



Australian Government

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

School and community: **working together** What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Conversations > Relationships > Partnerships

a resource for school staff

YOU CAN'T HAVE A PARTNERSHIP WITHOUT A RELATIONSHIP,
AND YOU CAN'T HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITHOUT A CONVERSATION.
YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION. **EVERYTHING STARTS HERE...**

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What Works. The Work Program. Conversations > Relationships > Partnerships – a resource for school staff.

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

Where schools and Indigenous families and communities work in partnership, students get better results from their education. It's that simple.

As one principal consulted in the preparation of these materials said, 'We had most things in place, but the one thing that wasn't working was our interaction with parents. And, of course, that was the thing that mattered most.'

Kinship is immensely important to Indigenous peoples. Their most important social unit is family, and family extends over generations and networks of relationships that are often more expansive than those for non-Indigenous Australians. The value put on these relationships is profound.

These families are the first, foremost, and continuing educators of their children. What young people learn at school is secondary to what they learn at home. If the interests of families and schools are aligned, and if there is trust and mutual support between home and school, opportunities to build success are markedly improved.

The responsibility for making improvements in educational outcomes must be a shared one. That will only happen when Indigenous 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 Indigenous families.

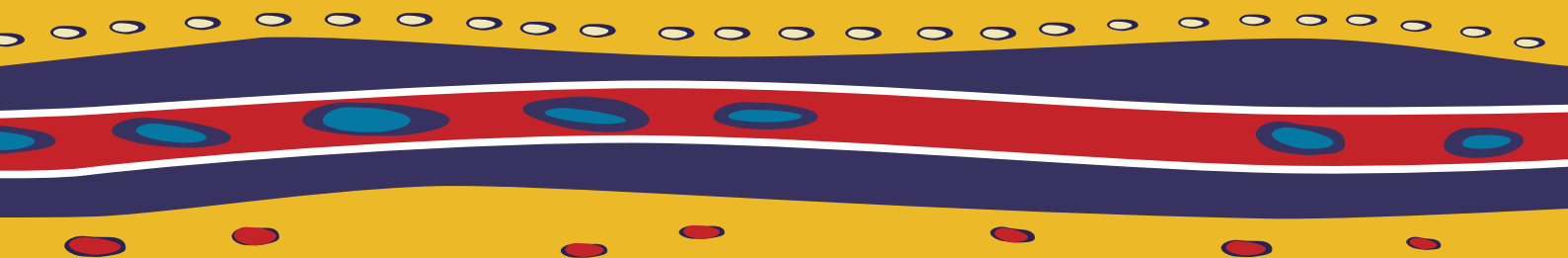
In the end, it's always about people getting on and working together — that's everyone's responsibility.

Part I of this publication explains the fundamentals which form the basis of improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

Part II goes on to explain how school–community partnerships can be developed with the aim of establishing formal arrangements.

This booklet is part of the *School and Community: Working Together* series of publications, which also includes the following pamphlets written for community members:

- *Conversations > Relationships > Partnerships: a resource for the community*
- *Learning at home and at schools*
- *How schools work*
- *Engagement: the big issue*
- *Teachers and teaching*



Part I:

The fundamentals

Overview

The What Works Program has studied many schools where Indigenous young people do well, and it's almost always the same story.

If outcomes for Indigenous students are to be improved

- they must be given respect

Self-respect and respect from others is more basic to learning than any other factor. Concern about 'self-esteem', 'self-confidence' and 'pride' is no accident. They are the starting points for becoming an effective learner — more fundamental than literacy and numeracy skills.

- their cultures and the relevant implications of those cultures must be respected

Aspects of students' cultures must be recognised, supported and integrated in the processes of education, not just for their own success, but for the general quality of Australian preschools and schools.

- they must be taught well

Good relationships, trust, flexibility, individual concern and problem-solving, perseverance and careful investigation of 'best' teaching strategies and possibilities, knowledge of students' backgrounds: this is what good teaching is. This is what teachers can do.

- and they must participate consistently.

The business of improving outcomes is a shared task. Regular attendance and consistent engagement are key ingredients by which improved outcomes will be achieved. Support and encouragement from people who work in schools, from parents and carers and from other members of communities are essential for this to occur.

Understanding, respect and support for students' cultural backgrounds

Making schools more 'culturally-friendly' is not just a matter of flying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, although that might be a starting point. It is a lived experience that has at least three central elements. Paying attention to these three things will help make cultural inclusion strong.

The establishment of good personal relationships and mutual trust

Good communication, genuine negotiation and consistency are absolutely necessary if we are going to get anywhere. They are all based on the quality of personal relationships.

Flexibility

Where cultural values are different, everyone needs to be flexible. Small changes can make big differences.

Knowing where you are and who you're working with

Educating students who live in remote communities has got special challenges. For example, English may be a foreign or a second language. The value of getting a mainstream education may not be as obvious.

But the vast majority of Australia's Indigenous people do not live in remote communities. They live in the same places as the rest of Australians. More than half live in New South Wales and Queensland, most in urban settings (around 20% in Sydney and Brisbane alone). They come from different family groups and may or may not have strong traditional links with the area in which they live. They may live in ways very similar to non-Indigenous Australians.

People who work in schools must be clear about the wishes of local communities and get advice and support from them about their own circumstances.



Development of the skills students need to succeed

In terms of teaching and learning, what works for Indigenous students are the same things that work for any other students.

Putting effort into the right places

Literacy in English and numeracy are essential for success in formal education, for all ages and in all learning areas.

For Indigenous students, a common need is for recognising and learning the differences between Standard Australian English and Aboriginal English and the creoles or Kriol that is common across the top end and in Torres Strait Islander communities. Students' everyday language use is not 'bad' or 'incorrect', just different. Success comes from acknowledging and accepting the differences and teaching the ways in which standard Australian English varies from home language.

Case study: Doomadgee State School, Lower Gulf of Carpentaria

Roshni Dullaway (left) is a Grade 1 teacher working in partnership with Aboriginal Teaching Assistant, Roslyn George.



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

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


Learning

It is easier to learn when what you are learning is connected with things you already know about.

There are more and more teaching materials and ideas which include Indigenous students' life experiences and backgrounds. But making what is taught more relevant to the lives of Indigenous students requires getting to know students and their cultures better, as well as being sensitive to their own individual capacities and interests.

The following facts about learning might help in discussions with your students' parents/caregivers.

- How you feel about yourself as a learner is very important. If you think you will succeed and work hard, the chances of being successful are high.
- Encouragement is valuable because it helps you to keep learning. Feedback about what you've done and how well you've done it helps you improve. Feedback is a crucial part of teaching, and learning.
- The more you practise learning, the better you get at it. The more you know, the more successful you are likely to be in tackling new and unfamiliar situations.
- The more you concentrate, the better you learn. You can't learn new things if you're thinking about something else, or if you're worried, sick or tired. Your mind is already busy coping with those things.
- Learning is more effective when you can see its purpose and value for you.
- When you're learning, what you know beforehand matters. New knowledge (and that includes skills) means more when it is connected with what you know already.
- Learning is easier when learning tasks are clear and well-structured in small steps. That means you can succeed consistently, and get hold of something properly before you go on.
- Learning can be helped by providing varied activities and coming at the same learning task in different ways. It can also be helped by changing activities, especially for young children. As you get older you should be able to concentrate for longer times.

 A companion document, 'Learning at home and at school', written for family and other community members is available at www.whatworks.edu.au.

Teaching practice

The following list is a summary of a study of the characteristics of teachers whose work with Indigenous students is demonstrably effective (adapted from Hill and Hawk, 2000).


Effective teachers

- know and care about each one of their students;
- are energetic and work hard;
- share responsibility for learning with their students;
- expect and require behaviour which allows all students to learn;
- always avoid head-on confrontation; and
- are proud of their school and work to make it good.

The full study can be accessed from the references at the end of this document.

Other strategies that have proven successful in many schools the What Works program has studied are

- having high expectations that students will succeed;
- having an individual plan about what is to be achieved, how, and by when. Working in small steps that are explained very clearly and taught specifically, celebrating successes;
- encouraging students to work together rather than just on their own;
- varying activities for learning. The sorts of 'hands on' learning that happens in art, music and technology classes give students a wider range of chances to do well. But this shouldn't be instead of work in core classes on literacy and numeracy; and
- having Indigenous people (teachers, other education workers, family and visitors) around helps Indigenous students to feel more 'at home'.

 A companion document, 'Teachers and teaching', written for family and other community members is available at www.whatworks.edu.au.

Coming to school regularly and being actively involved

Attendance

Coming to school regularly is an important part of doing well across all the years of schooling.

It is known that attendance for students who are at risk begins dropping off in the last years of primary school and get worse during secondary school.

Case management is one solution to this problem which has worked consistently. This includes helping students establish a relationship with someone or a small group of people whose job it is to help them get through these years — making home visits, following-up straight away when students are absent, providing support with academic work, helping with personal planning and goal-setting, linking up with other Indigenous students in similar situations; and counselling and mediation where problems occur.



Aboriginal mentor, Mick Hayden, with Year 8 students at Merredin Senior High School (WA);

Engagement

Students might go to school every day and still not learn much because they are not engaged.


More contact between young people and Indigenous adults (not necessarily teachers) operating as mentors and role models is one of the best ways to confront this situation.

Schools must get direction and help on the issue of engagement from respected members of Indigenous communities and from encouragement and support coming from families and other community members.

Other strategies that work are

- developing closer and less formal personal relationships between teachers and students;

- giving students more say about how and what they are learning; and
- teaching so that success can be regularly and obviously achieved.

 A companion document, 'Engagement: The big issue', written for family and other community members is available at www.whatworks.edu.au.



Students at Mildura Primary School (VIC).

The following checklist may help you establish what the situation at your school is now and how it might be improved.

Checklist

Do you think getting an education is valuable? Why?

- How do you get the idea over to your students that education is valuable and important for their future?
- Do they have some success with their school work most days? Do they think it's fair dinkum success, the same as applies to other students?
- Has anyone talked to them about the sorts of things they might like to do when they grow up and education's role in that goal? Do they know what it will take for them to get where they want to go?
- Do they know any Indigenous students who have finished Year 12 and gone on to university or TAFE? Have they had any contact with other role models who can help them think about their futures?

Is going to school something they can enjoy?

- Is being at school for your students stimulating and fun? What do they look forward to most? Can we turn that into better learning?
- Do they learn things at school that seem to be about them and their lives where they can sometimes be the expert?

- Do they feel safe and comfortable at school?
- Is there someone in particular at school who looks after and supports the Indigenous students?

Is going to school the 'normal' thing for your students to do?

- If not, how do we make it 'normal'?
- Is it what their friends do? In looking for solutions to poor attendance and low levels of interest, should we be thinking about groups of students rather than individuals?

Are there practical things that make going to school difficult?

- Do they have to look after other students or family in school hours? What can be done to help out in that case?
- Is transport an issue?
- Are health issues causing problems?
- Do they need to be fed in the mornings to help them concentrate?
- What other agencies should be involved in thinking about and helping with these issues?

attendance > participation > belonging
together they describe how we want students to be engaged in learning

Part II:

Conversations, relationships, partnerships

You can't have a partnership without a relationship, and you can't have a relationship without a conversation.

You've got to have the conversation. **Everything starts here.**



School-community partnership meeting at Drouin Primary School (VIC); from left to right: Nichole Hayes, Merrin Leicester, Phil Rankin and other teachers

CONVERSATIONS

Welcome, connected, comfortable, confident

Informal contact = core business

The best way to get to learn about your local community and how it works is to spend time with its members, in ways as straightforward as greeting and stopping for a chat inside and outside the school.

Many schools set up informal events — BBQs, sporting, community and school celebrations — where school staff and family members can get to know each other better. Creating respectful spaces for Indigenous community members to tell their stories, share their experiences and provide advice and guidance demonstrates that the school is genuine about building understanding, trust and respect.

Communication with Indigenous parents/caregivers

There are many reasons for parents/caregivers to come to school, some of which are spelt out below; but first impressions are crucial. The front office is the public face of a school. The way it looks is important. Many schools with Indigenous students

enrolled include displays of Indigenous art and artifacts as indications of their connections to local Indigenous cultures and heritage. But the dominant impression will be based on the sort of welcome families receive. One of our case study schools puts it like this.

The first port of call for visitors, parents and supporters of the school is the front office. It is there that the warmth of the school is judged. It is therefore of critical importance that the front office people are caring and sensitive. If visitors

Informal get togethers: some advice for you to think about

- You're there to get to know each other better and enjoy each other's company, not to do formal business.
- Get, and follow, advice about the right place to hold such occasions. It is possible that it might not be the school. Look at ways to take the school to the community.
- Get, and follow, advice about how to get the message around that the event is on.
- Look for opportunities to acknowledge and celebrate community events within the school.
- Ensure that Elders and senior members of the community are invited and arrangements are made for their transport to and from the school.
- Make everybody in the family welcome.
- Don't assume speeches are necessary. Ask community members about their views. Consider their views as well about a Welcome to Country, Acknowledgement of Country and Acknowledgement of Elders.
- Student and cultural performances are a way of showcasing the talent in the community.

are welcomed, made to feel appreciated and have their enquiries dealt with promptly and with sensitivity, then chances are they will be positive in their responses about the school.

While face-to-face contact and doing things together is the best way to establish relationships, time pressures may mean that you have to find additional ways of communicating with Indigenous families and community members.

If your school has an Indigenous aide or worker they may well have ideas about effective forms of communication.

One of the structured ways schools keep parents and community members in touch is by sending out a regular newsletter. If this is your main form of communication, pay special attention to the accessibility of the language in which it is written.

Indigenous Education Consultative Groups

In many parts of the country there are active groups promoting the interests of Indigenous students. In several cases they have major partnership agreements with Education Departments and other education agencies to be the voice of Indigenous people in decisions about education.

The following is an example of the role of Indigenous Education Consultative Groups.

The Vision Statement of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

We will

- *provide advice on all matters relevant to education and training with the mandate that this advice represents the Aboriginal community viewpoint;*
- *promote respect, empowerment, self determination and believing that the process of collaborative consultation is integral to equal partnerships and fundamental to the achievement of equality;*
- *promote cultural affirmation, integrity and the pursuit of equality to ensure that the unique and diverse identity of Aboriginal students is recognised and valued.*

The NSW AECG continues to provide the principal advice to government and non-government educational institutions on the key directions and policies that impact on the learning outcomes of Aboriginal people but, in particular, those issues that have direct impact on the quality of educational opportunities for our young people.

You may have a local organisation of this type. What role do you play in its functioning?

ACT Indigenous Education Consultative Body
Phone: 0416 153 315

NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
Phone: 02 9550 5666
www.aecg.nsw.edu.au

Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee
Phone: 07 3237 0785
www.qiecc.eq.edu.au

Northern Territory Indigenous Education Council
Phone: 08 8999 5612
www.deet.nt.gov.au/education/indigenous_education/ntiec

Tasmania Aboriginal Education Association
Phone: 03 6233 7968
www.education.tas.gov.au/dept/about/boards/tasmanian_aboriginal_education_association

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.
Phone: 03 9481 0800
www.vaeai.org.au

Western Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Council
Phone: 08 9441 1900
www.aetcwa.org.au

Some schools have a room or area especially for Indigenous parents and community members where they can have a cup of tea or coffee, meet with teachers, hold meetings or just get together with other people who have kids at school. Other schools provide families with calendars with the key dates marked on them.

Parent involvement activities

Parent involvement often happens more readily in primary than in secondary schools. But there are things you can encourage with parents in any school, like

- helping out in the canteen or in the library;
- helping out with sports coaching or supervision before and after school, or at homework centres;
- suggesting ideas about good places for excursions, and participating in them;
- supporting work experience;
- joining in to run ceremonies of celebrations for NAIDOC Week (first week in July, adjusted for schools if they are on holidays), Reconciliation Week (end of May), National Sorry Day (26 May) or National Torres Strait Islander Day (4 August); and
- attending school sports events and carnivals, concerts and presentation nights.

You may have parents, caregivers or other members of the community who can help staff in developing their cultural awareness, perhaps by participating in formal programs, or just by telling school staff about matters they feel staff should be aware of and that would benefit their work.

Your bridge to the community

Indigenous Education Workers

The Indigenous people who work in schools are at the heart of school community relationships and partnerships. In his description of change and improvement at Cherbourg State School, *Young and Black and Deadly*, Chris Sarra writes about the crucial importance of ‘finding a Mrs Long’.

The prospect of venturing out into an Aboriginal community may seem daunting. For me it was made easier by Mrs Long. Mrs Long is an Elder in the community who worked in the school as a community liaison person. Like many people in Indigenous communities, she harbours an intense desire to see Indigenous children gain power through education. The first three to four months saw Mrs Long working directly alongside me for most of the time, helping to establish who was in the community, who I needed to make contact with, who I needed to stay away from, who was the right person to get in touch with when a particular child played up, when was the right time to visit people, what the ‘hot issues’ of school concern were that were festering in the community.

As the new principal, these matters were far more crucial than things like school curriculum programs and so on. Mrs Long was my eyes and ears in the community. Clearly it was wise of me to embrace her and what she had to offer. While she may not have had any formal educational qualifications, she had something far more valuable to me — she was highly respected and knew the community inside out. Any new principal in an Indigenous school should find their own Mrs Long before doing anything else. I have not been to any Aboriginal community in which one does not exist ... If you are serious about establishing some

form of collective understanding, then be prepared to work extensively alongside them (p 20–21).

Local knowledge is often half the battle. In one of our What Works case studies, Joan Marshall, an Aboriginal Education Worker at Healy State School in Mt Isa, says:

I work in my own Murri way, as a go-between who can go into the community and say things that others can't. I can growl at them and encourage them to deal with their own disciplining of their kids and getting their kids to come to school. And I talk in language they understand ... One of the most powerful things is to get the parents and teachers talking, and this is really starting to happen now. I help bring them together. At Healy, it's like growing a tree. If we can grow up together, hand in hand, we can then branch out and really succeed. But it takes time, effort and good partnerships and relationships.

In more remote communities where non-Indigenous staff tend to be transient, Indigenous employees and community members play a central role in binding and maintaining the continuity of the school and its work. The 'bridge' often consists of educating non-Indigenous staff about the community and its life and focus. In the rural centres where most Indigenous people live, the role at its best can be more as Joan describes above. However, in metropolitan areas, Indigenous staff may not be connected to the students' families and in fact be from other parts of the country. They will need to do their own learning. This should be expected and understood.

The roles of Indigenous people currently working in schools are as varied as the schools they work in.

In some cases, an Elder or senior member of the community acts as a crucial bridge between non-Indigenous teachers and students, parents and community. A number of schools are fortunate enough to have Aunties and Uncles fulfilling this role — a friend, contact and mentor for Indigenous students who aren't afraid to growl if it is needed. Other schools employ Indigenous people in ancillary roles — for sports coaching, bus driving, grounds maintenance, informal classroom support, hearing children read and, too rarely, working in the front office.



Dianne Williams, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer at Mt Lockyer Primary School (WA) works with parents at their school-community partnership meetings.

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

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

IEWs are employees of the school, but their responsibilities extend into their communities as well. Partnerships are never stress-free and, just as IEWs commonly report unrealistic expectations on the part of the school, so they also report unrealistic expectations on the part of the members of the communities. IEWs are not all things to all people and should not be expected to be. Like other workers, their roles should be clearly defined.

More useful information on IEWs is available at the 'Same Kids Same Goals' Toolkit, which can be accessed at www.samekidssamegoals.dsf.org.au/index.php.

RELATIONSHIPS

Partnerships in students' learning

If we want to engage parents and community members in the school, we need to build working relationships based on trust, mutual respect and inclusiveness. That doesn't happen overnight. It takes time to get to know each other and create an atmosphere in which everyone feels safe enough to express views openly and honestly.

Be clear that the education of the students must be the central focus. So gatherings should allow mutual sharing and the opportunity for community members to talk about their aspirations for their children and their expectations of the school. Developing these contexts in which people listen to, and understand, each other is the key and the basis for a shared commitment to the education of the students, both as a group and individually. That's what the partnership will be all about.

Gatherings might be informal or formal, but we suggest that informal ones might be most effective in the initial stages. They need not be elaborate. We have seen schools spend an inordinate amount



Community member Yangkana and teacher Chrissie Perks during a Walmajarri language class at Wulungarra Community School (WA).

of time and effort organising a big event, only to find that, despite its success, the process was not sustainable. Instead, take advice from community members about what form gatherings should take.

Just as you wouldn't expect uniformity of beliefs, attitudes or behaviours among non-Indigenous parents, don't expect it among Indigenous parents. Some will feel comfortable about attending mainstream-style (usually formal) events but other will not. If they don't, it doesn't necessarily mean they aren't engaged with the school community or interested in what is happening in the school. The

key is to provide multiple and diverse opportunities for each family's participation.

Remember, too, that positive working relationships cannot be built without getting to know the local Indigenous community and recognising and valuing their cultures. Be aware that Indigenous communities have their own dynamic and that gradually coming to understand differences in interpersonal communication styles is vital.

But don't feel that the task is all too difficult! Indigenous communities are just as interested in their children's future as other people and most of them just need the right opportunity to get involved and work with you.

Personal or Individual Learning/ Education Plans

Working with Personal or Individual Learning/ Education Plans (for convenience, PLPs here) is one of the best possible ways of increasing the engagement of parents/caregivers in student learning. These are the reasons.

- All the parties are involved — teacher, student and parent/caregiver — and all have a direct stake in what is happening. You can assume a good level of engagement.
- You are all talking about something real and fundamental that is happening now, the student's learning.
- It is a chance to work directly on issues that will affect the student's school performance.

In situations where PLPs are in use, marked improvements in attendance, engagement and academic performance are often reported.

What is a PLP?

A PLP is a plan for a student's learning. It will have some background information about the student and include assessment results and information about attendance. It should tell everyone how things are going now, what sort of help the student is getting and/or needs, and how he or she might get to the next stage of what is being learnt.

Schools have their own ways of doing this and deciding what to include. Some systems provide direct guidance and templates. In some cases these plans run to many pages. This is not advised.

Who is involved?

Those who should be involved include parents or caregivers, sometimes older brothers or sisters, the student, his or her main teacher and sometimes the school's Indigenous aide or education worker.

What happens?

Sessions often run for about 30 minutes or a bit longer, sometimes twice a year, sometimes more often, at a time which has been agreed. Information needs to be prepared in accessible form. Matters such as those in the box below can be discussed. You might also want to collect some background information that is relevant to the education of the student. If this is the case, and information isn't readily forthcoming, don't press. Wait until you know each other better.

Discussion points

- The interests, talents and skills of the student.
- Their future interests and plans.
- Current class content and activity.
- Possible areas for improvement.
- What is going to be achieved before the next meeting.
- What each of the partners will contribute to that process.
- What success will mean and how it will be celebrated.

You all agree about what is going to be done, and make a time to meet in the future to review what has happened and to set new goals.

Some schools provide support via packs of materials and ideas to help with learning that can be taken home, for example rules for games, flip charts, reading games, dice, whiteboard markers, and other items of stationery.

To work, this process must be a friendly and positive experience for everyone involved.

PARTNERSHIPS

Making things better for everyone

Schools across Australia are increasingly working in partnership with Indigenous communities to improve Indigenous student outcomes. These partnerships are sometimes formalised through written agreements.

In some parts of Australia there are already arrangements in place for developing agreements with guidelines about how to do this. Sometimes, the state or territory government and, in some cases with remote communities, the Australian Government, is a partner in this process. There is no one way to form an agreement, and agreements will differ from place to place. But the key thing is that local school people, students, families and communities are involved in this process.

Ministerial Directions

The Ministers of Education in all states and territories have made a commitment that partnerships between schools with significant enrolments of Indigenous students and their Indigenous communities will be formalised through written agreements by 2010.

Ministers have requested that these agreements

- are expressed in plain language;
- enable broad community engagement in the selection of the school principal and teaching staff;
- enable community input into all school planning and decision-making processes;
- establish agreement on school goals and policies relating to matters such as attendance and academic achievement;
- provide greater flexibility in the development and adaptation of curricula, while maintaining high educational standards;
- provide flexibility in the operation of the school and use of resources;
- are referred to Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies for information; and
- are sustainable over time, irrespective of change of principal, and renegotiated to suit changing demands.

Why are formal agreements valuable?

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

What are good agreements like?

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

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

Making formal agreements: some advice

In the beginning

- There may be protocols that the Indigenous people you are working with want to have respected and observed. Please investigate this issue and respect their wishes.
- Decide the best way to proceed.
 - In some situations, it has been decided that the best way to go about things is for parents, families and community people to have their own meetings until they work out what it is they would like to happen.
 - Another important idea is to get someone to help run these meetings who is trusted by the community but who is not a part of the school — a ‘third party’ or broker or

independent facilitator, who doesn’t belong to either group but whose job it is to make sure things go smoothly. This allows people to talk more freely and to say what’s on their minds.

- Get as many people involved as possible. Spread the word about what’s happening and why. Talk it up round the community. Use flyers, the phone, email.
- Make sure key people like Elders are there. The people at the meetings need to be able to make sure that agreements stick.
- Is there any help people will need to be able to come to meetings? Do people need to be picked up, for example?
- Make sure meetings are held at a place where people can feel most comfortable. This mightn’t mean at school. Make arrangements for a cup of tea or refreshments.
- Don’t rush the process. Good agreements take time. Continuing good relationships are even more important than what ends up being written on a piece of paper — and strong productive relationships take time to develop.

Meetings together

- Make sure the purpose of the meeting is clear to everyone.
- Make sure you are clear about what you can offer and what you can’t. All parties need to say clearly what they can and can’t do and to be able to make their side of the agreement happen. Don’t waste time by getting expectations up that can’t be met.
- Start with some general questions like the following
 - What do we want the school to be like?
 - What does that mean in practice?
 - What’s working now? How can we make more of that happen?
 - What can we do to make things better?

Try not to talk about problems without providing a possible solution — keep everything as constructive and positive as possible. Be sensitive about other people’s views.

The worksheet on page 17 is designed to help with this process.

- What information do you have that would be useful for everyone to share?



Johnno Woods and Cherylene Simpson from Mt Lockyer Primary School (WA) work on their school-community partnership.

- Is there other information you need? Where can you get it from? Is there any expert advice that would help that could be brought in?
- Make sure someone is taking notes so that they can be shared and that a proper record of what has happened is kept.
- Try to get agreement about the main things you want to achieve, the objectives of the agreement. Keep all the ideas, on the understanding that the details will be filled in later.

- Consider if and when smaller meetings might be appropriate and, if so, who might be around the table; for instance, nominated representatives, or people from representative organisations. If there is a need, help establish a reporting back process.
- Participants have an absolute right to be able to understand what other people are saying. Be careful about 'school language'. Don't use jargon or acronyms, don't talk about programs that Indigenous participants don't know anything about. Always provide explanations that are requested.

Developing the agreement

- What are the sections to the agreement and who will write it?
- What is the process for endorsing the agreement? Have all key groups including students and teachers had an opportunity to understand the agreement.
- What will the final document look like? (Some agreements include artwork, pictures, themes and local Indigenous language.)

Members of the Cunnamulla (QLD) school community celebrate the signing of their school-community partnership agreement.



The end of the beginning

- When you have reached an agreement work out ways of celebrating and publicising it. Endorse it by signing off. Make sure there are copies for everyone. This is a good occasion for a get together and a celebration.

Make sure that things happen

- **Making an agreement is just the beginning.** You need to make sure that what you've decided really happens.
- Things can begin happening before the agreement is signed off. But there needs to be a **plan for action** which is shared, that says who is responsible for what and when things are to happen by.
- All schools have plans which say what is going to happen over the next year or sometimes longer. The plan for its Indigenous students could be a part of this or, if most of the school's students are Indigenous, their needs should be recognised in the plan as a whole. This plan is reviewed and reported on every year, and if your interests and wishes are included they become a part of this process.
- A good plan has a number of parts:
 - **objectives or goals** which say what you want to achieve;
 - **targets** which will say in more detail what and by when you want to achieve;
 - **performance indicators**, things you can measure, which will tell you how things are going;
 - **strategies** which will help you reach your goals and targets; and
 - **responsibilities**, which say who is going to do what.

The *What Works Workbook* is a very useful tool to help you develop a plan.

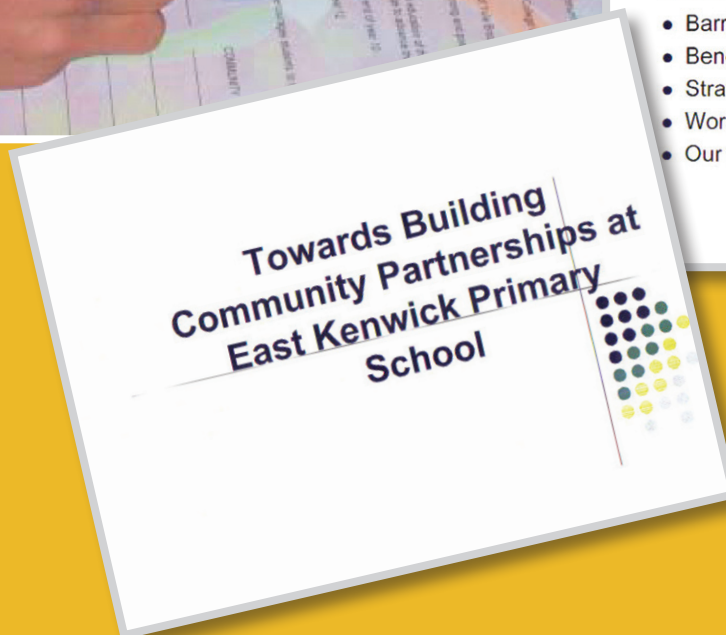
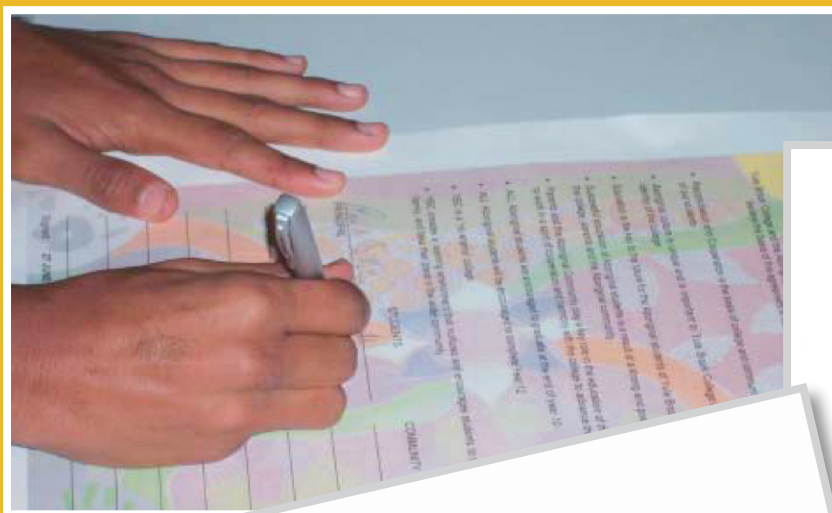
- There need to be arrangements in place so that participants can check what has happened. **This is very important.** This might be a job in which a local Indigenous Consultative Group, or Parents Committee can participate, or you might set up a group from your meetings which stays with the process. The way the plan is working should be regularly reviewed by this group. It has been suggested that four times a year is a good target for this process.
- In a review, there are four basic questions which need to be asked and answered
 - What has worked, or is working, and why?
 - What hasn't worked or isn't working, and why?
 - What could have been done differently?
 - What adjustments and changes are required now?

Answering these questions might mean some changes to your plan which should always change from time to time, especially if you are making progress. It might also mean having another look at your agreement.

Keeping the agreement in place over time

School people come and go, but that is no reason for changing the agreement. In any transition arrangements of senior school personnel the agreement should be one of the important items to which new people are directed.

It is your right and your shared responsibility to keep the agreement alive and working.



Overview

- School context
- Our process
- Working with staff
- Barriers
- Benefits
- Strategies that worked
- Working with Community
- Our community Agreement

Top (from left to right): Desley Rose, student, signing the Drouin Primary School school–community partnership agreement; musician Kutcha Edwards addressing the Drouin Primary School community; celebrating the agreement.

Bottom: Signing of the Yule Brook College (WA) community–partnership agreement; East Kenwick Primary School (WA) school–community partnership agreement.

Further examples of school–community partnership agreements can be found at www.whatworks.edu.au

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Photos courtesy of:

Cunnumulla State School

Drouin Primary School

East Kenwick Primary School

Merredin Senior High School

Mt Lockyer Primary School

Wulungarra Community School

Yule Brook College

Resources consulted and borrowed from in the development of these materials

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SA Department of Education, Employment and Training (undated) 'Yurrakaityarindi: Aboriginal Decision Making', Adelaide.

What Works Western Management Group, and Paul Loxley's speech to What Works Western's 2007 Conference in Dubbo 'Making Connections: Honest talk'.

Checklist: How well is your school doing?

This checklist is a version of the checklist that What Works facilitators ask teachers and school administrators to fill out. **It has been modified for the use of Indigenous parents and community members**, but it will be useful where school staff are involved in these discussions.

	Yes	Could improve	Needs urgent attention
Do you feel welcome at the school?			
Do teachers at your school know about the backgrounds and needs of your kids, and what they would like to do in the future?			
Does the school try to stay in regular contact with the families of kids who go there? Do you know what's happening there?			
Does the school have targets for improving results for its Indigenous students, and ways of achieving those targets?			
Understanding, respect and support for students' cultural backgrounds			
Are there ways in place at the moment so that teachers can learn about the local families and community and its background and issues that affect Indigenous people?			
Does your school have Indigenous members of staff, including teacher aides and other workers?			
Does it invite Indigenous guests along to talk about issues that would interest students?			
Does the school recognise and express its respect for the cultures of its Indigenous students in ways that are acceptable to and appreciated by students and other members of local communities, like flying the flags, murals and other art work, celebrating NAIDOC and Reconciliation Weeks and other dates and festivals important to Indigenous people?			
Developing the skills students need to succeed			
Does the school provide support for kids who can't hear or see as well as they should, or who have other health problems that might interfere with their learning?			
Is there special support for kids who are behind with their literacy or maths?			
In class, are the life experiences of your kids connected to what they are learning?			
Do all kids spend some time learning about Indigenous history, culture and perspectives? Is what they are learning accurate and helpful?			
Are there consistent opportunities for students to work together?			
Are learning activities varied (for example, do they get plenty of chances to use the computers)?			
Coming to school regularly and being actively involved			
Do your kids feel safe and happy when they come to school?			
Are regular attendance and consistent participation problems?			
Are there ways in place of successfully supporting individual kids who have attendance and behaviour problems? Are parents involved in this process?			
If there are problems are members of the community involved in helping solve them?			

What are we going to do together to make things better?



**What Works.
The Work Program**

This booklet is part of the *School and Community: Working Together* series of publications which can be downloaded from www.whatworks.edu.au.

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