



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

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.

Partnerships are vital to Indigenous students' success at school.

However you look at it, responsibility for improving educational outcomes must be a shared one. That can 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 — and that's everyone's responsibility.

Most of the material available here is about the process of developing fairly formal partnership agreements between schools and their Indigenous communities. But, even if you are not in a position to be part of such a 'large' partnership, there are other kinds of interpersonal partnership that make important contributions. Sometimes these are vital in situations where Indigenous students are a small minority.

Remember, though, that all of these partnerships, large and small, start with a *conversation*, develop into a *relationship* and finally become a *partnership*.



Teacher Roshni Dullaway (left) with Aboriginal Teaching Assistant Roslyn George at Doomadgee State School

Partnership between teacher and student

Any teacher knows that a kind of partnership is involved in working with a particular student. When things are working well, so is the tacit agreement between teacher ('I respect you and agree to help you learn as best I can') and student ('I'm here to learn and will cooperate with you to do so'). When things are not working well, one or other side of those statements is probably not true.

All other partnerships contribute to this fundamental, productive working arrangement. Non-Indigenous staff may sometimes take the view that they 'treat them the same as any other student'; that is, any other non-Indigenous student. Sometimes, where the level of pastoral care and interest is high, that will work, but often it won't. There is no substitute for an informed understanding of students' backgrounds, in both the particular and broad senses.

Partnership between teacher and parent or carer

Similarly, there can be a partnership between a teacher or teachers and an individual student's parents or carers. These informal partnerships might arise from deliberate efforts by either party, or might develop from informal contacts made outside the school, perhaps at sporting events or shopping centres. Don't ignore these valuable opportunities to begin conversations. Who knows? They may become important partnerships. Remember, though (but don't assume), that Indigenous parents may have had schooling experiences that were negative and relatively brief and their children may be breaking new ground by staying on at school. Be sensitive to this.

Partnership between teacher and Indigenous worker

Another important type of partnership occurs in the school, between teachers (who are most often non-Indigenous) and Indigenous workers. Symbolically and practically, this relationship is at the heart of the success of many Indigenous students at school. It has been said many times that the Indigenous workers are the people who were in the community before most teachers came and will be there long after most teachers have moved on. So they are the people who can help make the right connections.

What Works has produced a set of print materials, based on these ideas, for people working in schools and for Indigenous community members.

The South Australian Aboriginal Education and Training Consultative Body (SAAETCB) has produced an issues paper, 'What makes school-community engagement work?'. It provides a useful literature review and uses as an example the What Works partnership process at Fraser Park Primary School in Murray Bridge. The paper is available for download through the link on the right of this page.