



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

To what extent do health issues affect Indigenous students' learning?

Many Indigenous students are in good health and succeeding at school. However, we also know that there are large numbers of Indigenous students whose performance at school is seriously impeded by poor health. It is important to acknowledge, though, that most health issues among Indigenous people do not, in general, stem from Indigeneity. Sometimes it is easy to identify the person with the health issue, but there is a correlation here, not a causal relationship.

As Chris Sarra remarked at a conference in 2005, when discussing negative social issues in Indigenous communities and their consequences:

Our children need to understand that these things exist in our community because they are a legacy of other historical and sociological processes, and that they are not a legacy of being Aboriginal.

Not only Indigenous children, but teachers and the community as a whole need to understand this.

Every teacher knows that students who are consistently unwell may not achieve their potential. So what is the role of teachers and schools in relation to these matters?

General advice

- While your contribution to dealing with students' health issues is important, your expertise is in the area of pedagogy and your primary responsibility is to teach your students to the best of your ability. Do not be distracted from that.
- Even though a 'whole of life' approach will produce best results, there are many examples of students' educational outcomes being improved in less than optimal situations. Don't wait for conditions to be optimal. Everyone can take action to improve outcomes to some extent right now.
- If you know or suspect that a student has a health problem, consult parents or carers and ensure that the student is referred to appropriate health professionals. If appropriate services are not available, be persistent in requesting them from the responsible authorities.
- It is never the job of a teacher to diagnose medical conditions. Do not make assumptions, but once a diagnosis is made by appropriate professionals you are in a position to seek further targeted assistance if necessary.
- Your first port of call for advice and assistance should be the support services of the educational jurisdiction in which you are working.
- Hungry students can't concentrate. Providing food has been criticised as outside the province of schools, a welfare operation which builds dependency. On the other hand, if a Vegemite sandwich makes the difference between a good session and a bad one, then in the short term that might be helpful.
- Physical activity has long been associated with good health. Research now suggests that physical activity is associated with brain function and readiness to learn. All schools can contribute to students' health and learning by making sure that physical activity is a regular part of the school program.