



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 Indigenous parents
and communities

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...**

The fundamentals

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

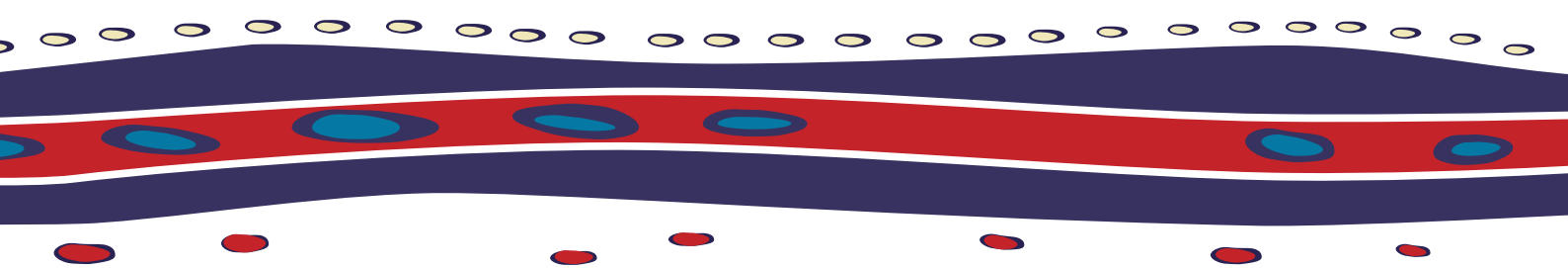
Aspects of students' cultures must be recognised, supported and integrated in the processes of education, not just for their own success, but for the general quality of Australian preschools and schools.

- 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.



The time for making improvement
a reality is now

Conversations

Getting connected, comfortable and confident

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.

Effective relationships and partnerships between Indigenous communities and schools build

- a sense of belonging for students and parents;
- real communication;
- community and parent support for what happens in the classroom, with shared responsibility for student outcomes;
- individual and community leadership;
- agreed ways of working together to a common purpose, with respectful decision making that produces results; and
- opportunities to change the way schools do business.

This pamphlet is part of the *School and Community: Working Together* series of publications:

For community members

- *Learning at home and at school*
- *How schools work*
- *Engagement: the big issue*
- *Teachers and teaching*

For school staff

- *Conversations > Relationships > Partnerships*

To be successful, your kids need to feel connected, comfortable and confident when they are at school. This is most likely to happen when you feel that way too.

Having a yarn

Feeling connected, comfortable and confident is most likely to happen when you know and feel comfortable talking to the people who work at school – and the easiest way to do this is just to have a yarn whenever there is an opportunity to do so.

It doesn't have to be about school things, or to be at school. People who work in schools need to learn about and understand

- your country, your culture, your community, your children and young people;
- your journey, your history, your rights; and
- your stories about learners and learning.

Your school might have an Indigenous Education Worker. (The name of this job varies around the country.) Part of their job it is to meet you and to introduce you to people at the school — the ones you want to meet and the ones who want to meet you. They'll tell you about what's going at school.

Your school might run BBQs or social get-togethers where you can meet with the mob and the people who work at the school. This is an opportunity for you to tell your stories.

Coming up to school

The first time you come will probably be when you enrol your child. You'll be asked for information that the school needs to have about you and your child. This is also a chance for you to ask questions to find out things you want to know. But you can talk about these sorts of things any time.

- Tell them about things your child is good at or interested in. You can ask how the school is going to

help them to develop these talents and interests.

- What are they going to learn? What would be helpful for you to know to be able to help them?
- How are the stories and experiences of Indigenous peoples included in teaching and learning?
- How is your child going to be looked after? Who will have responsibility for that?
- If you've got hassles, who do you talk to?
- What does the school do about homework?
- What excursions does the school provide?
- What other services, like after-school care programs, does the school offer?

And, an important one:

- **How can you have your say about the education of your children?**

Keeping in touch with what's going on

Regular school newsletters keep parents and communities in touch with what is going on. These are often sent home with kids, but there are always copies available at the school. If your school has a website you'll be able to find newsletters, news stories and other information there.

These might not be the best ways to get information to Indigenous families. You could talk to school staff about the best ways of getting messages home. You could suggest the sort of information that parents are interested in hearing from the school.

If your school has got an Indigenous Education Worker she or he will be able to tell you about what's going



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

on. Some schools have a room or area especially for Indigenous parents and community members where you can have a cup of tea or coffee, meet with teachers, hold meetings or just get together with other people who have got kids at school.

One of the best ways of keeping in touch with what is happening is by doing things at school.

Doing things at school

There are schools, especially primary schools, which welcome parents' help in the classroom, sitting with kids, listening to them reading, helping them with their work and so on. Your school might be one of these and your help might be asked for.

There are other things you can do with kids of any age, 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 where good places might be for excursions, and accompanying the students;
- there might be good places for work experience that you know and could tell the school about;
- if you are able to share cultural knowledge, or if you know anyone who can, offer to share this with students. It might be history about the area where the school is located, or you might know about bush plants, foods and medicines;
- joining in to run ceremonies of celebrations for NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week, National

Sorry Day on 26 May or National Torres Strait Islander Day on 4 August; and

- going along to school sports events and carnivals, concerts and presentation nights.

Being involved

You can help teachers by improving their level of cultural awareness by participating in formal programs and simply just by letting them know things you feel would benefit their work.

You can also help teachers by offering to get in contact with parents and families who you know and who don't have much contact with the school.

Assemblies provide opportunities for sharing with staff and students what is important to Indigenous communities. Major assemblies should commence with a Welcome to Country by an Elder or community representative or an Acknowledgement of Country by school staff or school students. Contributions by Elders and community people show that the school and the community value their shared responsibility in providing educational success for Indigenous students.

Workshops are one way of sharing knowledge between schools and Indigenous communities. It is important that the school understands the views of all parents, caregivers and community members rather than a small section of the community. Format, content and processes for the workshop should be mutually agreed upon. Outcomes from workshops could be shared more widely with the school community.

Schools form a number of committees to ensure that work is done. There are opportunities for Indigenous parents,

caregivers and community members to participate in committees to ensure that the needs of Indigenous students are understood and are being met. It may seem like just another meeting, but meetings about Indigenous students that occur with limited parent or community involvement will not be as effective as having authentic discussions and respectful decision making between schools and communities.

Checklist

- ☐ Have you met your child's teacher or teachers?
- ☐ With secondary age students, have you met your child's year adviser or coordinator?
- ☐ Have you talked to them about what you could do to help with learning at home?
- ☐ Do you know if there is an Indigenous aide or worker at school? If so, have you met him or her? Do you keep in touch?
- ☐ Have you made a note of important dates at school where you can be involved, like open days, parent-teacher meetings, sports carnivals, concerts or presentation days?
- ☐ Are you willing to help out at school with things like NAIDOC Week, in the canteen or library, with sports coaching or going on excursions?
- ☐ Are you good at art or music or story-telling? School people are always looking for people with talents like these.
- ☐ Are you in a position to help teachers with teaching about Indigenous history and issues?
- ☐ Do you want to get involved in committees at the school? If you are interested and feel you can help, talk to the Principal or Deputy or a teacher who you feel comfortable with. Bring a support person/family member with you.
- ☐ Have you seen a copy of the school plan?

Relationships


Staying connected and focusing the conversation

About relationships

For school staff and parents and community members to build working relationships, trust, mutual respect and inclusiveness must be established. 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 you to talk about your and your community's aspirations for your children. Listening to, and understanding, each other is the key and the basis for a shared commitment to the education of the Indigenous students. That's what the last step – the partnership – will be all about.

One productive way of building relationships is through the use of Personal (or Individual) Learning Plans.

 *Not all schools have Personal Learning Plans. You can ask about this. If your school doesn't provide them, you could ask about what is happening to track the progress of Indigenous students.*



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.'

Personal Learning Plans

Working with Personal Learning Plans is one of the best possible ways of improving your child's learning and of you getting involved with their education.

You're all talking about something that you all care about, something you can focus on that is real and happening now, and you're doing something directly that can improve your kid's education and chances in life. You're all involved. You'll be able to watch progress happening.

What is a Personal Learning Plan?

A Personal Learning Plan is what it says — a plan for your child's learning. It will have some background information about your child and probably some test results and information about attendance. It should tell you how things are going now, what sort of help he or she is getting, and how he or she might get to the next stage of what is being learnt.

Schools have their own ways of collecting and presenting information, but the teacher or teachers you are working with will tell you what is included.

What use are they?

Working on a Personal Learning Plan is a great chance to sit down and have a good talk with the teacher about what your child is learning, what their strengths and weaknesses are, where things are headed and how you can help.

You don't just get to know how your child is getting on at school, but you can find out a lot about the teacher and the efforts that the school is making, and maybe can make, to support the education of your child.

The most important thing of all — where Personal Learning Plans are used, students' results very often improve.

Who is involved?

Parents or care givers, sometimes older brothers or sisters, the student, his or her main teacher/s and sometimes the school's Indigenous Education Worker.

What happens?

That group meets at an agreed time and place. It might be for about 30 minutes twice a year, sometimes more often. You look at the information the teacher provides and talk about what your hopes are for your child and how they might become real.

You will all agree about what is going to be done, and that you will meet again in the future to talk again about what has happened and what should happen in the future.

These meetings are a good opportunity to talk about how you can help with learning at home.

Partnerships

Making things better for everyone

Schools across Australia are increasingly working in partnership with Indigenous communities to improve Indigenous students' educational 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. The key thing is that local school people, students, families and communities are involved in this process.

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. So, if you're connected to a school like that, you should expect some action.

There is no one way to form an agreement, and agreements will differ from place to place. But here are some ideas to think and talk about.

Why are formal agreements valuable?

- They recognise that everyone involved in education has rights and that they also have responsibilities.
- They give you a chance to have a say in how things will be at school and give you 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.
- You have a document that you can refer to check how things are going over time. If the principal and staff change, the agreement is still there to guide their behaviour.

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

- Look at examples of agreements that have been developed in other schools, especially schools in your area.
- 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.
 - Engage a 'third party' or broker or independent facilitator, who doesn't belong to either the school or the community but whose job



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

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 around what's happening and why. Talk it up round the community. Use flyers, the phone, email.
- As well as parents and family, make sure key people like Elders are there. The people at the meetings need to be able to make sure that agreements stick.
- Consider if people need help to come to meetings, and work out how this can be provided.
- Make sure meetings are held at a place where people can feel most comfortable. This mightn't mean at school initially but every attempt should be made to bring meetings into the school, as people feel more comfortable. Make arrangements for a cup of tea or refreshments.
- Don't rush the process or let yourselves be rushed. 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.

Initial meetings

- Talk about the purpose of the meeting and make sure everyone is clear about that.
- 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 patient with, and tolerant of, other people's views.
- What information do you have that would be useful for everyone to share?
- What other data and information do you need to make good decisions? Where can you get it from?
 - Is there any expert advice that would help that could be brought in?
 - What school documents and plans could be important to the process?
- Make sure someone is taking notes and that all the ideas are recorded.
- Work out together what the whole group agrees with, and what needs more talking about. 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.

Negotiating with school people

- School people might have been at all your meetings and negotiating might have been happening as you go along.
- Consider whether you might want to have smaller meetings and if so who you want to be around the table. If this is going to happen you need to think about how they are going to report back about what happens.
- Be clear about what it is you want to achieve. Be prepared to negotiate on the details, and for the school people to have ideas about how what you want to get done can happen.
- You have an absolute right to be able to understand what other people are saying. If they are using jargon or words you don't understand, or talking about

programs and so on that you don't know anything about, ask for an explanation that makes it clear for you.

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.)

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.




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

Partnerships

Making things better for everyone

Making 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 publication What Works. The Workbook is a very useful tool to help you develop a plan; it can be accessed at www.whatworks.edu.au*

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

- There need to be arrangements in place so that you 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, 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. However, it will be a good idea to have a meeting with a new Principal and to tell him or her about the agreement, what it means to you and how it works.



Top: Desley Rose, student, signing the Drouin Primary School (VIC) school–community partnership agreement; below: Musician Kutcha Edwards addressing the Drouin Primary School community.



**What Works.
The Work Program**

This pamphlet 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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