised learning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Personalised learning focuses on working with each student, in partnership with student's parents or carers, to develop a plan that maps a pathway for students to achieve learning goals tailored to their developmental and motivational needs.

Personalised learning plans (PLPs) are the way to do things, not an 'add-on'. It is important to integrate PLPs with teaching practice so teachers are able to work smarter – not harder or longer.

We will look at good practice and key factors for success.

What is personalised learning?

Personalised learning recognises the individual strengths, needs and goals of students and that schools respond to these differences by tailoring learning to meet each student's developmental and motivational needs.

Personalised learning is underpinned by an expectation that all students can learn to high standards, building on their personal strengths and identifying areas of learning where students can be extended or accelerated.

While factors that affect student learning are also identified, the belief is that, given the right teaching and learning conditions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will achieve the same standards expected of all students.

Personalised learning is based on the expectation that all students can learn to high standards, provided the appropriate conditions are created. It involves a commitment to identify each student's learning needs and then designing appropriate teaching strategies so all students can achieve high standards. Personalised approaches to teaching and learning may include individual, small group or whole class instruction. Personalising learning is the core work of teachers.

Discovering and nurturing individual talents, as well as identifying and addressing gaps in knowledge and skills, is crucial to personalised learning. It requires sound, precise information on student achievement, targeted attention to specific needs, and regular monitoring and reviewing student progress to ensure high expectations and successful outcomes for all students.

Personalised learning can also enhance student motivation and engagement. Students become engaged in learning when the experience matches their needs. If educational experiences stimulate student interest and result in success then this engenders further motivation. This is further enhanced when students have an active voice in the personalised learning process.

Why use PLPs?

The planning involved in personalised learning supports teachers in making teaching and learning explicit. When you think about it, personalised learning is about good evidence-based teaching practice for all students.

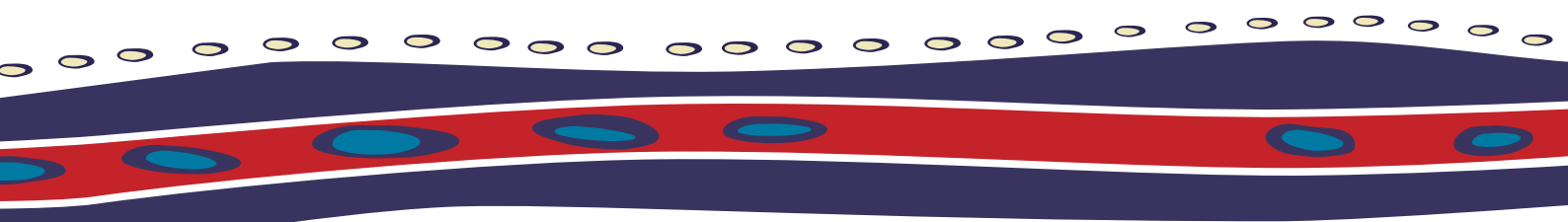
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be offered challenging and demanding learning linked to the results of mainstream curriculum outcomes. However, some may need different educational approaches, varying levels of teacher support and extra time to achieve unbiased results. Personalisation provides an education that is tailored to the students' learning and motivational needs. Personalised approaches through PLPs can make a positive contribution to Indigenous student outcomes.

Key beliefs and values underlying personalised learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

What Works believes in some sound fundamentals that form the basis for improved Indigenous student learning outcomes. These are important for personalised learning. A central belief about learning is that the gap in outcomes can be closed. It is acknowledged that while a range of factors can affect the rate at which students learn they are not justifications for students failing to learn. Personalised learning requires establishing goals and targets that raise expectations for Indigenous students and addressing those factors that might impede individual learning. In addition to the belief that all Indigenous students can achieve high levels of learning regardless of their backgrounds and starting points some other fundamental What Works beliefs and values include:

- Indigenous students must be given respect
- Indigenous student's cultures and the relevant implications of those cultures must be respected
- Indigenous students must be taught well
- Indigenous students must participate consistently.

These beliefs and values are similar to those described by DEEWR in the *Guide to developing Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students*:



Some key beliefs and values that should inform PLPs

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can perform at levels commensurate with the general population.
- PLP learning goals must be aligned with key mainstream learning outcomes.
- PLPS should respect and value:
 - cultural differences;
 - each student's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge;
 - each student's responsibilities and obligations within their community.

Such respect ensures each student's sense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity underlines PLPs and personalised approaches to learning. It also ensures that teaching strategies and resources for personalised learning are culturally and linguistically inclusive.

- PLP processes include family involvement and respects parents and caregivers as the first educators of the students.
- Where age-appropriate, students play an active role in the development of PLPs and their voice is clearly represented in the plans.

What are PLPs?

PLPs map the pathway that a student needs to follow to achieve learning goals at least commensurate with standards expected for all students. PLPs describe a clear destination for the student in terms of goals for learning. They identify the potential obstacles that might impede a student getting to their goals, and chart a course through them. The DEEWR *Guide to developing Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* describes PLPs as an active process:

They are usually developed by teachers, mostly in consultation with students and parents, to identify, organise and apply personalised approaches to learning.

To develop PLPs, teachers start with assessment and diagnosis of a student's learning. Teachers gather other data about the student, including patterns of behaviour and attendance; attitude to school (do they like it or not); social skills; family background; and cultural understandings. This is all collected and further discussed during a meeting with the student, their parents/family and other support people.

In developing the PLP, specific learning goals are identified and clear strategies put in place to support students to meet the agreed goals. The plan may also consider and deal with issues in the student's background and school context that are affecting their learning. This may lead to other goals focused on personal growth, social skills and cultural achievements.

Some teachers and school systems across Australia use 'individual learning plans', considering them to be the same as PLPs. This paper focuses on 'personalised learning' and not 'individual learning', which can involve learning in isolation from others. In many education systems, individual learning or education plans are developed specifically for students with disabilities or identified learning difficulties. In addition to these individual plans, personalised student plans exist in various other forms across the nation. These are generally designed to map pathways at the various transition points during schooling, for example, on entry to school. Career type plans are called career, transition, pathways or aspirational plans depending on the system. Behaviour management plans are another form of plans developed for individual student circumstances.

These all have some elements common to the PLPs described in this paper. One thing that does differentiate them is the timeframe for which goals are written. Many schools combine the various plans into one that has clear short and longer term goals related to learning, and in secondary settings, career aspirations and post-school pathways.

The PLPs described in this paper focus are 'learning' plans and focus on intended learning described by state and territory curriculum and/or the Australian Curriculum.

Integrating PLPs into the teaching and learning cycle

Personalised learning is at the core of an evidence-based teaching and learning cycle. Such a cycle consists of using assessment data about each student's levels of learning, establishing goals and targets, planning teaching and learning approaches, teaching, and then

assessing whether the new learning has been acquired. Then the cycle begins again.

There are some key questions that inform the development of a Personalised Learning Plan. These questions correspond to stages of the teaching and learning cycle depicted in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: INTEGRATING PLPs INTO THE TEACHING AND LEARNING CYCLE



Key questions for developing a PLP

In essence, teachers, in conjunction with students, parents/family and other support people, construct a PLP for a student by answering four key questions:

1. Where is the student now?
2. Where should the student be?
3. How will they get to where they should be?
4. How will we know when they get there?

Where is the student now?

Identifying a student's current level of learning requires:

- A detailed map of curriculum described in terms of a developmental learning continuum with clear descriptions of learning objectives and indicators of student progress. These descriptions should be those used for the general student population, such as each state or territory's curriculum framework and the Australian Curriculum. Other examples include early years continuums such as First Steps or more localised examples such as the Kimberley Literacy Profile.

- The use of accurate and timely assessment data to know where each student is on the developmental continuum being used – this identifies the point of instruction where a teacher and others can support and guide a student's learning.
- The use of multiple sources of assessment data generated as close to the point of teaching and learning as possible. Data from pre-testing, online testing, and evidence collected from the classroom, such as student work are needed to verify student learning. Teachers may need to confirm their judgments with colleagues using these multiple sources of data.

Where should the student be?

Given the answer to the first question, what are the specific learning goals and targets to support each student's development and progress toward reaching or exceeding the standards described in the map of curriculum?

It is important that students have a voice in identifying these goals, and that they are confirmed in conjunction with parents and/or carers.

A word about goals

The DEEWR *Guide to developing Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* distinguishes among long-, medium- and short-term goals.

Long-term goals

describe what students should achieve at the end of a school year or stage of schooling. While these are key milestones in achievement, they are seen as too far removed to provide motivation for many young learners. Consequently medium-term and short-term goals are needed to keep learning on track and up to speed.

Medium-term goals

describe learning outcomes, essential learning or learning standards that students are required to achieve at the end of a unit of work, term or semester. While vital in tracking progress towards key milestones, such medium-term goals are often outside the range and ability of a student's thought

processes as they proceed through schooling. Nearer targets and goals are appropriate for student motivation, guidance and direction.

Short-term goals

are very specific, short-term indicators of knowledge, understandings and skills that a student will need to get on their journey to completing end-of-unit, term or semester outcomes. They are the steps in the pathway on the journey through the curriculum milestones. Comprehensive diagnostic assessments frequently offer more detailed data to establish more precise goals and targets. These assessments often identify specific gaps in student knowledge, understanding and skills that must be dealt with for them to achieve unit or term outcomes or objectives (medium-term goals).

This paper is focused on the shorter-term goals.

How will they get to where they should be?

Answering this question requires knowledge of the appropriate teaching responses at the point of instruction, including when and how to use **teaching strategies and matched resources**, and having the classroom structures, routines, and tools to deliver differentiated instruction.

The specific teaching strategies and resources need to be focused on the actions learners need to do to achieve the outcomes or goals described. Personalised approaches to teaching and learning to address identified gaps may include individual, small group or whole class instruction, for example when identified gaps are similar for a group of students. Strategies should be culturally appropriate and linked to student interests to encourage engagement and motivation.

Mapping a route also requires working to undo barriers to learning, whatever their causes, including fostering the best possible conditions for learning with the help of parents, families, support staff and community agencies.

How will we know when they get there?

This question prompts answers identifying evidence that demonstrates the student has learned what was intended, that the PLP goals have been met. The evidence should be in the form of student actions such as what they do, write, say, make, present. Some systems describe these as success criteria – descriptions written in language students understand and that they may have contributed to.

Some other factors that influence student learning outcomes are highlighted in a 2009 ACER report. The report identified three factors that were found to significantly influence Indigenous students reading performance: home educational resources, engagement in reading and academic self-concept. Eight factors were found to significantly influence Indigenous students in Mathematics, including self-efficacy, classroom disciplinary climate and attendance.

As an example, a PLP might incorporate actions to enhance home educational resources, how parents can help at home and attendance to support student capacity to learn.

What might a PLP look like?

There are a variety of PLP templates used in schools across the nation. While PLP formats will reflect local contexts and State and Territory requirements one thing they have in common is space to answer the four key questions.

The following template is provided as a guide only..

Student details	Name, year level, etc.
Where is the student now?	In this section the PLP should identify the student's current learning on a pathway, along with the evidence that supports that judgement.
Where should the student be?	In this section the PLP should describe some specific learning goals to support the student's development and progress. These are specific, short-term indicators of knowledge, understandings and skills that a student will need to get on their journey to completing end-of-unit, term or semester outcomes.
How will they get to where they should be?	In this section the PLP should describe specific teaching strategies, the resources needed and how barriers to learning might be overcome.
How will we know when they get there?	This part of the PLP should include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the specifically observable actions that demonstrate that a student has achieved the intended learning; a process and timeframe for monitoring, reviewing and revising each student's learning goals; and the provision of feedback and self assessment of learning.

ANSWERING THE FOUR KEY QUESTIONS – A CASE STUDY

Where is Christy now?

Christy is a Year 4 female student who attends a government primary school in a large country town. Just over half of the students in the school identify as Aboriginal. Christy lives with both parents and has one older and one younger brother at home. She also has two older sisters not living at home. Her mother identifies as Aboriginal. Before the introduction of PLPs, Christy's parents only connected with the school when there were behaviour issues for her or her older brother. Christy is proud to be Aboriginal and actively participates in the school Aboriginal dance and language groups. However, she does not have a great deal of knowledge of her traditional culture. She has a regular attendance record. She has a strong interest in story writing, number strategies and times tables, with writing, spelling and the publication of texts her areas of strength. In the state-wide tests, Christy achieved an overall band 3 for literacy, band 4 for writing and band 2 for numeracy. The band 2 result was below what might be expected.

Where should Christy be?

Her mathematics teacher confirmed Christy's current numeracy levels through some online assessment and examination of some of her work. The teacher identified some issues with place value knowledge and specifically in renaming three digit whole numbers. A short list of goals was developed for Christy's PLP. One of these was improving her skills with renaming, trading and bridging.

How will Christy get to where she should be?

The pathway to her goals was based on a general teaching strategy to move from the most direct concrete representation of number to the abstract symbolic representation of number. Specific teaching strategies included using MAB and number expander activities to improve her skills with renaming in a variety of ways, using one number in each square of the Maths books to help improve place value knowledge, some QuickSmart sessions and working with Mathletics three to four times a week at school and home with the teacher monitoring her results. Some other students at similar levels were grouped with Christy for some classroom teaching focused on these strategies.

How will we know when she gets there?

Christy and the teacher talked about how they would know when she had achieved her goals. They decided that she would demonstrate her success by achieving faster and more accurate computer responses by using Mathletics Levels 1 and 2 and competing against other students or the computer, and being able to estimate the result of example such as $-234 \div 10$ as 23. Her teacher would base his judgments about learning on observation in class, her bookwork and monitoring her Mathletics results.

Developing and implementing PLPs at the whole school level: A checklist

The following checklist is designed to gauge where your school is in relation to the use of PLPs to improve Indigenous student outcomes. Your answers will provide a broad picture of what's working and what might need attention.

AT OUR SCHOOL...	YES	PARTLY	NO
there is an agreed belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can perform at levels commensurate with the general population			
school leadership has provided clear guidance and ongoing support for the school community in developing and implementing PLPs			
the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community is involved in the development and implementation of PLPs			
PLPs respect and value each student's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and knowledge			
PLP learning goals are aligned with key mainstream learning outcomes			
PLPs contain a section that identifies current learning on a pathway, along with the evidence that supports that judgement			
PLPs contain a section describing specific short-term learning goals to support the student's development and progress			
PLPs contain a section describing specific teaching strategies, the resources needed and how barriers to learning might be overcome			
PLPs contain a section describing how you will know when each student's learning goals have been achieved through specifically observable student actions			
student's progress towards their learning goals is assessed and reviewed regularly			
the PLP process is viewed as part of day-to-day teaching and learning			
along with the student and his or her teacher, appropriate family members or care-givers have been involved in the development and monitoring and revision of the plan			
the PLP process has made clear how parents and caregivers can help the student learn at school and at home			
where age-appropriate, students play an active role in the development of PLPs and their voice is clearly represented in the plans			
professional learning support is provided for teachers so they are confident in using PLPs			
time is provided for teachers to engage with students in the PLP process			
time is provided for teachers to engage with other teachers in discussing PLPs and student progress			

A process for developing and implementing PLPs at a whole-school level

Developing and implementing PLPs is most effective when undertaken on a whole-school perspective, rather than relying on individual teachers ‘going it alone’. Each school’s context and stage of development will determine the best approach suited to its circumstances. As a general guide, development and implementation of PLPs at a whole school level involves four stages, as illustrated in Figure 2.

How to do it

There is no one best-way to develop PLPs in a school, but the case study below provides practical advice from a school that worked for them. The case study is followed by a partly completed implementation plan to illustrate each of the four stages. The planner is based on the action planning template contained in the What Works Workbook Ed. 3, and readers are referred to this as a valuable resource. A fillable PDF version is available from the What Works website.

FIGURE 2: STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION



CASE STUDY: BUNINYONG PUBLIC SCHOOL

Buninyong Public School is situated in Dubbo, a western New South Wales city of 60,000 people. It is a K–6 school with approx 230 students, 60 per cent of whom are Aboriginal.

Individual plans have been a feature of student programs in this school for some time, particularly focusing on improving attendance. They were introduced initially as support plans and focused on a student’s social, behavioural and emotional needs to address attendance issues. However, they differed from PLPs which provide a more holistic approach to the child’s learning including strategies used to achieve individualised goals and targets.

Consultation with staff and the community led to the decision to introduce PLPs. The decision included PLPs for both Aboriginal and other students, in partnership with teachers, parents/carers and the students themselves.

In developing a format for the PLP, staff collected samples from other schools and worked in consultation with the Schools in Partnership (SiP) committee and local community. It was agreed that the PLP would incorporate parent knowledge, academic targets, strategies and social profiles, and students’ strengths and weaknesses. An attendance plan is attached to the PLP were relevant.

The school has adopted a whole school approach, involving teachers, parents/carers and students to the implementation of PLPs. Communication and relationship building has been a focal point for the process. The Community Centre aspect of the

school operation served to engage parents more directly with the school and ensure that they were more comfortable with the school environment.

Communication with parents has been diversified with the support of the Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs). Personal contact has become a priority, with home visits, phone calls and invitations to events used in addition to communication through letters and the school newsletter to keep families informed.

Each teacher has responsibility for conferencing with the Aboriginal parents or carers throughout the PLP process. The conference process focuses on the positive aspects of the child’s development. Goals and focus areas are negotiated and agreed upon by all stake holders.

The PLP plans are monitored, revised and evaluated by the principal and executive staff and the SiP committee as part of the teaching and learning process. Parents are kept informed as their children’s learning needs arise, with some parents needing to be contacted more regularly than others, depending on the individual student and their needs.

A sample action plan for implementing PLPs on a whole school basis

Actions have been grouped into four broad stages. The sample descriptions are illustrative and have been taken from pages 5–7 of the DEEWR *Guide to developing Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – A professional learning resource*, January 2011.

SCHOOL GOAL*: To improve Indigenous student literacy and numeracy outcomes		SCHOOL TARGET*: 100% of Grade 3 and 5 students at or above the NAPLAN National Minimum Standard by 2014					
STRATEGY*: Implement Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) for all Indigenous students							
Action	Description of key tasks	Personnel	Resources	Responsibility	Start date	Finish date	Milestones
Initiation	Identify system or sector support and guidelines for PLPs Establish with staff the reasons for PLPs Consult with local Indigenous communities about PLPs Establish a PLP project leadership/management team			School Leadership Team			System level PLP guidance distributed to staff and discussed Consultation meetings happen and decisions noted PLP team established with clear charter
Development	Develop Implementation plan Examine PLP practice in other schools Gather resources (eg, assessments, sample templates, sample PLP processes) Organise school structures, responsibilities, resources, time for meeting and implementing PLPs			PLP management team			PLP implementation plan developed and agreed to
Implementation	Teachers develop PLPs based on the four questions listed on page 6 of this document First round of PLP meetings with students and parents and other appropriate people Confirm the PLPs			Teachers			
Monitoring & review	Monitor student progress towards specific learning goals using observations and formative assessments to update strategies. Set new learning goals if required Second round of PLP meetings			PLP management team & Teachers			

* Extracted from the School Strategic Plan

A template is available for download at www.whatworks.edu.au > Forming Partnerships > Relationships > Personalised Learning Plans.

Useful web links for PLPs

The DEEWR *Guide to developing Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – A professional learning resource, January 2011* contains some valuable resources about PLPs including appendices on:

- setting learning goals for the PLP;
- teaching strategies useful for personalising learning;
- engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students Frequently Asked Questions.

The guide and website of supporting materials is available at



<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/Schooling/Pages/LitNum.aspx>

Conclusion – Success factors

The following success factors have been shown to be supportive of the effective and efficient implementation of PLPs and found to form a sound network to support implementation.

- There is whole-school ownership of and commitment to PLPs.
- Strong school leadership starts, drives and provides ongoing support for the school community developing and implementing PLPs.
- Teachers are committed to 'Closing the Gap' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- A range of formal and informal diagnostic assessment tools is used to profile each student and to inform the development of their learning goals.
- Specific, measureable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (**SMART**) learning goals are well understood.
- Targeted teaching strategies are developed to support students in meeting their learning goals.
- Collaboration takes place with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers, school support staff and other relevant community agencies to plan for and support learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Time allocation is provided for development of PLPs.
- Implementation of PLPs is included in ongoing work of teachers and not seen as an add-on or extra duty.
- There is provision of initial and ongoing professional learning support and resources for teachers in developing and applying personalised approaches and PLPs.

References

DEEWR (2011) *Guide to developing Personalised Learning Plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students – A professional learning resource, January 2011*, Commonwealth of Australia, downloaded from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/Schooling/Pages/LitNum.aspx>

De Bortoli, L J and Thomson, S (2009), *The Achievement of Australia's Indigenous Students in PISA 2000–2006*, ACER, Camberwell.



What Works. The Work Program

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

- Building awareness
- Forming partnerships
- Working systematically

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

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

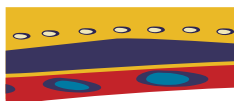
The '**School and Community: Working Together**' series supports the development of partnerships between schools and their Indigenous communities.

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

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

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

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



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