



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

The Secondary Pathways Project

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This project was conducted during 1998 and 1999 in ten member schools of the Association of Independent Schools in South Australia. Some important aspects continue today.

Forty students and 34 teachers in 10 schools were directly involved. An additional 13 teachers took part in the professional development activities and 27 students were involved in some activities. Andrea Harms was the project officer.



Andrea Harms

The issues

The absence of a cohesive and comprehensive approach to issues confronting Indigenous students in the schools in this sector had been a concern. A number of schools had not established their response to these issues, did not have the opportunity to share information and details about programs with other schools and were seeking direction on where and how to begin.

The project focused on ways of improving attendance, retention and completion rates of Indigenous students in Years 9-12 by

- identifying the Indigenous students in the schools involved;
- establishing which students were at risk and would benefit from intervention; and
- learning what outcomes were possible from differing forms of intervention strategies.

What happened?

Two key research questions were established and explored.

- What do we know about Aboriginal students in the schools in this sector (who and where are they)?
- What are the facts about their attendance, retention and completion rates?

The answers to these questions included the following information.

- They are comparatively isolated; a few students in many schools (62 students in 19 metropolitan schools).
- Some students are not comfortable about publicly identifying as Aboriginal, but this is a changing situation.
- Critical incidents outside the control of the school impact on attendance, retention and completion rates.

- Indigenous boys in Years 9-11 in these schools have poor attendance and retention rates compared to Indigenous girls and non-Indigenous students at those year levels.
- Attendance increases dramatically in individual cases where VET options have been made available.
- At secondary level, numeracy is a greater issue than literacy. (About half the students were below satisfactory literacy levels; about three-quarters were below satisfactory numeracy levels.)
- There is good success with Year 12 completion once that level is gained, especially among girls. Most students then enter tertiary study.

The project drew on this and other information to

- provide professional development for teachers so that they understood the critical issues for Aboriginal students in their schools;
- support the maintenance of a student network through ASSPA committees, camps and social events;
- provide funding to schools for the support of school-based programs;
- maintain a 'Focus Teacher Network', which helped key teachers in schools to provide a mentoring role to their students and for the teachers to become informed about significant issues, such as the Stolen Generations, land rights and reconciliation; and
- establish good links with parents to create a communication channel and to assist schools in doing this where requested.

Intervention strategies were initiated by groups in the individual schools involved (eg, support with development of VET options, subject choice and assessment advice); appropriate curriculum materials developed; and alternative teaching and assessment strategies trialled.

Among the schools involved were Immanuel College and Portside Christian School.

The results

Factors in success

Andrea Harms nominates the following factors as important in the success of the project.

- The Focus Teacher Network enabled teachers to become catalysts for change in their schools as well as to support students sensitively and confidently.
- Shifts in teacher attitudes support success. Involving Indigenous people and parents helps to make this happen. Change is achieved at classroom level.
- Teaching teachers how to teach more effectively produces significant results in a short period. (This can only happen when teachers can access time to learn and professionally renew their energies and focus.)
- Treating cases on an individual basis, creatively and flexibly, is of fundamental importance.
- Mentoring support for students is of high value.
- The development of the student network reduced students' sense of isolation and produced many new friendships and a sense of mutual support.
- Direct intervention in individual cases was highly valuable, especially in establishing course pathways.
- Ownership issues exist. Things succeed when the teachers, not just the administration, 'own' the project.

Andrea also notes the following challenges.

- Attendance and participation involve a multiplicity of issues, a number of which cannot be resolved by schools.
- The strategy of personal intervention is very time-consuming. It works, that is beyond doubt, but it has high costs.
- Some schools were slow to respond and remain uncommitted.
- Problematic attitudes demonstrated by non-Indigenous peers are one of the things focus network teachers face and have to deal with.
- It seems harder to make changes in secondary schools than it is in primary schools because of the structural rigidities and the absence of close and consistent teacher-student relationships.