



**A culturally responsive
evaluation of the
expanded Connected
Communities Strategy**

Acknowledgements

The evaluation teams respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We extend that respect to the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which the Connected Communities schools are situated. We acknowledge the land, water, skies and all living things that occupy these spaces, as well as the spiritual connection that exists between all these things.

Aboriginal people have an obligation beyond the professional roles that they undertake. This obligation is reflected in the relationships that individuals have with Country and with people within communities.

The evaluation teams acknowledge the Aboriginal people, past and present, who have worked with Connected Communities schools. We acknowledge the cultural connections and obligations they bring to their work and the ongoing contributions they make.

The evaluation team from the University of Newcastle have family and cultural connections in the communities where this evaluation was conducted. The work of the team and the obligations they have to communities existed prior to this work and will continue beyond this evaluation.

The evaluation teams would like to thank each school and local community for their generosity. It has been a privilege to be able to enter each community and interact with students, staff, Elders and community members.



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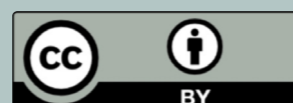
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A culturally responsive evaluation of the expanded Connected Communities Strategy



**New South Wales
Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group Inc.**

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List of acronyms and terms

ACLO	Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer
AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.
AEO	Aboriginal Education Officer
AOPD	Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships Directorate
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEL	Director, Educational Leadership
DoE	New South Wales Department of Education
ED	Executive Director, Connected Communities
EP	Executive Principal, Connected Communities school
GA	General Assistant
HSC	Higher School Certificate
Hub	A space for collaboration and coordination of services to support students and families
ICIP	Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property
LCE	Leader Community Engagement
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAIDOC	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NSW	New South Wales
NSWTF	New South Wales Teachers Federation
P&C	Parents and Citizens Association
PCYC	Police Citizens Youth Club
PLPs	Personal Learning Pathways
PPA	New South Wales Primary Principals Association
SLCE	Senior Leader Community Engagement
SLSO	School Learning Support Officer
SPC	New South Wales Secondary Principals Council
SRG	School Reference Group
WHO	World Health Organisation
WofG	Whole of Government

Notes

The term Aboriginal is used in this document to refer to both Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and staff in NSW for brevity and readability. Where the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ are used instead, they reflect the terminology used in the cited documents and policies.

The Senior Leader Community Engagement position (SLCE) is inclusive of Leader Community Engagement (LCE) when referred to throughout this report.



Executive summary

Background

The **Connected Communities Strategy** (Connected Communities, the strategy) is an initiative of the New South Wales Department of Education (DoE, the department). Connected Communities commenced implementation in 2013 in 16 rural and remote schools across NSW and was later expanded such that it currently operates in 33 schools in 23 communities. The strategy was approved until 2023, with an extension granted until January 2025.

Connected Communities was created because it was clear that a new approach was needed to how education and training were being delivered in the most vulnerable communities within NSW and how they were linked to other related services, such as health, welfare, early childhood education and care, and vocational education and training.

The strategy was co-designed and co-constructed with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG).

Evaluation

In 2020 an evaluation of Connected Communities was completed by the DoE's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) and found that service access had increased across all schools, with staff reporting more linkages with services and more students accessing health services in particular.

In 2023 it was proposed that the 2020 evaluation be complemented with a culturally responsive evaluation to provide further

contextual insights to guide adjustments in policy, program and service delivery.

The University of Newcastle was engaged to undertake this piece of work and the scope encompassed but was not limited to:

- an in-depth evaluation of each of the Phase 1 Connected Communities schools.
- a high-level review of the Phase 2 Connected Communities schools.

This scope was subsequently updated so that the 17 Phase 2 schools could be included beyond a high-level review; these visits were undertaken by Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) in Term 3 2023, making this a co-delivered evaluation.

The evaluation questions relevant to both Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools were as follows:

1. **To what extent have DoE and Whole of Government (WofG) systems supported the enhancement of teaching and learning outcomes in Connected Communities schools?**
2. **How have Connected Communities schools been supported by identified system supports?**
3. **To what extent have the DoE and WofG systems supported key deliverables of the strategy?**

4. **What success factors, barriers and any unintended consequences have been identified in the delivery of Connected Communities?**

The findings of this report demonstrate the evaluation teams' interpretation of the information gathered from stakeholders across Phase 1 and Phase 2 school communities. Some of this information aligns directly with one or more of the evaluation questions and other findings may be seen to sit outside of the questions.

The evaluation teams included all findings and interpretations in this report, as this approach is consistent with the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework, ensuring that many Aboriginal voices are heard.

Re-imagining Evaluation

This evaluation has been conducted in alignment with the Re-imagining Evaluation: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework for the NSW Department of Education (Re-imagining Evaluation Framework, the framework) which was launched by the department in August 2023.

It focuses on the experiences of Aboriginal students and families and consists of six guiding principles:

- **Aboriginal student and family sovereignty**
- **relationships**
- **place**
- **yarning**
- **responsibility and credibility**
- **empowering change.**

The evaluation questions were addressed using an iterative approach. This approach was grounded in the principles of the framework.

Methodology

The evaluation adopted a process design taking into account predominantly qualitative evidence gathered from each of the 33 Connected Communities school sites. This was augmented by quantitative data provided by the DoE to provide descriptive context.

The University of Newcastle team led the evaluation and focused on the 16 Phase 1 Connected Communities schools, while the CESE team conducted data gathering and analysis from the 17 Phase 2 schools.

Incorporating the principles from the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework, both evaluation teams had four touchpoints with the local communities and the schools serving those communities.

Key stakeholders at local sites included members of the local Aboriginal community, Executive Principals (EP) and Principals, school personnel who were locally identified as key stakeholders, local AECG representatives, including Senior Leader/Leader Community Engagement (SLCE), Aboriginal Education Officers (AEO), members of the School Reference Group (SRG), as well as other local individuals identified in a snowball sampling process used on site, in addition to students, families and carers.

Findings

The following findings are based on the perceptions, experiences and insights of school communities. The findings have been collated into three sections: those that were consistent across both Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools, those that were unique to Phase 1 schools and those that were unique to Phase 2 schools. All findings were captured under the following high-level themes, which were identified through the University of Newcastle team's field work:

- Aboriginal Education Ecosystem
- relationships
- place
- healing
- system supports.

Each of these high-level themes has been broken down into several sub-themes for each phase of analysis.

Findings common across Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools

Aboriginal Education Ecosystem

- Effective, proactive leadership realised through the EP and SLCE roles is vital to implementation success.
- A shared commitment and close, positive working relationship between the SLCE and other Aboriginal staff are integral to strategy success.
- More Aboriginal people being employed in Connected Communities schools is shifting the power dynamics within the Aboriginal Education Ecosystem and contributing to more culturally responsive environments for Aboriginal students and their families.
- The lifecycle of the Connected Communities Strategy impacts the health of Aboriginal Education Ecosystems.

Relationships

- A shared commitment and close, positive working relationship between the EP and SLCE are integral to strategy success.
- The increased involvement of Aboriginal community members in schools is highly beneficial although some challenges remain.
- Students have high levels of engagement and participation in education which extends to their families.
- Schools are engaging in more outreach activity; the lines of communication are more open and more parents are coming through the school gates.
- For some schools, more enhanced engagement efforts and more time are needed for families and communities to feel comfortable to participate in school activities.
- Support for students and families extends beyond the school.

Place

- There has been an increase in the number of Aboriginal people employed across Connected Communities schools.
- More Aboriginal staff and community involvement in schools can increase the cultural obligations for Aboriginal staff, which may not be well understood by non-Aboriginal staff.

- Many schools leverage the strategy to improve cultural visibility, recognition and celebration through signage, artworks and events. These actions promote greater family and community engagement within schools and foster open dialogues about culture across schools and their communities.
- The complex histories of communities are factors that schools must address as they work within the strategy.
- Connected Communities schools are achieving positive shifts in school culture.
- Cultural recognition, sensitivity, and connectedness to place and community, are central to students' being proud of their cultural identities and fostering their sense of belonging in Connected Communities schools.
- Cultural governance through the SRG can be impactful.
- Contextual barriers sometimes prevent the establishment of a consistent SRG.
- Embedding cultural protocols and practices in Connected Communities schools is integral to improving experiences for students and community members.
- Improvements to communications would enable deeper understandings about the strategy and enhance community trust.



Healing

- Aboriginal language and culture programs are essential to student learning, engagement and wellbeing.
- Opportunities to learn about culture generate positive effects in relation to staff cultural responsiveness, competence and awareness while also foregrounding areas for continual improvement.
- Students feel they belong and are developing a strong sense of pride in their cultural identity.
- The responsibility of providing safe learning environments, and fostering opportunities that assist communities to heal, continues to be addressed by Connected Communities schools so that educational goals can be realised.
- Inter-generational experiences of Aboriginal people in schools are vastly different and the opportunity for cultural learning now in schools is contributing to a sense of healing.
- Wellbeing strategies in Connected Communities schools demonstrate context-specific interventions that address the localised needs of students and communities in non-conventional ways.
- Engaging students in learning outside the school is integral to cultural learning, and to community healing, for schools and their communities.
- Schools play a major role in revitalising language and cultural practices in communities, and the strategy has increased opportunities for cultural learning for students and staff.

System supports

- The Connected Communities Directorate provides advice and support to Connected Communities schools.
- Students in Connected Communities schools are developing high aspirations for further education and employment with clearer pathways to achieving those aspirations.
- The strategy provides greater flexibility in the delivery of teaching and learning.
- Through the hub, more students and families are seeking and receiving support from a range of services.
- The hub provides a safe place where students and families can seek support and be supported when accessing services.
- Place-based inductions and training promote knowledge about community dynamics, histories and experiences.
- The strategy enables faster and more direct access to the department's system supports and services.
- Staff recruitment and retention, particularly for schools located in regional and remote locations, is a major challenge for schools to successfully implement the strategy.
- More time to deliver the strategy is required for meaningful change and impact to be achieved.
- Establishing or strengthening transition points for students presents an opportunity to improve the strategy.
- Formalised networking, knowledge sharing and connections between Connected Communities schools offer opportunities to enhance the implementation of the strategy.

Findings unique to Phase 1 schools

Aboriginal Education Ecosystem

- The SLCE role has a long-term positive impact.

Relationships

- The strategy has led to increased levels of trust between the school and community.

Place

- Connected Communities schools support the transient nature of Aboriginal students and families.

Healing

- Connected Communities schools have the ability to play a role of healing within each community.

System supports

- The evaluation team observed inconsistent application of strategic induction processes.
- School communities report that students are better prepared to start school.

Findings unique to Phase 2 schools

Relationships

- The SLCE role embeds a sense of trust with families and communities.

Place

- Cultural awareness includes knowledge of kinship and sacred sites.
- Connected Communities schools exercise autonomy in developing and enacting reconciliation strategies within their communities.

Healing

- Connected Communities schools manifest demographic, operational and cultural shifts following involvement in the strategy.
- Histories of schools are temporal markers for observations of transformative shifts since engaging with the strategy.
- Pre-strategy experiences provide points of comparison for the transformative shifts observed since the implementation of the strategy.
- Post-strategy experiences provide points of comparison from a school's history prior to implementing the strategy.

System supports

- Connected Communities schools demonstrate autonomy by using the strategy with high degrees of flexibility to meet the needs of students and local communities.



Summary of findings on success factors and challenges

The following is a summary of key findings as they relate to the success factors and challenges that have been identified in the delivery of the Connected Communities Strategy.

Key success factors

During consultation, participants from across each school community were asked what aspects of the strategy were working particularly well. Whilst participants' responses to this question varied, analysis of data collected from schools revealed the following reoccurring themes:

- improved family and community engagement with the school
- embedding Aboriginal language and culture at school
- effective and proactive leadership
- cultural belonging and safety
- flexibility and autonomy.

Key challenges

During consultation, participants from across each school community were asked what aspects of the strategy were challenging to implement, both at the beginning and more recently. Whilst participants' responses to this question varied, analysis of data collected from schools revealed the following reoccurring themes, reported below:

- staff shortages, turnover and capacity creating a barrier to strategy delivery
- family and community engagement in some contexts
- recruitment of local staff who understand culture and community
- schools can only achieve a limited amount of change in the time allocated to implement the strategy

- limited access to services was more pronounced in remote and some regional schools
- improving awareness and understanding of the strategy was limited beyond the school gates (and amongst staff in some schools).

The evaluation team undertook a thorough analysis of the data obtained during field work. The overall findings, success factors and challenges associated with the Connected Communities Strategy will be explored in more depth further in this report.

The following recommendations are an output of the evaluation teams' analysis to guide and strengthen the implementation of the strategy, which in turn, aims to improve the experiences and life outcomes of Aboriginal students and families.

Recommendations

That the NSW Government:

- develops a long-term continuation plan for the Connected Communities Strategy
- establishes a Ministerial working group to ensure cross-government collaborations that support Aboriginal students and families.

That the department:

- develops a structured process to help Connected Communities schools to share knowledge with, and provide support to, each other
- strengthens induction processes for new staff in Connected Communities schools, particularly new EPs
- facilitates a strategic approach, led by the Connected Communities Directorate, to strengthen the relationship between EPs and SLCE, particularly in times of transition
- undertakes an audit, led by the Connected Communities Directorate, of SRG membership and activity
- makes the SLCE role available for schools outside the Connected Communities Strategy
- employs more Aboriginal staff through targeted, locally-suited positions
- creates a specific leadership program for Aboriginal people in school-based positions that recognises the cultural nuances of leadership for Aboriginal people

- facilitates how the Connected Communities Directorate and the Regional, Rural and Remote Policy Directorate will work with School Workforce to learn from the experiences of staff in Connected Communities schools who have been in the school for five years or more

- uses the learnings from the SLCE role and the SRG cultural governance structure to empower other underrepresented populations in schools

- develops resources and support to help Connected Communities schools with key transition points. Pre- and post-school transition as well as primary to secondary transition points.

That Connected Communities schools:

- create resources for the sharing of local histories, cultural analysis of local environments, documentations of local family histories and stories, in partnership with the local Aboriginal community

- develop Aboriginal staff networks.

That the NSW Government, the department and Connected Communities schools work together to:

- strengthen communications for families, communities and external service providers using a range of mediums.



“We have to be strategic around relationship building. Creating time and space for people to connect, staff, students and community members.”

(Executive Principal, Phase 1 school)



1. Background

The Connected Communities Strategy

The Connected Communities Strategy commenced implementation in 16 schools in 2013. These 16 schools collectively will be referred to as Phase 1 schools. The strategy aims to improve outcomes for students in some of the most vulnerable communities in NSW.

The strategy was created because it was clear that a new approach was needed to how education and training are delivered in the most vulnerable communities, and how education and training are linked to other related services, such as health, welfare, early childhood education and care, and vocational education and training.

The Connected Communities Strategy was co-designed and co-constructed with the NSW AECG.

Initially the Walgett Community College was counted as one school site with one EP. However, in 2019, the Community College was separated into a Primary School campus and High School campus and is now counted as two distinct sites under the strategy with two EPs.

The strategy has since been expanded to another 17 schools which will be referred to as Phase 2 schools, bringing the total to 33 schools across 23 communities; see Figure 1.



Figure 1: Map of 33 Connected Communities schools

Student enrolments have fluctuated over the duration of the Connected Communities Strategy. Contributing factors such as geographic location, access to services and transient families being on Country have impacted enrolments. Figures 2 and 3 show enrolments for 2022.

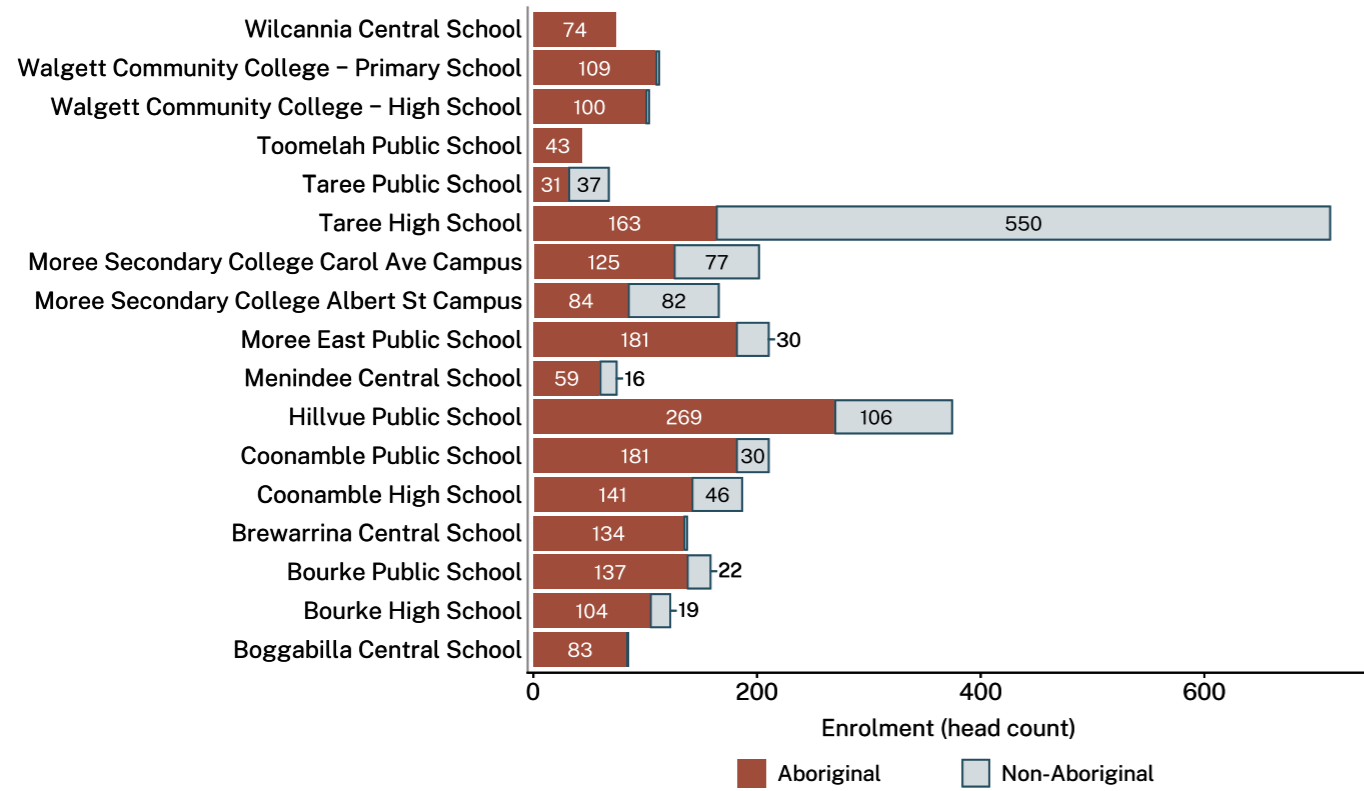


Figure 2: Enrolments at Phase 1 Connected Communities schools, 2022

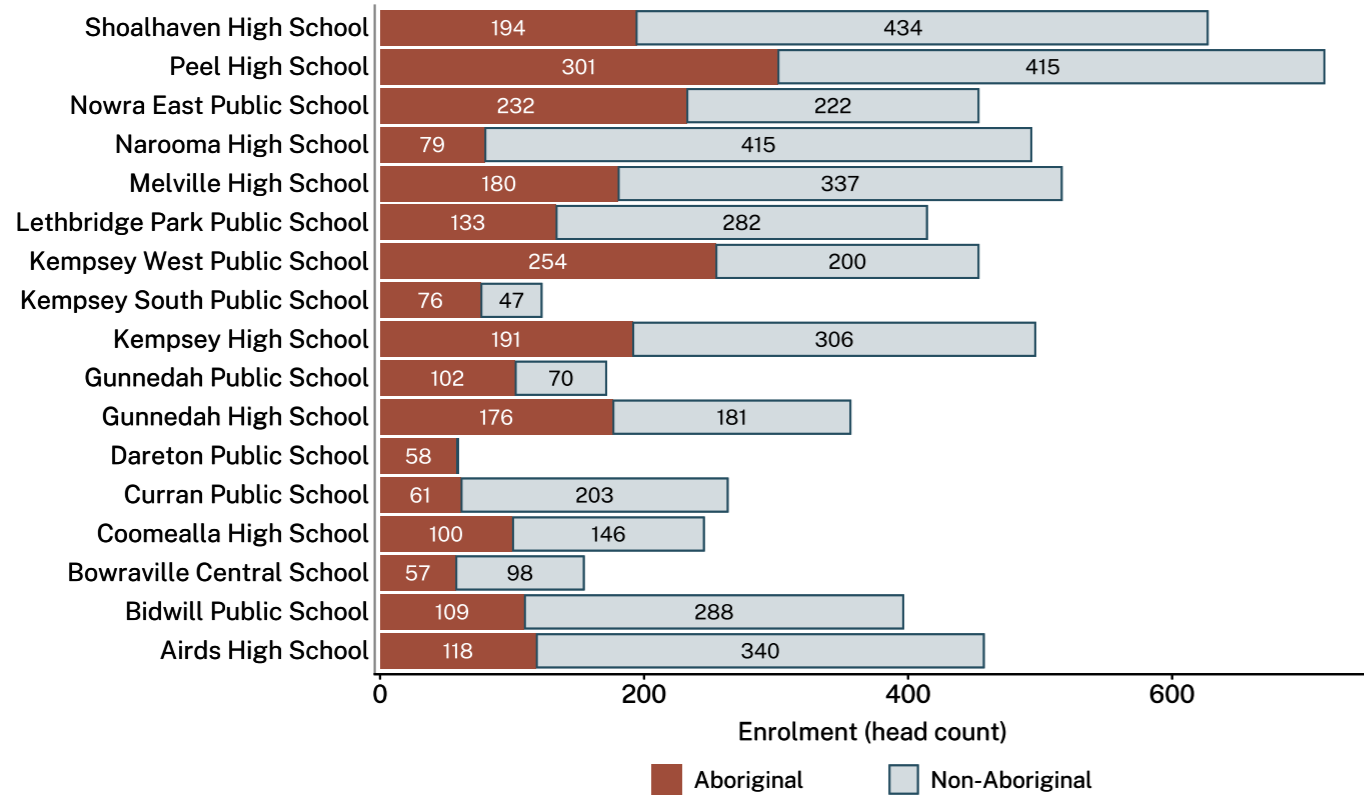


Figure 3: Enrolments at Phase 2 Connected Communities schools, 2022

Explanatory Notes for Figures 2 and 3: Enrolments are sourced from the midyear census conducted annually in August as part of the National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC) by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Data were extracted in October 2023. Data represent the number of students (headcount), rather than full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolments. Enrolment numbers are suppressed when 5 or fewer.



“I left the community and when I came back on maternity leave, I saw an ex-student in the community and she gave me a hug. That’s when I knew I needed to be back here.”

(Teacher, Phase 1 school)

To determine the possible locations where the strategy could be implemented the department looked at the following:

- Social circumstances that determine disadvantage – as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO). These circumstances influence how students can learn and engage. These included health status, affordability and availability of fresh food and vegetables and basic household products, access to early childhood services/ education; housing and transport, social exclusion and levels of unemployment.
- Educational outcomes over time – drawn from the department’s own data, which included attendance, NAPLAN, and HSC data.
- Local knowledge – which included input from the NSW AECG.

Other NSW Government agencies provided data to help shape this work. This included the Department of Communities and Justice, the Ministry of Health, the Aboriginal Housing Office, Transport for NSW and Police NSW.

Once the data were analysed a consultation process was conducted in partnership with the NSW AECG, Primary Principals Association (PPA), Secondary Principals Council (SPC), Parents and Citizens Association (P&C) and New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and a list of possible schools was presented to the NSW Government Cabinet (via its Delivery and Performance Committee).

The strategy outlines three areas that underpin success: effective leadership; good governance; and genuine community partnerships.

Effective leadership

An Executive Director (ED), Connected Communities role was created to provide leadership across the whole Connected Communities portfolio.

An EP role was created to lead each Connected Communities site. This classification reflects the high level of leadership required to implement the key deliverables of the Connected Communities Strategy.

The SLCE role was created to be a conduit between the school and Government/non-Government agencies and services and to assist with the links with the community. In some circumstances, the role has morphed into acting as a cultural mentor to the EP and staff. The SLCE is an Aboriginal-identified role that contributes to the school executive team.

Genuine community partnerships

The Connected Communities Strategy positions schools as community hubs, reflecting the role they play in coordinating the delivery of key services in supporting children, young people and their families.

This includes support from birth through to school and into further training, study and employment. The EP and SLCE lead the engagement and coordination of local services.

Good governance

All Connected Communities schools have a local SRG chaired by the President of the local AECG. Membership includes the EP, Aboriginal Elders and/or community members, parents and a representative from the school’s P&C.

The SRG structure was developed exclusively for Connected Communities schools to empower and amplify the voices of Aboriginal people and communities.

Each school has the flexibility to ensure their SRG reflects the local context by involving key stakeholders from the community.



Key deliverables of Connected Communities

Various targets and priorities for the strategy were set out to align with the priorities of National and State education agendas. As outlined in the strategy (NSW Department of Education, 2024), the key deliverables for Connected Communities are:

Aboriginal children are increasingly developmentally ready to benefit from schooling – in their physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication

Aboriginal families and community members are actively engaged in the school

attendance rates for Aboriginal students are equal to the state average

Aboriginal students are increasingly achieving at or above national minimum standards and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are improving

Aboriginal students are staying at school until Year 12 (or equivalent training)

Aboriginal students are transitioning from school into post-school options such as training and/or employment

Aboriginal parents and carers report that service delivery from the school site is flexible and responsive to their needs

Aboriginal students and communities report that the school values their identity, culture, goals and aspirations

staff report that professional learning opportunities build their capacity to personalise their teaching to meet the learning needs of all students in their class

staff report that professional learning opportunities build their understandings and connections with the community.

Historical experiences of Aboriginal people in NSW schools

The historical experiences of Aboriginal people in NSW schools are an important aspect of this evaluation as they set the context of why the Connected Communities Strategy was needed, developed and implemented. Individuals also shared stories about these historical experiences as the evaluation teams conducted yarning sessions and focus groups within schools and communities as part of this evaluation.

Aboriginal people across NSW have been severely impacted by invasion, resulting in inter-generational trauma that impacts current life outcomes. Phillips and Osmand (2018) state that past government policies and structures have focused on destroying Aboriginal cultures and assimilating Aboriginal people into a white non-Aboriginal society.

Schools have been at the forefront of this destruction as outlined in the following examples. Cadzow and the NSW Board of Studies (2007) created a timeline of Aboriginal Education from 1788–2007. It demonstrated that the Clean, Clad and Courteous Policy (1884) and the Exclusion on Demand Policy (1902), as cited in Reynolds (2009) are examples of government policy that have impacted the educational experiences of Aboriginal people in NSW.

Rahman (2013, p. 660) argued that **“in schools, most of the learning rules or guidelines reflect the ‘white’ dominant culture’s values and practices, and that it is generally those who do not have the cultural matchups that schooling requires for success, such as Aboriginal students and minority students, who face the most educational disadvantage”**.

Others have also argued that curriculum represents the knowledge of dominant white groups, excluding Aboriginal knowledges (Bishop, Vass & Thompson, 2019). This has made it very difficult over many generations for Aboriginal students to engage with school as equal peers, undermining a sense of belonging in these settings.

The evaluation teams heard many stories, mainly from Elders in communities, about the things that impacted their education and how they were made to feel while at school. Stories of segregation, overt racism, exclusion and violence were shared throughout the second touchpoints across Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools.

In 2005, the Social Justice Report was released by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2005). This report called for Australian governments to commit to a strategic approach to improve life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia.

In 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) responded with the release of the Closing the Gap concept, committing to address Indigenous inequalities in specific areas (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008). Targets for reducing inequalities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life expectancy, mortality, education and employment were set. The targets for education fell under the areas of attendance, literacy and numeracy, and Year 12 attainment (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2019).

Educators and system leaders committed to ‘closing gaps’ and agreed to work strategically to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged and empowered through education in Australia. In the same paper they highlighted that little work has been conducted on successful school participation strategies that work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

The NSW AECG began in 1977 as a committee of Aboriginal people invited by the department to advise it on Aboriginal education. In 1981 the Minister for Education, the Hon. Paul Landa, formally recognised the NSW AECG as the principal advisory body on Aboriginal education. All Ministers since have continued this recognition (NSW AECG, n.d.).

A series of partnership agreements have provided details of the relationships between the NSW AECG and the NSW DoE. Walking Together, Working Together: Partnership agreement between the NSW AECG and the NSW DoE 2020–2030, is the current agreement.

In 2023 the NSW AECG was made up of 20 regional and over 140 local committees supporting schools and communities across NSW. The Connected Communities cultural governance structure, the SRG, is chaired by the local AECG President.

NSW Aboriginal Education Policy

In NSW, the first Aboriginal Education Policy was released in 1982, focusing on improving the educational disadvantage faced by Aboriginal people (NSW Department of Education, 2008).

This policy was developed in collaboration with the NSW AECG and set out guidelines for the use of more appropriate pedagogical practices when working with Aboriginal children, emphasising the need for schools to consult with their local Aboriginal communities (Burridge & Chodkiewicz, 2012).

The current Aboriginal Education Policy defines the department’s commitments in its schools and was developed in response to the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (2004), in collaboration with Aboriginal communities and key partners. The Policy is supported by other documents including:

- Turning Policy into Action (2023)
- Partnership Agreement with NSW AECG (2020–2030, n.d.)
- 10 Year Plan – Footprints to the Future (n.d.)
- Strong Strides Together (2022).

Aboriginal Education Ecosystem

The Aboriginal Education Ecosystem is a concept that has been identified by the University of Newcastle evaluation team to understand how the complex nature of each school and community functions collectively as unique local agents in the provision of the educational experience of Aboriginal children in NSW.

As a general finding, the impact of all unique programs on Aboriginal student learning outcomes is fundamentally dependent on the overall health of the local Aboriginal Education Ecosystem. This is no less true for the Connected Communities Strategy.

The Aboriginal Education Ecosystem within each school and community was established well before the Connected Communities Strategy was implemented and it will be there long after. The health of these local ecosystems needs to be recognised as a major contributing factor in the successes of the strategy.

The evaluation teams heard from all stakeholders about factors that contribute to the health of each ecosystem in positive and negative ways, including both systemic and local factors.

The concept of an Aboriginal Education Ecosystem can be aligned to the work of Hannon et al. in Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models (2019) and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1977). Hannon et al. identify that society has a collective role to play in equipping people to create meaningful futures, through lifelong learning.

Bronfenbrenner identified that a child’s development is influenced by a series of interconnected systems and relationships. In schools and communities, there are a series of structures, historical experiences, programs and people that influence the education of Aboriginal students.

Historically, schools served a purpose of assimilation and therefore these earlier iterations of the Aboriginal Education Ecosystem did not reflect the cultural curriculum, aspirations or obligations that existed in Aboriginal families and communities.

Over time, this ecosystem has evolved. The Connected Communities Strategy has impacted this ecosystem by adding additional resources and structures to each school and community.

Throughout the evaluation, the teams observed each local ecosystem and heard stories from individuals, which described the factors that impact on the health of that ecosystem. Each community’s ecosystem has been navigating the complexities of education and schooling for Aboriginal students for many generations.

The evaluation teams heard stories that indicate a tension exists where the Aboriginal people within each ecosystem attempt to work with the non-Aboriginal people and the DoE systems, structures and measures of success.

Often these systems, structures and measures of success do not align with Aboriginal peoples’ expectations of education, culture and measures of success.

Burgess and Lowe (2022) identify a disconnect between policy and practice which impacts on teacher agency to effectively work in the Aboriginal education sphere.

This concept of the Aboriginal Education Ecosystem will be referred to throughout this report.

Previous evaluation of Connected Communities

An evaluation of the Connected Communities Strategy was conducted in 2020 which aimed to answer the following evaluation questions (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020):

1. How well has the model of the Connected Communities Strategy been formed and implemented, and what variation exists across schools?
2. What are the outcomes and impact of the Connected Communities Strategy?
3. Does the Connected Communities Strategy deliver value for money?

The evaluation used a large range of quantitative and qualitative data sources to investigate these evaluation questions.

The conclusion and discussion section in the report of this earlier evaluation provided the following summary of findings:

- There is moderate evidence to suggest that Connected Communities had a positive effect on Year 3 NAPLAN outcomes, but little evidence for positive effects in older years.
- There is strong evidence to suggest that student attendance increased following the introduction of Connected Communities, but only for primary school students.
- The early years focus appears to be having a positive impact on students' developmental readiness.

- Retention rates changed only for non-Aboriginal students in Connected Communities schools, and post-school outcomes for all students in Connected Communities schools have not changed.
- The focus on culture is having positive effects on the school environment.
- Community engagement is improving but is still inconsistent.
- Service access has increased.
- Teachers are being provided with effective professional development.

The same section of the report identified the following patterns regarding the impact of the strategy:

- Overall, Connected Communities is showing promising results.
- The strategy appears to be more effective at the primary level than the secondary level.
- Attendance is key yet increased only for primary school students and remained unchanged for secondary students.
- There was variation across schools in outcomes.
- Environmental factors impacted on the strategy's implementation and impact.
- Staff buy-in affects outcomes.
- Stability of key roles is key to the strategy's success.





2. The evaluation



“One of the best things that happens at our school is setting new staff up for success. We invest time in welcoming new staff members and introducing them to all members of the community.”

(Teacher, Phase 1 school)

Scope of work

A team from the University of Newcastle was successful via tender to develop the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework for the department. The team then submitted a further successful tender to conduct a culturally responsive evaluation of Connected Communities.

The initial scope outlined a culturally responsive evaluation of the Expanded Connected Communities Strategy to provide further contextual insights to guide adjustments in policy, program and service delivery.

The review involved, but was not limited to, in-depth reviews of each of the 16 Phase 1 schools, plus a high-level review of the 17 Phase 2 schools.

After the project began, the DoE amended the scope to include a team of CESE evaluators who would conduct qualitative data gathering in the 17 Phase 2 schools. The University of Newcastle evaluation team therefore engaged the Phase 1 schools for the entire project, and, after the scope of work was amended, the CESE team engaged the Phase 2 schools.

The evaluation questions relevant to both Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools were as follows:

1. To what extent have DoE and Whole of Government (WofG) systems supported the enhancement of teaching and learning outcomes in Connected Communities schools?
2. How have Connected Communities schools been supported by identified system supports?

3. To what extent have the DoE and WofG systems supported key deliverables of the strategy?

4. What success factors, barriers and any unintended consequences have been identified in the delivery of Connected Communities?

The findings of this report demonstrate the evaluation teams' interpretation of the information gathered from stakeholders across Phase 1 and Phase 2 school communities.

Some of this information aligns directly with one or more of the evaluation questions, while other findings may be seen to sit outside of the questions.

The evaluation questions were addressed using an iterative approach. This approach was grounded in the principles of the Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework.

Culturally responsive evaluation allows the voices of participants to be heard even if the statements are not aligned with pre-specified areas of inquiry.



Re-imagining Evaluation: A Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework for the NSW Department of Education

The Re-imagining Evaluation Framework was launched by the department in August 2023 and this evaluation of the Connected Communities Strategy is the first to be conducted in alignment with it.

The commitment to develop a Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework represents a new approach and substantial commitment to changing the way that evaluations are undertaken, by including Aboriginal peoples, their knowledges and perspectives, shaped by lived experiences, as valued partners in moving forward. It focuses on the experiences of Aboriginal students and families and consists of six guiding principles (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Re-imagining Evaluation Framework
Source: University of Newcastle



Principle 1: Aboriginal student and family sovereignty

The Principle at the core of the Framework is Aboriginal student and family sovereignty. It honours the centrality of family, which encompasses the kinship structures that exist in Aboriginal peoples' lives. Aboriginal students and families are central to all culturally responsive evaluations of Aboriginal policies and strategies.



Principle 4: Yarning

Evaluation teams engage in conversations that involve active listening, creating an ongoing culture of reflection and reciprocity. Yarning methodologies are used to promote dynamic conversations with all stakeholders.



Principle 2: Relationships

Relationships are crucial to stakeholder willingness to participate in evaluation. Culturally responsive evaluations leverage the family and cultural connections that exist in communities to promote engagement and participation.



Principle 5: Responsibility and credibility

Cultural considerations around how Aboriginal people do business are essential. Knowledge and practice of cultural nuances reinforce the responsibilities of an evaluation team and enhance the credibility of the team in each community. Culturally appropriate and accessible evaluation reporting methods are implemented.



Principle 3: Place

Place is an integral part of Aboriginal peoples' identity. System-wide initiatives should contain the flexibility to be adapted at the local level. Culturally responsive evaluations respect local protocols and the place-based initiatives implemented when addressing evaluation questions and assessing any specific initiative.



Principle 6: Empowering change

Evaluation identifies and promotes best practice and meaningful change. Evaluation teams acknowledge that any evaluation process needs to support local communities to better understand how a strategy or initiative or process has empowered change. A culturally responsive evaluation is also an opportunity to strengthen and celebrate change.

This framework has guided the methodological approach used by the evaluation teams throughout this evaluation of the Connected Communities Strategy.

Methods and methodology

To be consistent with the six principles of the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework, several design features of the evaluation were incorporated into the methodology.

The evaluation adopted a process design taking into account predominantly qualitative evidence gathered from each of the Connected Communities school sites. Quantitative data provided by the DoE provided descriptive context.

The need for a predominantly qualitative approach was based on two requirements:

1. **explicitly opening the question of what communities choose to value in their approach to the strategy, and;**
2. **the need for evidence that related to the meaning given to events and outcomes by local communities.**

That is, while it is possible to treat qualitative data as representing factual historical events, the question of meaning requires independent and explicit analysis

Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and collective yarning with key stakeholders at each site as well as with staff from the Connected Communities Directorate.

Key stakeholders who were important to each place included members of the local Aboriginal community, such as AECG representatives, EPs, school personnel locally identified as key stakeholders, SLCEs, Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs), members of the SRG, as well as other local individuals identified in a snowball sampling process used on site.

The evaluation process encompassed four separate touchpoints between the evaluation teams, the local communities and the schools serving those communities.



“I think the definitions of what success should be or what each student’s education journey should look like and how that should be measured, should be set locally because it’s just going to be so different for each community.”

(Community member, Phase 1 school)

Phase 1 engagement

1. Introductions

The first engagement met an important cultural responsibility for the evaluation team, to let the school and community know who they were, where they came from and what they intended to do throughout the evaluation process.

This builds credibility through leveraging existing and creating new relationships across the schools and communities visited. 14 of the 16 Phase 1 schools were visited. Wilcannia Central School and Menindee Central School were not visited face-to-face due to Sorry Business at the scheduled time. An alternative online introduction was completed for both sites.

2. Data collection

A face-to-face visit to all 16 Phase 1 schools. A full day was spent in the school and community. Data collection was conducted through yarning and focus group discussions. A videographer accompanied the evaluation team at 6 of the 16 schools visited.

This allowed the evaluation team to capture elements of the evaluation process and create a resource that could be used in the fourth touchpoint, ensuring the responsibility and credibility principle was being met by the evaluation team. A series of short clips were also captured and can be accessed via the QR codes throughout this report.

In total, 222 participants were involved in this phase through face-to-face interactions. A further 6 participants contacted the University of Newcastle team and were followed up with an online zoom interaction. Five members of the Connected Communities Directorate also participated in an online interview with the University of Newcastle team. A fully informed, signed consent process was followed when recruiting participants.

3. Validation/sense-making (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

The evaluation teams sent a summary of what they heard through the data collection visit specific to each place to the EP and an Aboriginal lead from the school. Each place had two weeks to share this with the stakeholders who were part of the data collection process and provide feedback to the evaluation team.

Phase 2 engagement

1. Introductions

Due to time constraints the first engagement for Phase 2 schools was an online interaction, allowing the CESE evaluation team to introduce themselves. A member of the University of Newcastle evaluation team was included in this touchpoint to speak to the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework as a guide to explain the evaluation process. The CESE team observed the University of Newcastle evaluation team for a full day during the Engagement Phase.

2. Data collection

CESE observed the University of Newcastle team carry out data collection at two Phase 1 schools in Coonamble ahead of data collection with Phase 2 schools. A face-to-face visit was made to all 17 Phase 2 school communities. A full day or more was spent in each school. A fully informed, signed consent process was followed when recruiting participants for interview.

There were no refusals recorded at the time of informed consent. CESE followed the data collection Agenda and Discussion Guide developed by University of Newcastle. Interviews were audio recorded subject to participant approval. Data collection was by way of one-to-one interviews, yarning and focus group discussions. In total, 114 interviews with 339 participants were conducted face-to-face during this phase. Interviews lasted for 30-45 minutes. Additional interviews were completed online or over the phone following these visits to speak with school community members who were not able to participate on the day.

4. Presenting the findings (Phase 1 and Phase 2)

In the first half of 2024 the evaluation teams will visit all 33 schools to discuss the findings and the evaluation report. The evaluation teams have a responsibility to each school and community to ensure they understand what their yarns contributed to. This touchpoint is also important to ensure the evaluation report empowers change and improvement.

Phase 1 and Phase 2 school engagement

The first 3 touch points were completed in 2023; the fourth touchpoint will occur after the delivery of the final report in 2024. It is important to note that these four touchpoints with community have and will not occur in isolation from former and future relationships between the University of Newcastle evaluation team and the communities who have shared their knowledge and experience.

This process has been developed in accordance with the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework, principles established in post-colonial research methodologies (Smith, 1999; Swadener et al., 2004) and Indigenous methodologies (Denzin et al., 2008).

Analysis of the qualitative data gathered was conducted following the processes of developing grounded theoretical understandings of social phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

That is, our first efforts were in developing a description of what a community had shared with the research team based on the concepts and language, separate from those of concern from the department's interests in its evaluation questions.

The transition between local understandings and central departmental concerns was used to structure both the general qualitative discussions (interviews and yarns) and the regular feedback regarding the processes of this evaluation.

That is, in each conversation, discussions began with a focus on what local participants wanted to say about the strategy that they felt needed to be recognised and understood (independent of any formal policy concerns) based on their knowledge and experiences.

Within many of these conversations, participants were overtly asked to comment on the four departmental evaluation questions directly – as coming from the program itself – to seek their reflection on how the program might be better defined or directed.

The transition from a local to a more general programmatic understanding also characterised the overall process of data analysis across the life of the evaluation.

Early in each of the first two community touchpoints, our analyses focused on developing an initial tentative description of the local Connected Communities Strategy using local terms and understanding. These initial themes were then used in the subsequent field trips in discussions and analysis of both the local and overall program level.

Once the second field trips were conducted, the themes (as understood then) were used in the more conventional thematic textual analysis of transcriptions gathered in the field (reported to DoE to complement Phase 2 data analysis), where processes of confirmation, contextual validation and further theme refinement were conducted.

These themes were also used as the bases of the ongoing community feedback, utilising videographic reporting directly in the third and fourth touchpoint.

By comparing and contrasting the differing perspectives and reported experiences across sites, initial themes were interrogated and refined into the understandings reported in this evaluation report. This process included a final stage of analysis in which data sets from each site were used in a verification and validation process (in which counter-evidence is overtly sought and themes are refined or qualified) among the evaluation teams.

Throughout qualitative data gathering, yarning was the most common method of structuring conversations with local stakeholders. Yarning in a semi-structured interview is an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together, visiting places and topics of interest relevant to

the study, or in this case, the evaluation. Yarning is a process that requires the researcher to develop a relationship that is accountable to the Indigenous people participating in the research (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010).

The evaluation teams recorded the yarns and also took observation notes. The observation notes were used throughout the analysis process to ensure the full meaning of the yarns were captured.

Observations included, but were not limited to, body language, humour and sarcasm. Interviews with school and agency personnel often took the form of semi-structured interviews using the four DoE evaluation questions directly as initial prompts.

In tandem with the development of our grounded theoretical understanding of the experience of people who were representative of schools and communities, results from the quantitative, school-level aggregates of the DoE testing and survey data were examined in an analysis which sought to explain the patterns of those conventional evaluation measures based on what our qualitative analysis revealed.

This methodology (in which existing data are triangulated against newer qualitative insight) is a conventional mixed methodology described by Creswell and Clarke (2011) as an 'embedded' design. That is, our analysis has been developed to be incorporated into existing DoE evaluation analyses.



This method of comparing insights from data gathered from fundamentally different epistemological commitments served two purposes. On the one hand, where existing measures are reflective of our findings, this mixed methodology yields confirmatory insights.

On the other hand, where quite different or independent insights occur, we can note what has not been revealed by conventional methods and offer alternative explanations of what existing evaluations have not shown.

In addition to the new data generated by the evaluation, reference was also made to existing departmental data and program-level quantitative reports of existing DoE evaluation measures taken longitudinally over the life of the strategy.

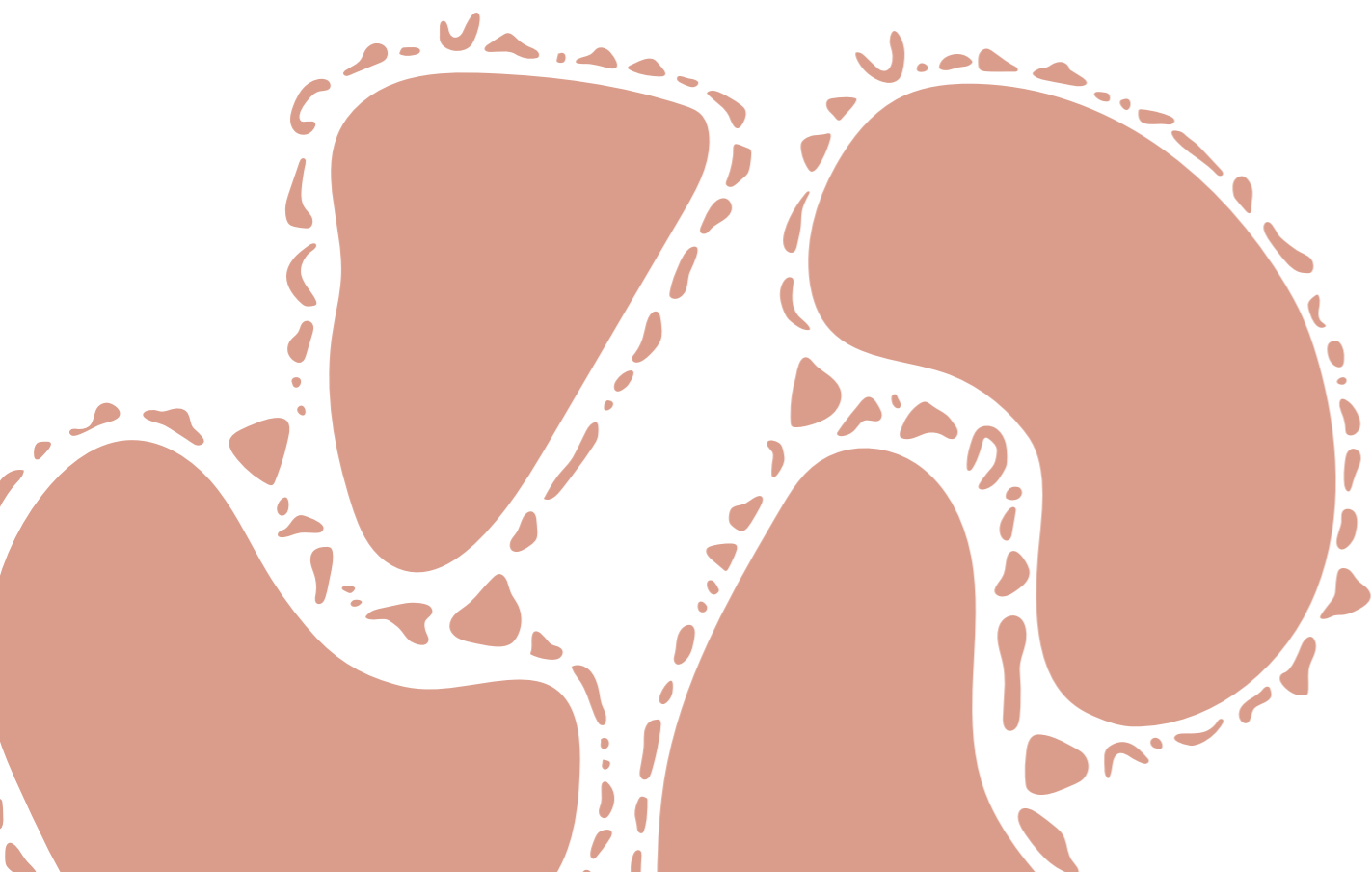
The evaluation teams also conducted a document analysis of publicly available material from school websites. This included Strategic Improvement Plans, school Annual Reports and newsletters.

Building from these systemic evaluation questions and the existing data reports from the DoE, the evaluation was designed to meet the timeline outlined by the DoE in the scope of work, while also respecting the newly developed Re-imagining Evaluation Framework.



“When I started in the role, the relationships would go up and down. The longer I’ve stayed I have developed more trust and rapport with students and families.”

(Teacher, Phase 1 school)





3. Findings



“If a student’s trauma doesn’t get addressed at school, it will never be addressed.”

(Teacher, Phase 1 school)

The following findings are based on the perceptions, experiences and insights of school communities. The evaluation teams worked closely together throughout the evaluation process, particularly during data analysis. The findings are separated into three sections:

- Findings common across Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools
- Findings unique to Phase 1 schools
- Findings unique to Phase 2 schools.

There are similarities between many findings, however, there are also slight differences. The evaluation teams believed it was important that these differences were acknowledged and separated in the findings. Five high-level thematic categories were used to situate the findings:

- Aboriginal Education Ecosystem
- relationships
- place
- healing
- system supports.

It is worth noting that the thematic categories are relational in nature rather than mutually exclusive.

Findings common across Phase 1 and Phase 2 schools

Aboriginal Education Ecosystem

This theme reflects the dynamic interrelationships across people, place, programs and initiatives that exist to support the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students.

Effective, proactive leadership realised through the EP and SLCE roles is vital to implementation success

Effective leadership was commonly cited as a success factor in strategy delivery. Leadership was described in two ways:

1. Organisational/system leadership:

At the school level, effective, proactive leadership was realised by the EP. Several defining qualities of effective EPs were cited by school staff and community members.

Effective EPs were commonly cited as showing strong leadership and commitment to the strategy, setting vision and shaping positive school dynamics. Effective EPs were further described as being visible around the school and actively engaging with students, while also maintaining a community focus.

On matters of Aboriginal education, the need for EPs to have a strong commitment to Aboriginal education was commonly reported by school staff. Several staff perceived that having a passion for Aboriginal education was requisite for both the EP and SLCE roles and numerous EPs and SLCEs were praised for demonstrating such passion.

A challenge to the EP role, as reported by several EPs, was the expectation of accountability and performance pressure encountered from within the system.

2. Community/cultural leadership:

Evaluation participants addressed the need for strong cultural leadership as an integral part of the strategy. Many participants identified the SLCE role as a cultural lead as well as the AECG, local Elders, parents and other local Aboriginal people employed in other organisations.

The SLCE role was also described as one that provided important assistance to the EP through making connections with community organisations.

Across many schools, this expression of leadership often involved positive relationships with, and role-modelling for, Aboriginal students inside and outside of the school. In several contexts, parents and carers reflected about the significance of having trusted and respected Aboriginal leaders in the school.

Many referenced that individuals in these roles often bridge the gap between community and the school. Some participants also reported that the presence of cultural and community leaders creates a sense of safety and trust for Aboriginal students and staff, and more accurately targets the needs of the local community.

Other activities pursued by cultural and community leaders included transmitting community specific and/or cultural knowledge to students and supporting the revival of language in the school and community.

Those in this position were also noted to prioritise and facilitate healing in collaboration with Elders and other leaders in the community. This leadership role was often performed by the SLCE, but Aboriginal staff and community members were reported as undertaking this role in some schools.



Peony Daniels

Community Centre Facilitator, Moree East Public School, Gomerai Country

A shared commitment and close, positive working relationship between the SLCE and other Aboriginal staff are integral to strategy success

Responses from school staff indicated that a positive relationship between the SLCE and other Aboriginal school staff was required to successfully address the deliverables. Challenges were reported in those schools where different community groups were represented among Aboriginal staff members.

And for the SLCE role, navigating these differences was complex. According to some staff, school initiatives, including committee groups need to be grounded in the principles of equity and inclusion and representative of the diverse community groups within the school community. A nominal number of staff also called for more clarity around the SLCE role, relative to the roles of other staff members in relation to engagement with families and communities.

Reportedly, prior to the introduction of the SLCE role, other staff roles had assumed responsibility for engagement with families and some staff were seeking clarification on how their role integrates with the SLCE role.

More Aboriginal people employed in Connected Communities schools is shifting the power dynamics within the Aboriginal Education Ecosystem and contributing to more culturally responsive environments for Aboriginal students and their families

During consultation, participants from all schools noted that successful delivery of the strategy relied on the recruitment of key staff who had both a strong understanding of the strategy objectives and the knowledge to support its adaptation to the local school community context.

These characteristics were seen as important to build trust and relationships with students and their families to: ensure the strategy was being delivered in line with community expectations, and; to support the school to be more culturally responsive when it came to implementing or responding to student/community issues.

While the SLCE was generally considered to be a key role in this regard, many also acknowledged the important work of both local and non-local Aboriginal staff employed as teachers, executive staff, AEOs, Student Learning Support Officers (SLSOs), General Assistants (GAs) and cleaning staff.

Some participants noted that they have observed an increase in the recruitment of local Aboriginal staff as a result of the strategy.

Further, many Aboriginal staff working across schools reported feeling more valued and recognised for the cultural knowledge they hold in the school. However, there was also a sense that delivery of the strategy could be improved if more local Aboriginal staff were recruited to support it, particularly male staff to provide culturally responsive support to male students.

To that end, many saw the ability for schools to conduct merit-based recruitment as an important feature of the strategy to enable employment of Aboriginal and/or local people, who hold the ideal set of local and cultural knowledge to support delivery of the strategy.

The lifecycle of the Connected Communities Strategy impacts the health of Aboriginal Education Ecosystems

At every Phase 1 school, multiple stakeholders spoke about the hard end date of the strategy that caused uncertainty and confusion for school and community members.

Similarly, this sentiment was expressed across Phase 2 school communities. The implications of this resulted in several Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff, employed in positions specific to the strategy, seeking more stable employment elsewhere.

“It’s important to have more jobs for local people. Students listen to us and we help non-Aboriginal staff.”

(Staff member, Phase 1 school)



Relationships

This theme demonstrates the criticality of the relationships that exist within schools and beyond to support the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students.

A shared commitment and close, positive working relationship between the EP and SLCE are integral to strategy success

The relationship between the EP and SLCE was observed as being critical to the health of the Aboriginal Education Ecosystem.

This finding is not unexpected given these roles are dedicated strategy roles, with the EP providing overall leadership within the school and the Aboriginal-identified SLCE role providing a cultural connection with the broader community.

This is suggestive of the need for a shared commitment and a close, positive working relationship between the EP and SLCE roles to enable the deliverables of the strategy to be successfully addressed.

“In particular, the integrity, care, strength and motivation of those two key Connected Communities roles of the Executive Principal and the Senior Leader Community Engagement... just outstanding.”

(Local AECG president, Phase 2 school)

The increased involvement of Aboriginal community members in schools is highly beneficial although some challenges remain

Many participants highlighted that the strategy had enabled opportunities for greater community involvement, both informally through events and extra-curricular activities, and also formally through the SRG. Students, school staff and community members all saw greater community involvement at the school as an important feature of the strategy.

This prioritisation acknowledges the rich cultural and local knowledge these stakeholders brought with them to enrich student learning and how the school operated.

However, some participants also acknowledged delivering this aspect remained a challenge. Some participants highlighted the administrative requirements to bring community members into the school were a barrier, while others noted community members found balancing their involvement in the school with other commitments (work or otherwise) difficult, particularly where no remuneration could be offered. Often, it is the same community members trying to support multiple community-based services.

“Our Elders are our knowledge holders, and you can only read so much in a book.”

(Executive Principal, Phase 2 school)

Students have high levels of engagement and participation in education which extends to their families

For many participants, improved student, family and community engagement with school was considered to be an important aspect to improve the overall experience of school for Aboriginal students.

In this regard, school staff and community members acknowledged that there was a degree of distrust with the educational system within their school's Aboriginal community, stemming from historically negative experiences with the education system and governments more broadly.

Further, many school communities reflected that there were elements of schooling systems that did not necessarily align with or reflect Aboriginal cultural values, belief systems or ways of learning and which were having a negative impact or tension for students and their families in terms of their engagement with school.

Schools noted the strategy, through its focus on engaging with families and communities and bringing them into school was actively trying to break down these barriers with some pockets of success being observed.

However, many participants noted this was a challenge that could not be overcome by a single strategy and in such a short period of time.

“We have moved from managing to teaching.”

(Staff member, Phase 1 school)

Schools are engaging in more outreach activity; the lines of communication are more open and more parents are coming through the school gates

Staff commonly referred to more parents coming through the school gates and there being more open communication between the school, families, and communities. Additional cultural celebrations were discussed as a reason for the increase in engagement.

A number of staff reported that locally recorded statistics showed an increase in family and carer engagement, as the number of parents and carers that came into the school was recorded and this attendance was monitored and reviewed.

Under the strategy, schools had increased their outreach and consultation activity. According to staff from several schools, more informal ways to welcome parents and carers into the school were being adopted.

By way of example, schools were extending invitations to additional cultural activities such as dance groups and yarning morning teas and cook-ups. These culturally affirming events and activities were perceived to enhance happiness and pride amongst parents and students.

Some staff noted that teachers were improving their cultural capacity, getting to know more about local communities and their issues and increasingly interacting with parents about their children's Personalised Learning Pathways (PLPs). Parents, carers and community members identified the increase in Aboriginal staff as a key reason why they engaged with the school.

Most schools reportedly utilised social media platforms to promote teaching and learning activities and facilitate parental involvement in student learning. These promotional and engagement initiatives varied with local context.

One school adopted three-way goal setting conferences (including student, parent/ carer and teacher) and an interactive learning experience platform that included a family interface to further involve parents and carers. Another school sent postcards to parents and carers with updates on learning and attendance, rather than formal PLP reports. The postcards were viewed by staff as a more culturally friendly medium to engage with parents.

Staff from several schools also reported they had seen improvements in student attendance, through supporting processes such as incentives and promotions. In some schools, attendance was regarded primarily as a wellbeing issue.

For some schools, more enhanced engagement efforts and more time are needed for families and communities to feel comfortable to participate in school activities

While family and community engagement were reportedly improving overall, for a small minority of schools challenges remained in developing relationships and bringing communities inside the school gates, which was more common in high schools.

Historically negative experiences with the education system resulting in distrust was cited

by staff as a barrier. This history was combined with the challenge of creating a responsive environment and forums for families and communities where they feel culturally safe and comfortable to participate and share.

It would appear more time and increased efforts by the schools may be needed for these communities to feel comfortable about becoming more involved with the school. An additional challenge noted by several staff was the complexity around engagement when there were several different communities represented in the school.

Staff considered it crucial to apply an equity lens and balance engagement activity and services with different community groups, so they are all benefiting.

A high-level document review of newsletter content, sent from schools to parents and carers since the strategy commenced, supports the above findings. Targeted engagement with parents and carers was being addressed in this communication medium with most schools welcoming, or directly inviting, families and their communities to school events and activities.

It is worth noting that the volume of engagement communication varied considerably across schools. Communications ranged from references and invitations to information about events and activities as well as efforts to

consult families and carers on school priorities and policies.

Activities included informal morning teas and lunches (sometimes addressed to Elders), yarning sessions, NAIDOC and reconciliation week celebrations, through to more strategic school forums. Several schools used newsletters to invite Aboriginal parents and carers to yarning sessions to listen to feedback about the school year and to generate ideas to assist with school planning.

Support for students and families extends beyond the school

Each SLCE spoke of the way in which their role fundamentally depended on them supporting students and families directly beyond the specific requirements for successful school experiences.

Most, if not all, SLCEs extended the support they provide for the families of school children to include facilitating interaction with other government agencies and/or organising or providing basic needs such as transportation. Often this relationship with the family extends beyond when the children finish school.

Examples of staff extending support to students and families are abundant, but the impact for students was made very clear by a student who had faced significant family disruption but had relied on the school to maintain his educational progress.



“Our school learns from the community, because it contextualises learning for our children, because our children are out in the community, and so I think it’s quite powerful because it’s allowing our kids to take stuff home.

And it’s allowing community in on so many different levels. Like not just come to the barbeque, but we’re learning together, we’re growing together, we’re doing together.”

(SRG member and support staff, regional Phase 2 school)





“My daughter came home one day and she said that I can do the Acknowledgement of Country in language. As a father and as an Aboriginal father who grew up not knowing much about culture. That’s the proudest moment I’ll ever have.”

(Parent, Phase 1 school)

Place

This theme highlights the importance of local people, story and knowledge that supports the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students.

There has been an increase in the number of Aboriginal people employed across Connected Communities schools

Across every site, the additional funding provided by the strategy has been instrumental in increasing the number of local Aboriginal people employed within each school. While there is universal agreement about the need to increase the proportion of Aboriginal staff within schools, there is also widespread recognition that this is a necessary factor that is insufficient on its own.

That is, whether or not increasing the proportion of Aboriginal educators leads to improvements in student educational experiences fundamentally depends on many other factors contributing to the overall health of an Aboriginal Education Ecosystem.

We can confidently assert that having more Aboriginal people employed at the school increases the degree to which Aboriginal students and families engage with the school and their reporting of schools as being more culturally responsive.

More Aboriginal staff and community involvement in schools can increase the cultural obligations for Aboriginal staff, which may not be well understood by non-Aboriginal staff

Aboriginal participants spoke about the cultural obligations that come with their roles which often sit outside of their position description. Some participants noted that an unintended

consequence of having more Aboriginal staff and involvement of community members in the school, was an increased work and cultural load for Aboriginal staff.

Aboriginal staff reported that, due to an increasing focus by the school to being more culturally responsive, their knowledge and involvement was being called upon more often, particularly by non-Aboriginal staff, to improve their own cultural responsiveness. This extra demand was often on top of what their roles usually entailed.

Many of these staff noted that the relationships they hold in the community meant their obligations and work in the community extends beyond the school gates, which is often overlooked or not well understood by non-Aboriginal staff.

Aboriginal staff noted they are often the face of the school for their local Aboriginal community, and this brings a sense of greater responsibility for the strategy to be delivered (and school to operate) in line with community expectations and, ultimately, succeed.

“In this community I am a representative of the school 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, someone is always wanting me to do something.”

(Staff member, Phase 1 school)

Many schools leverage the strategy to improve cultural visibility, recognition and celebration through signage, artworks and events. These actions promote greater family and community engagement within schools and foster open dialogues about culture across schools and their communities

Beyond specific programs, many schools reported increased effort in cultural visibility, recognition and celebration. For example, many schools have invested in signage and artwork around the school that reflects local Aboriginal Elders, community members, language and culture. This was also evident on many school uniforms.

Further, schools report putting considerable effort into celebrating significant events for their Aboriginal community such as NAIDOC Week, Reconciliation Week and Harmony Week, for example. Participants from across school communities report these activities were improving student, family and community engagement with the school.

Many school staff noted that the efforts being put into hosting significant events were particularly effective in bringing families and community members into the school.

A high-level document review of newsletter and annual report content, sent from schools to parents and carers since the strategy commenced, supports the above findings. A substantial number of schools advertised, promoted and reported on cultural programs, activities and events.

This included: a high proliferation of invitations to celebrate significant Aboriginal events; informing the school community about changes made to the school environment to improve

cultural visibility; and notifications of language curriculum, tutors or programs available to students, families and community members. Some schools also used, or showcased, examples of language and artworks in their newsletters.

Particularly for those school communities that have a diverse and multicultural population, a reported flow-on benefit from these activities was that it has resulted in opportunities for open dialogue, and to learn about and celebrate the many cultures of their students and families. As a result, events such as Multicultural Day and Harmony Week, have become major events in the school calendar.

The complex histories of communities are factors that schools must address as they work within the strategy

Schools operate in relation to the communities they serve. At the same time, communities have significant leverage in how a school operates within the strategy. In a similar manner, the complex histories of a community are closely connected to a school's standing and how it is perceived within its community.

In interviews and yarns, evaluation participants frequently disclosed their knowledge of communities when reflecting on their experiences of the Connected Communities Strategy.

Histories of educational experiences carried by community members, alongside the implications of those experiences to current educational endeavours, were disclosed by many participants.

Participants revealed that fear, resulting from generational traumas, has established an underlying general distrust of the education system by many members in a school's community.

In one school, building relationships with communities was described as a 'slow burn', where 'time' and 'pace' were valued as integral strategic features in efforts to redress such fear.

“Community members will stop and have a yarn with staff and we’ll get a wealth of information that you might not get in the tick-a-box of the ‘Tell Them From Me’ [Department of Education annual survey for parents]”

(Deputy Principal, Phase 2 school)



Connected Communities schools are achieving positive shifts in school culture

Participants perceived changes to school culture in most schools and identified those shifts as intrinsic to being involved in the strategy. Factors identified by participants as essential to improving school culture were linked to student wellbeing strategies as well as physical changes to the school environment.

In one high school, for example, the school gym was of central importance to students, while in other schools the front of the school site was described by several evaluation participants as ‘appealing’ and ‘culturally inviting’.

In another example, public education scholarships were appreciated for the opportunities they afforded to student interests, in ways not previously possible.

Some of the effects that participants identified as resulting from an improved school culture included increased enrolments, positive shifts to the ways that students behave, increased staff retention rates and an increase in positive perceptions of the school by community members as well as by other schools within networks of school communities.

Cultural recognition, sensitivity, and connectedness to place and community, are central to students’ being proud of their cultural identities and fostering their sense of belonging in Connected Communities schools

Evaluation participants frequently characterised ‘success’ in Aboriginal education in terms of cultural recognition, cultural identity, and connections to place and community. Parent participants highlighted the importance of Aboriginal students being proud of their cultural identity, and those sentiments can be related to the sociological concepts of identity and belonging.

Expressions of knowledge demonstrate the interdependencies between individual and social identities and the contributions that identity can make beyond an individual. The contributions that cultural identity, connectedness and belonging make to the wellbeing of individuals, to school communities and towards healing for community members were also expressed by participants who noted the increased responsiveness of schools towards cultural safety.

At the same time, participants recognised that individuals often need to balance cultural sensitivities between different systems, for example between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural systems. One benefit of building the trust required for students and their families to navigate differing systems, is that when students “**feel seen and heard ... they’re connected to their learning**” (Executive Principal, Phase 2 school).

In this, the relationship and connection associated with cultural identity is attributed by school leadership as being integral to tangible outcomes for schools such as “**impressive attendance results**” (Executive Principal, Phase 2 school).

Links between increased attendance rates and positive levels of student engagement were made by participants and in many instances, these were identified as being beneficial to student wellbeing.

For example, in line with the department’s strategic plan (2018–2023), one participant shared that “**we’re seeing great results when it’s coming to student wellbeing and students coming to school. We’re seeing our attendance, you know, is going through the roof as well**” (Assistant Principal Wellbeing and Attendance, Phase 2 school). Other participants confirmed that increased attendance also contributes to building a positive school culture and connections between the school and its communities.

For example, one participant reflected:

“We’ve got kids who are now telling their parents: ‘No, I need to go to school today, because I want to ... get this sort of, you know, recognition.’ ... If that’s coming out of their mouth, that’s more powerful than us putting it in a newsletter ... in reframing how the kids see being at school is the more important thing for them.”

(Executive Principal, Phase 2 school)

The importance of such ‘reframing’ extends beyond students to their families too. Another participant commented that:

“While this strategy’s in place, then it’s helping the kids, you know, to be able to stay at school, stay connected, stay, you know, involved, and for the parents to feel like they’ve got a place to come that’s a safe place because, you know, of that – the whole community connection that they’ve got going.”

(Parent, Phase 2 school).

By way of example, the Shoalhaven High School case study showcases the wellbeing and attendance hub at that school.

“We have turned the tide, previously we had children being bussed out of this community to go to school. Now we are bussing students from outside of the community to come here.”

(Staff member, Phase 1 school)

Cultural governance through the SRG can be impactful

Under the strategy, the SRG works collaboratively with the EP in developing and planning the strategy. Embedding the SRG varied across school contexts with several reporting the SRG was functioning well while other schools were still in the process of establishing or re-establishing their SRG.

In addition, the functioning of the SRG is predicated on the local AECG and reportedly, for a minority of schools, when the local AECG was not functioning, this in turn disrupted the functioning of the SRG.

Contextual barriers sometimes prevent the establishment of a consistent SRG

Despite several schools establishing the SRG successfully, some participants across sites noted unique contextual barriers to formalising an SRG under the strategy.

Some community members noted that many of the ideal candidates are already committed to other local community groups. As the SRG is often made up of parents or carers, other barriers to participation included a lack of time.

Some Aboriginal community members also noted that the lack of remuneration for the time, advice and support provided as members of the SRG acted as a barrier to individual participation. Dependent on context, there were some reports about other place-based barriers, including potential complexity surrounding commitments to the AECG.

In some schools, staff and community members noted that due to the early stages of the strategy the formation of the SRG had not yet been a viable possibility for those eligible to be involved.

Embedding cultural protocols and practices in Connected Communities schools is integral to improving experiences for students and community members

Across schools, staff, parents/carers and community members noted the importance and increased prevalence of embedding cultural protocols and practices in the school.

Based on the unique requirements of each context, these practices were often applied and developed in a variety of ways. Staff members referenced the development of more culturally appropriate responses to Sorry Business in the local area. Among staff members, those engaged with both Aboriginal students and community highlighted the need to respond and adhere to responsive practices during these events.

Multiple non-Aboriginal staff members noted that an increased understanding of cultural protocols during Sorry Business not only encouraged respect and understanding, but authentic support for families and students who were affected.

Another reflection of embedding cultural protocol and practice was referenced in building local knowledge into the school curriculum and programs. In many schools, executive staff and other staff involved in the Aboriginal education team reported engaging local community members and knowledge holders based on place-based protocols.

To plan curricula relating to local histories and culture, school staff reported engaging local Aboriginal educators who were recommended by the local AECG or community leaders. In multiple sites, Elders and Traditional Landowners were also engaged by the school to teach language to students in accordance with local protocols regarding passing down customary knowledge.

Despite success in facilitating these processes in many Connected Communities schools, some metropolitan schools faced barriers in embedding place-based knowledge and language due to the presence of diverse community groups.

Some staff and community members working with the school referenced the integration of activities and programs that encourage Aboriginal students to learn cultural protocol regarding respect for Elders. Through combined learning regarding histories, language and cultural activities, some Aboriginal community members have reported strengthened connections spanning multiple generations.

In many of the schools, respect for Elders among students was noted by community members as a continuation of important cultural tradition and protocol.

Strengthened relationships between Elders and students was also seen as a key component of broader community connection. Since the introduction of the strategy, some participants have reported the increased presence of Men's and Women's Business in school contexts.

A number of community members noted that local Aboriginal staff in the school have prioritised embedding practices around Men's Business with male students for both cultural and personal wellbeing.



Aboriginal parents also reported that this provides male students with additional support figures if they come from single parent families. In some schools, local Aboriginal women talked about the regular engagement of young female students for Women's Business and women's groups broadly.

Throughout these meetings, community leaders prioritised learning about ceremony, culture and shared experiences. There was a shared understanding that these protocols are vital for healing, wellbeing and teaching younger generations about cultural understandings of gender.

Across many schools, community members referenced the commonplace practice of using yarning circles. Involving staff, Aboriginal students and community members, the protocol of using yarning circles to share knowledge and enhance connection was used frequently. Some community members referenced the use of a yarning circle to enhance the presence of culturally safe and welcoming spaces within the school context.

Yarning circles were also embedded to facilitate learning about ceremony and language, often led by Aboriginal staff or Cultural and Community Leaders.

Across a number of regions, staff and community members both reported the increased application of cultural protocols around language and titles. Some participants reported that students were encouraged to use appropriate terms, like 'Uncle' and 'Aunty' as a show of respect between peers, teachers, staff and the community generally.

During cultural events like NAIDOC, staff and parents/carers referenced the increased presence of culturally appropriate and authentic protocols in the school environment.

Led by both staff and students who have a developed awareness about place-based

practice, many reported there was more consistent engagement with the broader community during these events. Across sites, these protocols were developed in collaboration with the AECG, the SLCE, community members or other school staff who were well-respected within the community.

Overall, authenticity in building cultural protocols, knowledge and practices into dynamics between the school and community was seen as an enabler of the strategy.

Improvements to communications would enable deeper understandings about the strategy and enhance community trust

Across schools, many participants reported that communication about the strategy could be strengthened between the department, school, and community. Participants reported that there was a lack of information around why schools were selected and the intended outcomes of the strategy.

Although the strategy was generally perceived positively by communities, the need for better communication was linked to broader calls for authentic consultation. As many understand that the strategy has a focus on improving student, family/carer and community outcomes, participants reported that information about Connected Communities should be communicated more clearly to relevant groups.

Some community members suggested that a lack of clear communication created the risk of negative perceptions of the strategy and/or misunderstandings in the community. In some schools, there were some concerns that this could cause a degradation of trust between the department, schools and communities more generally.



“The school is the hub for our community, if anyone needs help with anything we go and help.”

(Senior Leader Community Engagement, Phase 1 school)

Healing

This theme highlights the role schools are playing in improving the lives of Aboriginal people, whilst supporting the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal language and culture programs are essential to student learning, engagement, and wellbeing

The extent of Aboriginal culture and language that was being embedded varied considerably across all schools.

Some schools had implemented a fully embedded language curriculum, many had established cultural spaces for students and community, and others had established extra-curricular activities and/or targeted activities for students as a means of improving engagement.

Across all schools, Aboriginal culture and language programs were run by either Aboriginal staff, community members or via local organisations. Some schools reported accessing DoE-identified supports such as the Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships Directorate (AOPD) language nests to support delivery of these programs, while others relied on the local knowledge of their Aboriginal staff and community members.

School staff considered the recognition of Aboriginal culture to be essential to student learning and engagement at school, acknowledging that they are linked. From the perspective of one Aboriginal student, the recognition of Aboriginal culture supports further engagement at school and contributed to developing a sense of pride in identity.

Almost all Aboriginal students who participated in the evaluation reported feeling as though the school respected their culture. Family and community participants also noted the programs

were an important opportunity for them to give back and share their knowledge with students.

Many family and community participants also highlighted that it provided them an opportunity to heal from their historical experiences with public education where learning about their culture and language simply did not occur.

While considered important, some schools acknowledged there are challenges to improving how embedded Aboriginal language and culture is at school. This was particularly the case for schools where there could be many nations or language groups represented in their school community.

An example of language and cultural learning is explored further in the Moree East Public School case study.

“And we share sometimes our stories and how tough it was for us as well ... like, you know, we’ve been through a lot ourselves as women and when we dance together we actually heal together.”

(SLCE, Phase 2 school)

Opportunities to learn about culture generate positive effects in relation to staff cultural responsiveness, competence and awareness while also foregrounding areas for continual improvement

Another aspect and flow-on benefit of efforts to embed Aboriginal language and culture at school was a sense that non-Aboriginal school staff were becoming more aware and responsive to Aboriginal culture.

This was both through increasing participation in formal cultural awareness training and through increased engagement with their Aboriginal staff and community, particularly the AECG. Community members and staff noted that this has resulted in schools becoming more aware of and responsive to Aboriginal students’ needs, particularly in understanding and responding to behavioural issues and seeking or providing appropriate support to improve student engagement at school.

While improvements were being made in this area, Aboriginal staff and community members acknowledged more could be done to improve staff cultural awareness and capability, in addition to continually increasing the number of Aboriginal staff being employed by schools.

“We have learnt to be more responsive to the needs of our students and families.”

(Teacher, Phase 1 school)

Students feel they belong and are developing a strong sense of pride in their cultural identity

School staff and community participants identified that success also meant their students feel they belong, both at school and in society more broadly. Part of this means that they develop a strong sense of pride in their identity during their schooling.

Schools were actively trying to develop this within their students, noting identity and belonging was being nurtured through efforts to embed, recognise and celebrate culture at school. Identity and belonging were also being promoted through initiatives designed to promote student voice, pride, confidence and leadership such as the Junior AECG.

Many students who were participating in these programs reported a great sense of pride in being considered leaders of their peers and being able to make decisions to improve the school environment for them.

Other programs designed to improve Aboriginal student engagement such as SistaSpeak and BroSpeak were also seen to be contributing to a greater sense of belonging at school. The Dareton Public School case study explores the integration of an embedded language program with complementary cultural identity and wellbeing strategies.



“Connected Communities has given me the opportunity to be proud of who I – who I am and where I come from and embrace my culture. Connected Communities has also given me the opportunity to learn my people’s language and express myself in dance. Connected Communities has also given me the growth I’ve – I have needed to stand up and speak up for what I believe in.”

(Primary school student, Phase 2 school)

The responsibility of providing safe learning environments, and fostering opportunities that assist communities to heal, continues to be addressed by Connected Communities schools so that educational goals can be realised

The lived experiences of community members, both now and over time, continue to present challenges as well as opportunities for schools to build cohesion between the education system and communities.

Inter-generational trauma, and the willingness of families to engage with the education of their children, for example, are two of the issues that many staff and students continue to reconcile with educational endeavours.

In this, there is broad understanding amongst participants in the evaluation that schools have a significant role in providing safe learning environments and fostering opportunities that assist communities to heal.

Nevertheless, many schools operate within complex communities. In some regions, participants disclosed that family factions, and loss of cultural identity and cultural leadership, persist in relation to mixed nations resettlements associated with Stolen Generation events. In other areas, family factors also serve as reasons for families to have relocated, with one Aboriginal participant identifying the mix of different people in the community as a factor that contributes to lived experiences of disadvantage often reported in statistical data.

The diversity and challenging nature of complex community issues such as these continue to be acknowledged and addressed by school staff and their communities in ways that seek to generate and sustain cultural recognition and respect.

Inter-generational experiences of Aboriginal people in schools are vastly different and the opportunity for cultural learning now in schools is contributing to a sense of healing

Within conventional school systems and evaluation practices, there is a broad understanding of education as being part of societal evolution in which next generations are prepared for life after school.

Given staff mobility within NSW, it is relatively uncommon for any one school, principal or teacher to work directly with more than two generations of a family. Although there are several long-term, multi-generational relationships between families and schools in some locations, that remains rare.

However, due to the history of Aboriginal experience in NSW, and the specific history of Aboriginal Education in NSW, that multi-generational connection to all government agencies is the rule, not the exception. And the cross-generational differences of experiences are such that the experience of living Aboriginal families in NSW today is radically different between generations.

The colonial use of schooling to exclude, assimilate and control Aboriginal people is not in the past in NSW. Those first-hand experiences are very much in the personal memory of the Elders of NSW.

So when we say that the inter-generational experiences of Aboriginal families have impacted every school, or that there is substantial evidence that the Connected Communities schools have increasingly been successful in building post-school pathways for next generations, this is not just about parents and students.

This work directly impacts four to five generations of Aboriginal people locally and that means this evaluation is best understood in the transition from the colonial to the post-colonial (which is a current historical struggle for Aboriginal families and communities, inclusive of evaluation participants).

For the Connected Communities Strategy, this requires seeing conventional key indicators in historical terms. For example, what it means to graduate from secondary school differs across time and space. Historically the link between the HSC and further qualification differs substantially even over the past three decades, but it also means very different things across and within rural and remote areas than it would in urban contexts.

This is where the generalised intended outcomes of the Connected Communities Strategy, the ‘key deliverables’, are not always shared by all stakeholders as the most valuable outcomes to pursue. Understanding which outcomes are seen as valuable locally requires local school leaders to know and understand this longer history.

As a general pattern, where we found school executives and community leaders who understand the cross-generational experiences of their students’ families, the Connected Communities initiatives also demonstrated significant advances in cultural learning and inclusion of Aboriginal people. When executive had direct relationships with members of those multiple generations, we also observed more trust and empowerment of local actors.

The importance of understanding the larger cross-generational historical context of that difference has been recognised by several school leaders in Phase 1 schools where there is also a recognition of the agency of Aboriginal communities.

That is, where school leaders (inclusive of the SLCE) understand that longer history, they also understand that the relationship with the school for which they work is not determined by the department. This is also where school leaders learn that non-attendance often occurs with good reason.

“When we first started doing language, I got really emotional. It made me think, if we don’t learn it, it could be lost forever.”

(Ex-student, Phase 1 school)

“I’m jealous of my kids, how much language and culture they get at school.”

(Parent, Phase 1 school)

Wellbeing strategies in Connected Communities schools demonstrate context-specific interventions that address the localised needs of students and communities in non-conventional ways

The wellbeing of students is fundamental to goals pursued in education so that all students are positioned well to thrive in their educational endeavours. Wellbeing is therefore not an isolated concept and frequently overlaps with other sub-themes identified during analysis including attendance, identity and belonging, connections to services (relationships), as well as with other domains such as student engagement and learning.

Addressing physical, psychological, emotional, and social modes, student wellbeing was referenced by many participants in general terms, or in relation to other goals. For example, as one participant noted **“our attendance is improving what we do as far as wellbeing is improving as well”** (Deputy Principal, Phase 2 school).

However, participants also provided detail of specific programs and services frequently used to illustrate work undertaken in this area. In one school, for example, a wellbeing and attendance hub was established where students take 15–20 minute appointments during class time to increase access to local services onsite (such as a Wellbeing and Health In-reach Nurse).



One participant reflected that this strategy facilitated more staff-to-student connections than previously experienced in other school contexts. Dental services, speech pathology, clinical psychology, as well as optical and hearing screening, are examples of other community health services incorporated on school sites.

In other contexts, school staff accompany students and their families to external health services and wait while they attend their appointments.

In this, an AEO serves an important function as a conduit between a school and its communities, arranging food drives for families in need. In another school, a range of non-conventional strategies were employed to increase student wellbeing and serve as 'pre-escalation' interventions.

One of these involved a 'wellbeing dog' where a community member – an Aunty to several students – was invited to become an SLSO and brought her dog to school each day. The SLSO would walk her dog around the playground and visit classes to help regulate and focus students' behaviours. In addition to the change in student behaviour, the strategy was noted as **"a massive thing for our kids, actually learning how to respect animals"** (Executive Principal, regional Phase 2 school).

Wellbeing strategies such as these demonstrate context-specific interventions that go beyond the duties typically undertaken by wellbeing teams in other schools insofar as staff in Connected Communities schools seek opportunities to address the localised needs of their students and communities in non-conventional ways.

Engaging students in learning outside the school is integral to cultural learning, and to community healing, for schools and their communities

Across a large portion of schools, students were able to experience a range of cultural, recreational and educational activities outside the school. Students learning outside the school, which in some cases was referred to as learning on-Country, was used to facilitate discussions around identity, connection and healing activities among peers and/or the broader community.

Excursions were often organised by staff, cultural and/or community leaders and involved place-based education about local places and sites. Both staff and parents/carers spoke of the positive impacts learning activities outside the school had on students.

Among several Aboriginal parents, carers and staff members, students learning outside the school was regarded as an important part of broader community wellbeing.

As some community members had historically been disconnected from Country, there were reports of generational healing as a result of the initiative.

During school visits, some community members observed that the strategy may contribute to students having overnight stays at places of cultural significance.

Two Aboriginal service providers said that due to increased post-school opportunities and the impacts of Connected Communities broadly, there is an aspiration that students will be more likely to stay in their local context and decide to work in the local community.

Addressing the significance of learning experiences outside the school, some parents, carers and community members across varying school sites suggested that more excursions to culturally significant sites should become a more regular and embedded part of the school curriculum for Aboriginal students.

Schools play a major role in revitalising language and cultural practices in communities, and the strategy has increased opportunities for cultural learning for students and staff

Beyond the initial induction of staff new to the site, there have been several Phase 1 schools in which there has been both an increase in the range of people included and an increase in the quality of that cultural learning.

This is most evident in the expanded prevalence of language revitalisation and cultural practices. Often this is directly related to curriculum developed for students to learn language, but the potential of cultural learning extends well beyond language per se in many sites. In many schools this took the form of gathering and documenting local histories, personal biographies of Elders, or learning Aboriginal understandings of the local land (and water and sky) and how best to understand cultural uses of place and the general stewardship of that land.

The strength of this work is reflected in the degree to which young students speak openly and proudly of their heritage and identity, and the public displays of Aboriginal culture, stories and history on school grounds.



System supports

This theme identifies the whole of government system supports that play a role in improving the outcomes of Aboriginal students.

The Connected Communities Directorate provides advice and support to Connected Communities schools

Generally, school staff highly endorsed the Connected Communities Directorate and the Director, Educational Leadership (DEL) role in terms of the support received.

Several EPs particularly valued the support of DELs who demonstrated an understanding of place and the local school history. A number of individuals in the SLCE role also spoke highly of the support they received from the newly created Project Officer position within the Connected Communities Directorate.

While the endorsement of the goal of providing regular ongoing support was clear, the degree of support reported across sites varied both in terms of the amount and specific source of that support. That variation reflects the fluctuating nature of school personnel and staff at all levels of the system. This is a well-documented and well-understood dilemma for all government systems.

The genuine relationships needed to provide support take time to develop, but advancement for school leaders almost demands their own mobility, which often means school leaders are transient. The challenge for Phase 1 schools has been maintaining the health of the networks making up the local Aboriginal Educational Ecosystem above and beyond the movement of individuals within that ecosystem.

Students in Connected Communities schools are developing high aspirations for further education and employment with clearer pathways to achieving those aspirations

Many schools reported that success in Aboriginal education meant students completed their public schooling with high employment aspirations and a clear pathway to achieve them.

This included the completion of Year 12 and entry into tertiary education pathways, and also employment opportunities, including through apprenticeships and cadetships. School staff felt they had an important role to play in exposing their students to the array of employment opportunities available to them and instilling a sense of belief that they could achieve them.

Further, school staff also noted they had a responsibility to ensure their students were prepared, both academically and socially, to reach their potential. This view was held particularly strongly in high schools, where they noted substantial effort has been put in to developing student aspirations post-school, and some reporting improvements in the number of students completing Year 12.

However, there was a general sense that more could be done to connect students with career pathways. This was particularly the case of schools in regional and remote locations where employment opportunities were limited.

“Success needs to be viewed holistically. One of the greatest success stories from this school is a student who now works at Woolworths. The amount of time and effort everyone invested makes us all proud.”

(Teacher, Phase 1 school)

The strategy provides greater flexibility in the delivery of teaching and learning

There was a sense that the high degree of flexibility and autonomy to deliver the strategy in line with the local school community context was having a positive impact on teaching and learning outcomes for their staff and students.

The additional staffing and resources that came with the strategy have enabled more off-class time for key staff to plan and develop curriculum and activities to improve student engagement. Further, the focus on student wellbeing and greater opportunities to engage with external services have resulted in better wraparound support to meet the needs of students and their families.



Kate Brennan

Deputy Principal, Moree East Public School, Gomerai Country

“Obviously resourcing is a big thing, but just having that flexibility to design the curriculum to suit the needs of our students.”

(Teacher, metropolitan Phase 2 school)

Through the hub, more students and families are seeking and receiving support from a range of services

In the early phase of implementation across school communities, the hub model was generally perceived as an early success. A key driver of the hub model involved the SLCE role building relationships with a range of agencies for the purpose of linking students and their families with the services they need.

The SLCE facilitated access to services through liaison work with both government and non-government organisations. Reportedly, some schools also engaged the SRG and AECG membership to provide greater leverage in connecting families with services. This process was strengthened when Aboriginal people used their local cultural networks to support students and families.

In practice, the provision of these wraparound services was both insourced and outsourced, with schools providing transport for external service appointments. According to school staff, the scope of service delivery was holistic, including medical, dental, educational, family and police (community police liaison and Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) services).

This focus on holistic service delivery also enabled the insourcing of specialised mental health programs at schools, such as KidsXpress, which offers a trauma-informed therapy program.

Many staff spoke of the high demand for paediatric, speech and occupational therapy services and several schools reportedly privately insourced these services.

A small minority of schools, particularly in Phase 2 schools, were still in the early phases of establishing relationships with service agencies. In most schools, service delivery centred around a stand-alone wellbeing program or unit. For some schools, these programs were formed as part of the strategy, whereas at other schools existing wellbeing programs were strengthened with strategy resources. Some schools that had established wellbeing units under the strategy directly linked wellbeing with school attendance through naming their units the Wellbeing and Attendance unit.

With regards to challenges, some regional and remote school staff cited difficulties in accessing services due to services being under-resourced in their locations.

Staff also highlighted the high turnover of staff in the services as a challenge in maintaining effective partnerships. Some staff also made a distinction between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools. According to these staff, metropolitan schools had greater access to a range of services, including broad-based Aboriginal health services.

A further challenge cited by several staff was the requirement for Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) service agreements which were perceived as administratively onerous. These staff stated a preference for less formal, localised agreements.

Some staff were of the view that department-driven service-level agreements may provide more impetus for the coordination of service delivery.

The hub provides a safe place where students and families can seek support and be supported when accessing services

Perceptions expressed by staff and community members reveal the hub was a success because more students and families were seeking and receiving support and a range of services. Further, students and community members perceived the hub to be a safe place where they could seek support and be supported when accessing these services.

A further flow-on effect was that, through addressing the health and wellbeing needs of students, the hub provided relief for teachers, such that teachers could focus on teaching curriculum. The success of the school as a community hub was commonly attributed to the SLCE who was seen to be forging relationships with service agencies and effectively engaging local families and communities, through frequent outreach activity and soft referrals.

“It’s like giving the community the keys to the gate, and it’s no longer community or school. School is the community, and the community is the school. So, it’s just bringing that togetherness and knocking down those boundaries.”

(SRG member, regional Phase 2 school)

Place-based inductions and training promote knowledge about community dynamics, histories and experiences

Many schools reported the importance of having staff, including EPs, that have a developed awareness of the local context. To enable the success of the strategy, both Aboriginal staff and community members noted that those who hold key roles benefit from a more developed understanding of place-based dynamics and conditions. One staff member noted that the school's onboarding process would benefit from an induction that involves key stakeholders from across the local community.

In one school, a staff member stated that an ideal induction would include informing them who to engage with for sharing appropriate cultural protocols for curriculum focus, events and other activities in the school.

Across several schools, staff noted that training and/or professional learning should capture the unique place-based conditions that shape experiences within the local community, spanning from cultural or trauma-informed training that addresses local histories to other contemporary issues that impact students, families and the broader population.



The strategy enables faster and more direct access to the department's system supports and services

School staff, particularly those in leadership or executive positions, noted that since coming on as a Connected Communities school they now have a 'direct line' to DoE services and supports, and that their requests for assistance were being fast-tracked or prioritised. The system supports being accessed varied across schools, with assistance for recruitment, finance, curriculum and wellbeing cited as the most common.

School staff also observed they were able to more readily access optional and additional specialised programs to provide targeted support to meet the specific needs of their students.

In addition to improved and broader access to DoE supports, most schools also reported that their transition into the Connected Communities Directorate meant they had more engagement and closer working relationships with their DELs and ED, who were considered to be highly visible and actively engaged in their school.

School staff noted that faster access to DoE supports were reducing the administrative burden for EPs and staff, providing them more time to spend either in the classroom, or to spend planning and implementing additional activities to support delivery of the strategy (for example, developing relationships with service providers, curriculum development or planning cultural learning activities).

Staff recruitment and retention, particularly for schools located in regional and remote locations, is a major challenge for schools to successfully implement the strategy

Staff noted stability of staffing within schools was a crucial aspect to establish and maintain trusting relationships with students, their families and the broader community.

Frequent staff turnover meant that these relationships needed to be constantly re-established, impacting on student and family engagement with the school. Further, while schools acknowledged the strategy provides resourcing for key positions in the school, these can be hard to fill – particularly in regional and remote locations.

Most schools acknowledged that staff shortages were a broader systemic issue not specifically related to the strategy design, however, it was nonetheless having an impact on implementation. Despite these ongoing challenges, schools highlighted that the support they have received with recruitment through the strategy has been particularly beneficial.

Some noted that being able to recruit based on merit (as opposed to transfer for non-Connected Communities schools) was a particular strength of the strategy as they have been able to selectively recruit staff that are a good fit for the school.

More time to deliver the strategy is required for meaningful change and impact to be achieved

All schools highlighted that the limited amount of time allocated for them to deliver the strategy was having adverse impacts on their staff and school community. Many schools noted that the objectives and deliverables of the strategy were long-term, for which only minimal change could be feasibly achieved in its current timeframe at their school.

Further, schools noted that delivery of the strategy required substantial investment and structural change to accommodate and that it would be hugely disruptive for the strategy to end so soon. A clear message received across all schools was that the strategy must continue beyond 2025 in order for them to achieve meaningful change.

Establishing or strengthening transition points for students presents an opportunity to improve the strategy

Primary schools often highlighted that the early childhood education service offered at their school was providing a key entry point for families to engage with the school and support services.

This entry point helped to form strong, lasting relationships with the school, provide an initially positive experience of the education system, and/or provide an opportunity for families to access services that would set students up for success through their schooling years.

However, many highlighted the need for better transitions between primary and high school – particularly for those schools in locations where there was not a ‘feeder’ Connected Communities primary or high school. Particularly in

metropolitan areas, staff and parents noted that having a partner school (either primary or high) would greatly benefit students in this transition as it would provide a consistent and culturally responsive education pathway from pre-school right through to the end of high school, maximising the impact of the strategy.

Staff working across regional and remote schools also highlighted the need to establish stronger pathways and partnerships with tertiary education and employment, including the need for their schools to explore opportunities to help with employment readiness, such as obtaining a driver’s licence, pre-apprenticeship training and qualifications.

Formalised networking, knowledge sharing and connections between Connected Communities schools offer opportunities to enhance the implementation of the strategy

In terms of what additional system supports would aid in the delivery of the strategy, many schools highlighted the need for a more formalised network between Connected Communities schools in order to share learnings, build a knowledge base of what works and build capacity to deliver the strategy.

Some staff noted that information sharing currently occurs at the EP level, and informally amongst some staff across schools who have established working relationships. A more formalised networking arrangement to support key staff involved in the delivery of the strategy from across schools would extend and enhance the level of information sharing and learning.



Findings unique to Phase 1 schools

Using our iterative analysis of an initial thematic understanding of what was found across all Phase 1 sites, the following findings are what we found to be true across all sites, noting that there is significant variation in how the phenomena in these findings were identified within and between sites. Often that variation importantly clarifies the meaning of these findings. Below we elaborate variations found that informed the identification of these general findings.

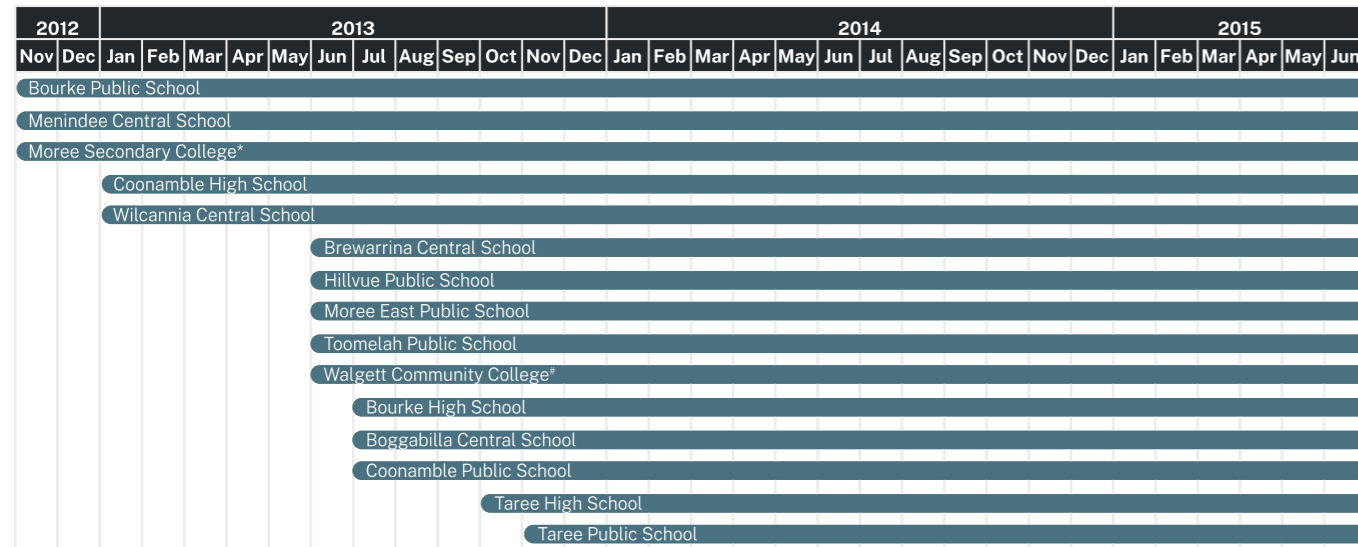


Figure 5: Initial Executive Principal entry on duty at Phase 1 Connected Communities schools

* Moree Secondary College includes two campuses, Albert Street Campus and Carol Avenue Campus.

In 2019, Walgett Community College was divided into Walgett Community College – High School and Walgett Community College – Primary School.

Aboriginal Education Ecosystem

The SLCE role has a long-term positive impact

Across all Phase 1 sites, one of the most impactful elements of the strategy has been the introduction of the SLCE role. In almost every site, this was made clear through evidence of positive ongoing actions of individuals. However, the importance of the SLCE role was made even clearer in sites where that role has not been filled on an ongoing, stable basis.

There are two aspects of the role which were identified by community as being crucial. On the one hand, the importance of the role of the SLCE was directly linked to the many specific events, programs and daily practices that are based on the local expertise and consultations with community done by the SLCE.

On the other hand, the importance of the SLCE being on local executives was re-enforced repeatedly across sites, serving the crucial role of being consulted on all matters related to Aboriginal education in that school and also adding value to educational matters more broadly.

The consultative role has included ending practices the community identified as not working or even harmful, offering alternative ideas to assist schools in its program and event planning, and facilitating collaborations across government and local agencies.



“The SLCE role gives us a seat at the table and allows the school executive to understand what is going on in the community.”

(AECG representative, Phase 1 school)

Relationships

The strategy has led to increased levels of trust between the school and community

Whenever speaking of general ‘levels’ of trust between the school and community, it is crucial to keep in mind the diversity of histories, experiences and perspectives in every local community or school.

While the frequency of reports about levels of trust between specific groups deepening through the work of the strategy were the most common accounts, they were by no means shared across all members of any one community.

Due to the centrality of direct relationships in establishing trust within local Aboriginal Education Ecosystems, the establishment of trust is related to background conditions:

1. the well-known diversity of views within communities, and;
2. the relatively high turnover of school leadership.

Nevertheless, despite these historically embedded and deep challenges, several Phase 1 school sites have reported increases over time in the degree of trust experienced, and increases in the number of individuals

reporting similar experiences. Confirming these observed trends with departmental survey data is difficult given the technical limits of those measures, but there is a congruence between our qualitative observations and relatively high levels of perceptions that are consistent with the increase in trust reported in local yarns.

Examples of deep trust include several SLCE-EP pairs across Phase 1 sites where these leaders freely and openly discuss how they have secured trust between each other.

Recognition of the need for schools to develop long-term relationships built on trust was near universal but the actions of several DoE leaders were constrained by the nature of their contracts and careers. While turnover of teaching staff remains a structural challenge for local trust, this is also true of those in positions of school or community leadership.

“The standout thing that I have learned is listening. It’s consultation and listening and listening and listening. ... but I’ve never listened so much in my life.

I’ve just had to slow everything down and actually go, okay, what does that mean for you? What does that mean for you? What does that mean for you?

And then just bring it all together and go, okay, this is the direction we need to go now.”

(Executive Principal, Phase 1 school)

Place

Connected Communities schools support the transient nature of Aboriginal students and families

A common theme, particularly in remote schools, was the number of students who move schools for short periods of time. Stakeholders identified family cultural obligations as the reasons as to why students move for uncertain periods of time. School staff identified the impact of this on school-based data.

The challenge for Phase 1 schools has been how to assist students who are transient in a manner that maintains educational progress.

Two main ways Phase 1 schools have addressed this challenge include regularly updated progress charting for individual students (which has included, for example, charting attendance and awards) in ways that mean all teachers have some understanding of each individual student’s current path. This quasi-performance-indicator mapping has focused primarily on the key deliverables of the strategy.

Beyond this pragmatic use of available system information, however, the means by which Phase 1 schools supported transient students has been through the larger Aboriginal Education Ecosystem, based on historically established trust with local agencies, individual people and families.



Jason Brown

AECG President, Moree, Gomerai Country

Healing

Connected Communities schools have the ability to play a role of healing within each community

As noted previously, the history of education for Aboriginal people in NSW has been one in which schools have been sites of harm and trauma for many Aboriginal people.

Phase 1 Connected Communities schools have met this challenge directly and become sites of healing.

Before sharing some of the examples of the actions Phase 1 schools are taking, it is very important to note that the role these schools play is very much related to, and dependent on, many other local groups and institutions on the same journey (most notably perhaps are the Aboriginal medical services, who are present in most Phase 1 school communities).

Through this local web-like network of organisations and individuals there has been an evolution of local Aboriginal Educational Ecosystems. As can be expected, the health of those ecosystems varies across time and place – but it is important to note that the Connected Communities Strategy is but one program in a much larger history and network of social actors.

It is very much in the interest of schools to evaluate their overall role in meeting the challenge of assuring that those local Aboriginal Education Ecosystems are healthy and inclusive of the healing needed in the foreseeable future.

In Phase 1 Connected Communities schools that healing has included the reclamation of local Aboriginal history and language, while the actions of the most healthy Aboriginal Education Ecosystems go further to include the school working directly with families of current students to address the consequences of trauma.

Evidence of the schools playing their historical role can be found in public exhibitions of historical events, recounts of Elders' personal experiences, and celebrations of culture across all Phase 1 schools.

The degree to which those public displays are matched by the lived experiences of current students and families does vary, but is most evident where schools have overtly reached out to families directly to seek assistance and guidance in how the school can play its healing role for current students.

“I feel like my daughter teaches me culture every day. It should be me teaching her but she teaches me.”

(Parent, Phase 1 school)

System supports

The evaluation team observed inconsistent application of strategic induction processes

Three levels of induction processes were identified as playing a crucially positive role in building the first-hand understanding and trust required to set new staff up for success.

1. School-based induction. For example, ensuring new staff have the appropriate keys, know where facilities are located etc. This induction process was observed across all schools.

2. Connected Communities induction. The second level of induction regularly reported by Phase 1 schools dates back to the initial rollout of the strategy itself. Local discussions still express a need to understand what the program actually is (as opposed to several other co-existing programs), and why their locations were selected to be a Connected Communities school.

The fact these discussions are still common suggests an ongoing need to address this induction issue with community stakeholders. Several current local debates stem from divergent understandings of what the strategy is and how they became part of the strategy.

3. Place-based induction. Staff across Phase 1 schools highlighted the need to learn more about the local community, including people, place, story and knowledge.

It should be noted that sites where there was a sense of shared purpose were those that had established staff induction processes before the creation of the strategy.

The importance of giving new school staff the background knowledge and experience needed to work effectively with local communities has long been part of successful Aboriginal education in NSW.

For the Phase 1 schools, this was affirmed by the creation of the initiative and added momentum to the maintenance of that work locally and the expansion of it in new sites.

Given the amount and range of locally developed induction processes now available from community (noting local Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP) applies each time), how to best maintain, expand and further use these processes has been identified as a current need.

An example of effective induction processes is explored further in the Menindee Central School case study.

School communities report that students are better prepared to start school

Several sites have substantially increased the degree to which Phase 1 primary schools have worked with families, teachers and other agencies to expand participation in school training programs, as well as increase the quality and scope of provision.

In every case where this has been successful, the role of the SLCE has been critical, as has been the capacity of the local Aboriginal Education Ecosystem to provide the cultural knowledge and community knowledge needed for those networks to flourish.

Examples of this work can be found in the Bourke Public School Case Study.

While there is no direct evidence of student preparedness based on systemic data available, aligned with the qualitative reports from Phase 1 schools on improvements in student preparedness, there appears to be slight growth in overall Aboriginal student enrolments, particularly with primary school students, between 2013 and 2022 (Figure 6).

Note that these enrolments should be read in the context of the well-known decreases in population of rural and remote NSW regions over the past decade.

These decreases in secondary schools relate directly to declines in the economic life of the remote communities where a lot of Phase 1 schools are located.

Enrolment of Aboriginal students in Phase 1 Connected Communities schools (2010-2022)

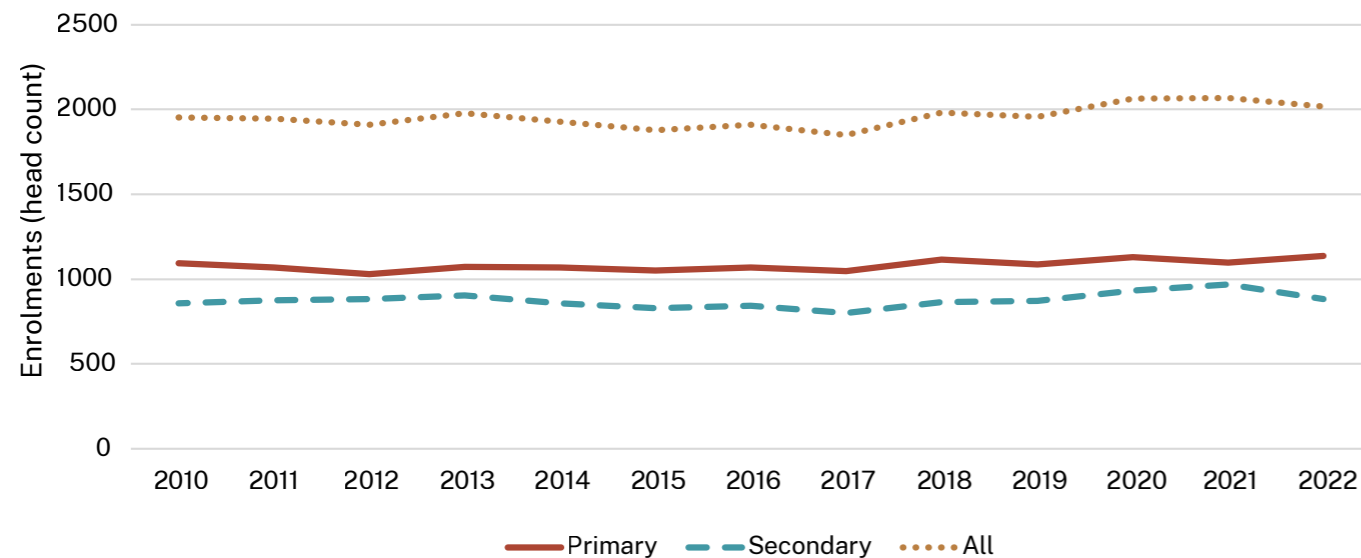


Figure 6: Enrolment of Aboriginal Students at Phase 1 Connected Communities schools
Source: CESE

Note: Enrolments are sourced from the midyear census conducted annually in August as part of the National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC) by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, NSW DoE. Data were extracted in October 2023. Data represent the number of students (headcount), rather than full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolments.



Findings unique to Phase 2 schools

The strategy was rolled out in Phase 2 schools between April 2021 and October 2022; see Figure 7.

Given the recency, it could be assumed that the evaluation interviews would mainly involve content on recruitment and establishment issues. Notwithstanding, significant progress in the delivery of the strategy was repeatedly cited by Phase 2 schools.

Several schools had embedded language and cultural programs, service hubs and strengthened community engagement initiatives. For a small number of schools, becoming a Connected Communities school strengthened a direction in Aboriginal education that they were already taking prior to the strategy. The themes identified for Phase 2 schools represent those most commonly reported.

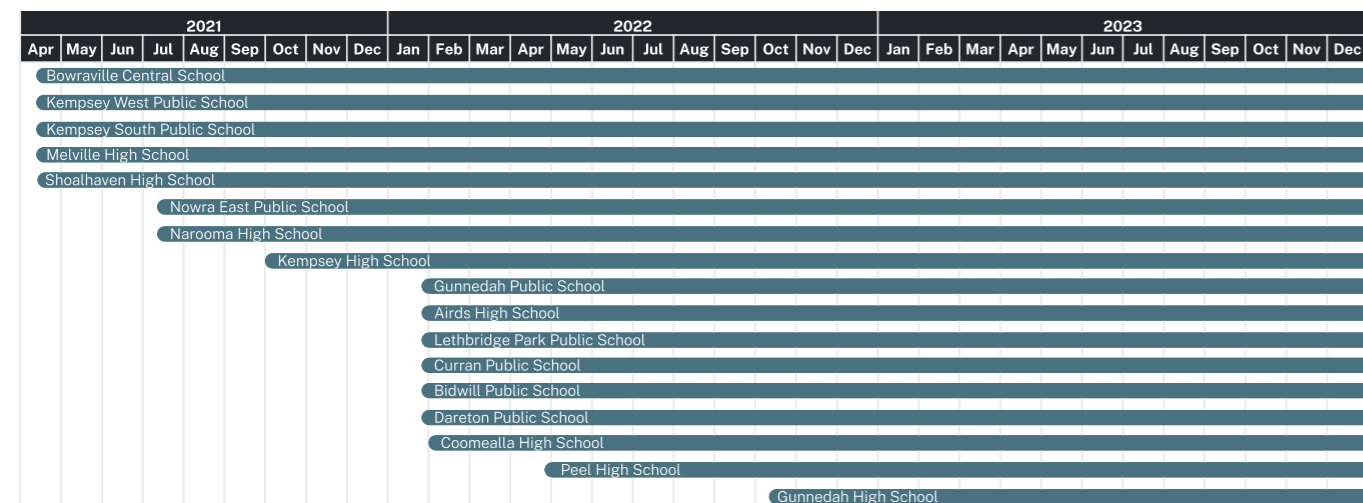


Figure 7: Initial Executive Principal entry on duty at Phase 2 Connected Communities schools

Relationships

The SLCE role embeds a sense of trust with families and communities

The SLCE role was commonly framed by school staff as the conduit for community engagement or the community liaison lead for the school. Cultural leadership evidenced by an understanding of cultural protocols and the local community was seen as requisite for this role.

For the most part, staff viewed the SLCE role as vital to the school in the delivery of the strategy.

Although the strategy was in the early phase, according to many staff and community members, the SLCE had greatly broadened and strengthened relationships between the school, community members and community service agencies. Strong support for the SLCE role was also voiced by the majority of AECG, SRG and community members interviewed.

As an identified role, the SLCE was perceived to confer a sense of trust with families and communities, particularly given the prior negative experiences that community members had reportedly experienced with government agencies.

According to many staff, flow-on effects from this improved relationship with the school included more family and community members receiving services support from the school and participating in school activities, and becoming actively involved in students' learning.

“I feel like that particular position (SLCE) is amazing and they’re really doing that very well. But again, that’s because there’s been someone consistently in the role who’s been able to work in partnership with community. It’s about relationships, relationships, relationships.”

(Staff member, Phase 2 school)

Place

Cultural awareness includes knowledge of kinship and sacred sites

Reflecting on cultural awareness, knowledge concerning kinship and sacred sites was foregrounded by some participants as significant. Some Aboriginal participants observed that kinship is integral to the development of students' cultural identity because it delineates a network of responsibilities that also serve to inform students' identities at school.

“It’s really important to learn about these sites. But it’s more than just going up there, doing a smoking ceremony and saying, ‘This is the artwork.’ They need to actually be aware of kinship. You know? Roles and responsibilities in families.”

(Parent and SLSO, Phase 2 school).



Owen Whyman

AECG President, Wilcannia, Barkindji Country

Connected Communities schools exercise autonomy in developing and enacting reconciliation strategies within their communities

Evaluation participants in Phase 2 schools revealed some of the ways they perceived that schools and communities are working towards reconciliation.

For example, many participants referred to activities and events—such as planned walks, celebrations and professional learning opportunities—that were considered to have reconciliatory value.

Of these, the integration of Aboriginal languages, cultural activities, and protocols were given primary importance by participants as authentic ways to build trust and healing in school communities.

In this, reconciliation can be understood as a concept that correlates to the wellbeing of individuals or whole communities. It also functions towards nurturing strong relationships between individuals in those social communities.

Healing

Connected Communities schools manifest demographic, operational and cultural shifts following involvement in the strategy

Participants' comments concerning general changes to a school that occur over time, signified a demographic change (for example, population decline and its effect on student enrolments, high rates of staff turnover), school operational change (for example, standards of discipline, school leadership decisions,

improvements to the school environment through landscaping and activities), cultural change (for example, increased number of students using cultural protocols) and relational change (for example, improved relations between the school, families and the community more generally).

Histories of schools are temporal markers for observations of transformative shifts since engaging with the strategy

Schools are complex institutions where change is continual. During yarns, interviews, focus group discussions and school visits, evaluation participants often used temporal markers when speaking about changes they have observed and experienced in their schools since implementing the strategy.

In some instances, participants observed general changes over time, and in others, comments related to perceptions and experiences both before, and after, their school engaged with the strategy. These references generate knowledge about the types of change evidenced in a school over time and how those changes are perceived. They also point to how a school's standing in its community, as well as its operations with students and staff, may have shifted since implementing the strategy.

“The school’s more open. So, when I came here we had bars on our windows ... And then when I walked in here, like, 20 years later and it’s, like, opened up and no bars ... they’ve only just been removed.”

(Teacher, Phase 2 school)

Pre-strategy experiences provide points of comparison for the transformative shifts observed since the implementation of the strategy

Participants spoke of their observations and experiences of a school before the strategy was implemented. These comments spanned perceptions of community disengagement, lack of access to services, divisions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, issues concerning student behaviour (including bullying), low student enrolments and levels of engagement, and staffing issues (including dissatisfaction with school leadership, lack of teaching staff, lack of respect towards staff and low levels of staff wellbeing).

Post-strategy experiences provide points of comparison from a school's history prior to implementing the strategy

Contrasting participants' perceptions of schools prior to involvement with the Connected Communities Strategy, are those since the strategy has been implemented. Many participants made positive comments concerning improvements to the ways they perceived a school's culture and its environment.

Although some participants acknowledged that sustaining meaningful connections with some community members remains challenging, others noted the increased number and quality of connections with community and valued the wider range of services available to students and their families.

System supports

Connected Communities schools demonstrate autonomy by using the strategy with high degrees of flexibility to meet the needs of students and local communities

School staff considered that one of the greatest strengths of the strategy was that it enabled their school to exercise a high degree of autonomy and flexibility in addressing their students' needs and their community context. School staff appreciated that the design of the strategy reflected that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot account for the varied and often complex circumstances where these schools operate.

Whilst ambitious, many staff also appreciated that the strategy deliverables were well resourced, where they felt the strategy provides both the strategic direction but also the resources to support success.

The implementation of the strategy in each school, including which aspects of the strategy were being prioritised in the initial years of operation, varied according to what schools considered were areas of greatest need.

For example, in some schools considerable effort had gone into recruitment and retention of staff to enable certainty and consistency. This was seen as an important element to establish (and maintain) strong relationships with students and their families. In other schools, priority was given to embedding and enhancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and language through signage, yarning/community spaces and cultural/language curriculum and activities.

Summary of findings on success factors and challenges

The following is a summary of key findings as they relate to the success factors and challenges that have been identified in the delivery of the Connected Communities Strategy.

Key success factors

During consultation, participants from across each school community were asked what aspects of the strategy were working particularly well. Whilst participants' responses to this question varied, analysis of data collected from schools revealed the following reoccurring themes:

- **Improved family and community engagement with the school.** Participants reported that under the strategy there was increased emphasis on the relationship between the school and community. According to staff at most schools, relationships had strengthened with families, communities and community Elders being more involved in school activities and meetings, in combination with school staff being more visible within the community.
- **Embedding Aboriginal language and culture at school.** Members from the local school community reported that opportunities to teach and learn about Aboriginal histories, cultures, and languages were a key feature of the strategy. This aspect of the strategy was observed in a number of ways and varying degrees of success across schools, including: the establishment of Aboriginal language and culture programs run by either Aboriginal school staff or local organisations, and, cultural visibility, recognition and celebration through signage and artworks, and greater efforts to celebrate significant Aboriginal events.
- **Effective and proactive leadership.** At the school-level, effective, proactive leadership realised by the EP and the identified SLCE role combined with resource support were seen as integral to driving strategy success. The SLCE role was also described as one that provided important assistance to the EP through making connections with community organisations.
- **Cultural belonging and safety.** Participants considered the recognition of Aboriginal culture to be an essential part of their students' learning and engagement at school, acknowledging that they are inextricably linked. From an Aboriginal student perspective, they supported further engagement at school to install or develop a sense of pride in their identity. Family and community participants also noted the programs were an important opportunity for them to give back and share their knowledge with students. Many family and community participants also highlighted that it provided them an opportunity to heal from their historical experiences with public education where learning about their culture and language simply did not occur.

- **Flexibility and autonomy.** Participants considered that one of the greatest strengths of the strategy was that it enabled a high degree of flexibility and autonomy in how the school addressed students' needs and community context.

School staff appreciated that the design of the strategy reflected that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot account for the varied and often complex circumstances where these schools operate. Whilst ambitious, many staff also appreciated that the strategy deliverables were well resourced, where they felt the strategy provides both the strategic direction but also the resources to support achieving them.

Key challenges

During consultation, participants from across each school community were asked what aspects of the strategy were challenging to implement, both at the beginning and more recently. Whilst participants' responses to this question varied, analysis of data collected from schools revealed the following recurring themes, reported below:

- **Staff shortages, turnover and capacity are creating a barrier to strategy delivery.** Participants noted that one of the major challenges to successful delivery of the strategy was staff recruitment and retention, particularly for schools located in regional and remote locations. Staff noted stability of staffing within schools was a crucial aspect to establish and maintain trusting relationships with students, their families and the broader community. Constant staff turnover meant that these relationships needed to be constantly re-established, impacting on student and family engagement with the school.

- **Family and community engagement in some contexts.** While family and community engagement were reportedly improving overall, for a small minority of schools, challenges remained in developing relationships and bringing communities inside the school gates. Historically negative experiences with the education system resulting in distrust was cited by staff as a barrier.

Related to this was the need for schools to create a culturally responsive environment and forums for families and communities where they felt safe and comfortable to participate and share. It would appear more time and increased efforts by the schools may be needed for these communities to feel comfortable about becoming more involved with the school. An additional challenge noted by several staff was the complexity around engagement when a number of different communities are represented in the school. Staff considered it crucial to apply an equity lens and balance engagement activity and services with different community groups, so they are all benefitting.

- **Recruitment of local staff who understand culture and community.** Participants noted that new or replacement staff who are not local may not have the knowledge/ understanding of local dynamics and community, which can impact on student, family and community relationships with the school. There was a view held by both staff and community members that prioritising the employment of local staff would ensure stability and help to establish or improve connections with families/communities.
- **Schools can only achieve a limited amount of change in the time allocated to implement the strategy.** Participants highlighted that the limited amount of time allocated for them to deliver the strategy was having adverse impacts on staff and the school community. Many schools noted that the objectives and

deliverables of the strategy were long term, for which only minimal change could be feasibly achieved in its current timeframe at their school.

- **Limited access to services was more pronounced in remote and some regional schools.** Some regional and remote participants noted they were experiencing difficulties in accessing the services needed by their students and families in their locations. This was due to both the limited availability of key services and the limited resourcing to provide them.

These staff felt that they were attending meetings to facilitate services, yet service delivery was not eventuating. Some staff also made a distinction between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools. According to these staff, metropolitan schools had greater access to a range of services, including

broad-based Aboriginal health services. A further challenge cited by several staff was the requirement for MoU service agreements which were perceived as administratively onerous. These staff stated a preference for less formal, localised agreements. Some staff were of the view that department-driven service-level agreements may provide more impetus for the coordination of service delivery.

- **Improving awareness and understanding of the strategy was limited beyond the school gates (and amongst staff in some schools).** Some participants reported that there was a lack of information around why schools were selected and the intended strategy outcomes. Although the strategy was generally perceived positively by communities, the need for better communication was linked to broader calls for authentic consultation with the school community.





4. Conclusion and discussion

Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this Connected Communities evaluation was to engage with stakeholders who were representative of the groups impacted by the strategy itself, and make meaning of their experiences. This report is grounded in the stories and historical experiences of Aboriginal people across NSW.

One of the major reasons this evaluation was sought directly relates to the self-identified need for the DoE to develop a school evaluation framework and processes which reflect the culture and educational outcomes valued by Aboriginal communities across NSW, above and beyond conventional measures of educational outcomes.

This work should not be taken as a replacement of conventional evaluation mechanisms; however, it augments an overall educational evaluation of the Connected Communities Strategy that is not only framed by what is important to the system but also by what is important to Aboriginal people.

There are structural implications from this evaluation for the conduct of culturally responsive educational evaluation, for schools and for the wider DoE (and WofG) systems.

Conducting culturally responsive evaluations fundamentally depends on working from and with local people on a first-hand basis, by people who are well recognised and accepted as being appropriate to the community.

This almost always means there is a need to develop structures to assure community, people, and values are represented within future educational evaluations. For Aboriginal communities this requires specific individuals and organisations be structurally incorporated into evaluations which are open to co-design

and conduct. While this would be a challenge currently for all schools, it also represents an opportunity for capacity building and future empowerment.

For schools, the structural implications are evident in the architecture of the Connected Communities Strategy. The schools' structural features include the SLCE being represented on the school executive; the SRG providing cultural governance and the additional resources of Connected Communities which allowed the employment of local Aboriginal people.

All of these structural features and the relationships that exist between them have played a role in creating more culturally responsive schools, which in turn allows the local people and structures to inform the system to become more culturally responsive.

The local school structure impacts the Aboriginal Education Ecosystem and facilitates the positive initiatives impacting on Aboriginal students and families. Individual SLCEs and local community members who make up the SRG are working collaboratively with the local Aboriginal communities to ensure their visions and voices are amplified and sit at the decision-making level.

The co-governance structure of the Connected Communities schools means that the EP must have a relationship with the local Aboriginal community.

The structural aspects of the SLCE role and the representative body have contributed to culturally safe places in Connected Communities schools. The cultural and historical healing that the Connected Communities Strategy has achieved is substantially different to the structural barriers faced by Aboriginal people historically, but those historical barriers remain and therefore a structural response is still needed.

At a systemic level, the structures of the Connected Communities Strategy within the DoE have supported and created a similar form of co-governance in the sense that the Connected Communities Directorate gives voice to the school communities at a systemic executive level.

Beyond the Connected Communities Strategy itself, issues of staff development, succession planning of leaders and a broad understanding of working with Aboriginal educators in a non-colonial manner all remain larger systemic challenges.

These structural shifts need to be made. They have aided many communities in building cross-generational healing and growth. But it is only a start. Structural reforms are necessary, but in and of themselves insufficient. The cultural achievements these structures facilitated have been based on the needs, knowledge and understanding of local Aboriginal communities

themselves. These are what drive healthy Aboriginal Education Ecosystems.

Importantly, the successes of the Connected Communities schools must be seen in the long term since the road toward a healthy Aboriginal Education Ecosystem will be neither linear nor simple. All school reform requires time to substantially shift the direction of a school (and longer for systems).

But when it comes to understanding the role of school systems for Aboriginal people, that means understanding the longer-term colonial role of schooling. In NSW this applies to individual schools, today. The long-term success of the education system will be measured from seven generations from now.



5. Recommendations

Consistent with the Re-imagining Evaluation Framework, all recommendations are made with Aboriginal student and family sovereignty at the core. The evaluation team undertook a thorough analysis of the data attained during field work. The overall findings, success factors and challenges associated with the Connected Communities Strategy have been explored throughout this report.

The following recommendations are an output of the evaluation teams' analysis to guide and strengthen the implementation of the strategy, which in turn, aims to improve the experiences and life outcomes of Aboriginal students and families.

Recommendation for the NSW Government

That the NSW Government:

1. Develops a long-term continuation plan for the Connected Communities Strategy.

The current uncertainty of how long the strategy will be in operation creates uncertainty and confusion for all stakeholders and impacts the health of each Aboriginal Education Ecosystem.

The evaluation teams recommend that the strategy must continue beyond 2025 in order for schools and communities to achieve meaningful change. Further, schools noted that delivery of the strategy required substantial investment and structural change to accommodate it and that it would be hugely disruptive for the strategy to end so soon.

2. Establishes a Ministerial working group to ensure cross-government collaborations that support Aboriginal students and families.

The authority of EPs lies within the NSW Department of Education only. This has constrained the degree to which EPs and Connected Communities schools have been able

to maintain strong and regular cross-agency collaborations. While these collaborations have occurred in most sites, at the moment they are fundamentally dependent on individual relationships.

Recommendations for the department

That the department:

3. Develops a structured process to help Connected Communities schools to share knowledge with and provide support to each other.

In terms of what additional system supports would aid in the delivery of the strategy, many schools highlighted the need for a more formalised network between Connected Communities schools in order to share learnings, build a knowledge base of what works and build capacity internally to deliver the strategy.

Some staff noted that information sharing currently occurs at the EP level, and informally amongst some staff across schools that have established working relationships. A more formalised networking arrangement to support key staff involved in the delivery of the strategy from across schools would extend and enhance the level of information sharing and learning.

4. Strengthens induction processes for new staff in Connected Communities schools, particularly new EPs.

Only one site across all Connected Communities schools spoke about their induction processes as effective. In all other sites, stakeholders spoke about the need for new staff, especially EPs to participate in induction activities that helped set them up for success. Induction processes can be divided into three categories:

1. School-based induction: In most cases this was the only type of induction present. This included access to keys, a tour of the site and other school-specific information.

2. Connected Communities induction: With a high turnover of staff, many stakeholders spoke about the importance of new staff understanding the history of the strategy and the unique positions and governance structures that relate to the strategy. An overview of the key deliverables would also need to be included.

3. Local cultural and social induction: Many new staff spoke about the impact of participating in the AECG Connecting to Country professional learning, however they also commented that it would have been beneficial to have the networks and knowledge acquired through this learning earlier in their appointment. This cultural and social induction could also be facilitated through other local Aboriginal people and organisations.

5. Facilitates a strategic approach, led by the Connected Communities Directorate, to strengthen the relationship between EPs and the SLCE, particularly in times of transition.

One of the major impacts on the health of each Aboriginal Education Ecosystem was the dynamic of the relationship between the EP and SLCE.

We recommend that the directorate undertake further analysis of the ways in which current EP and SLCE pairs have developed long-term collaboration relationships built on trust. This analysis can serve as the basis of further initiatives to help new EP and SLCE appointees develop similar working relationships.

6. Undertakes an audit led by the Connected Communities Directorate, of SRG membership and activity.

A number of sites spoke about their SRG being absent for some time. A critical element of the strategy was the introduction and continuation of this important cultural governance structure. An audit of SRGs would give the Connected Communities Directorate an overview of each SRG, how frequently they meet, the engagement of members and the views of SRG members on the structure itself.

7. Makes the SLCE role available for schools outside the Connected Communities Strategy.

One of the key findings from this evaluation is the positive impact of the SLCE role in schools and communities. Having an Aboriginal-identified position that is part of the school executive gives the school Principal and executive team a greater understanding of the local Aboriginal community's learning needs and expectations.

If non-Connected Communities schools, in partnership with their Aboriginal community identify a need for this role, they should be able to create and recruit it.

8. Employs more Aboriginal staff through targeted, locally-suited positions.

During consultation, participants from across schools noted that successful delivery of the strategy relied on the recruitment of local Aboriginal people who had both a strong understanding of the strategy objectives, and the knowledge to support its adaptation to the local school community context.

These characteristics were seen as important to build trust and relationships with students and their families, ensure the strategy was being delivered in line with community expectations, and support the school to be more culturally responsive when it came to implementing or responding to student/community issues.

9. Creates a specific leadership program for Aboriginal people in school-based positions that recognises the cultural nuances of leadership for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal employees discussed the cultural obligations and responsibilities that they have within the community and the school/system. This is a leadership role that is often complex and not well understood.

A program that unpacked the cultural nuances of leadership would be extremely valuable for Aboriginal leaders and could also help non-Aboriginal staff and leaders understand the complex role that many Aboriginal people play across the community and school/system.

10. Facilitates how the Connected Communities Directorate and the Regional, Rural and Remote Policy Directorate work with School Workforce to learn from the experiences of staff in Connected Communities schools who have been in the school for five years or more.

There are three main functions this recommendation can serve.

Firstly, collecting the experiences of long-term successful Connected Communities staff will greatly assist new teachers and school leadership in their own induction to Connected Communities schools.

Secondly, learning from these colleagues will provide a direct review into specific recruitment and employment practices, providing stories that will strengthen recruitment endeavours.

Thirdly and finally, formally learning from experienced educators within Connected Communities schools will strengthen the professional networks noted above.

11. Uses the learnings from the SLCE role and the SRG cultural governance structure to empower other underrepresented populations in schools.

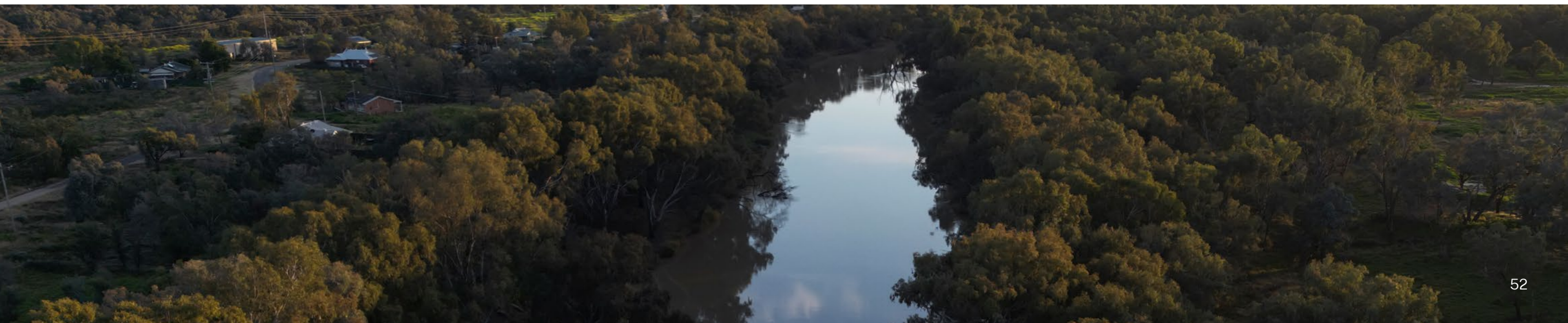
The SLCE role (as an Aboriginal-identified position at the executive level) and the SRG cultural governance structure in schools have facilitated greater cultural understanding for school principals, staff and students.

This structure is effectively a co-governance structure that could be applied across all relevant equity groups in any one school.

12. Develops resources and support to help Connected Communities schools with key transition points. Pre- and post-school transition as well as primary to secondary transition points.

The opportunity to establish or strengthen transition points was frequently raised across school communities, with many highlighting this aspect of the strategy could be improved – particularly for those schools in locations where there was not a ‘feeder’ Connected Communities primary or high school to ensure students had continuing access to cultural programs and supports.

Staff working across regional and remote schools also highlighted the need to establish stronger pathways and partnerships with tertiary education and employment, including the need for their schools to explore opportunities to help their students with employment readiness, such as obtaining a driver’s licence, pre-apprenticeship training and qualifications.



Recommendations for the Connected Communities schools

That Connected Communities schools:

13. Create resources for the sharing of local histories, cultural analysis of local environments, documentations of local family histories and stories, in partnership with the local Aboriginal community.

In the first instance, the creation of these resources serves an important healing and truth telling function. Beyond the initial recounts however, the value of this work extends to the students actively constructing curriculum material based on their own lives, Aboriginal people reclaiming language and culture, and local communities understanding the long-term connections to place. It also serves as a resource for the community to introduce new staff to people and place.

14. Develop Aboriginal staff networks.

With an increase in the number of Aboriginal staff being employed in Connected Communities schools, a number of these staff spoke about the importance of clearer communication and collaboration. The evaluation teams observed a number of sites where position descriptions and roles and responsibilities were not clearly defined.

Aboriginal staff identified the need for them to come together as a group regularly to discuss roles and responsibilities, community matters and how they can support each other in their roles.

Joint recommendation for the NSW Government, the department and Connected Communities schools

That the NSW Government, the department and Connected Communities schools work together to:

15. Strengthen communications for families, communities and external service providers using a range of mediums.

Participants reported that improved information flows from the Connected Communities Directorate to schools, and from schools to their community would be beneficial to building a clear understanding of the strategy, its objectives and allow opportunities for more community and service provider involvement.



“Some parts of the education system don’t understand the complexities of our site.”

(Executive Principal, Phase 1 school)

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Appendix 1: **Case studies**



Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Bourke Public School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

Servicing a small, remote community in the far north-west of NSW, Bourke Public School has been involved in the Connected Communities Strategy for more than 10 years (joining in 2013). This case study highlights how Bourke Public School engages with the local community to increase student enrolments and support early years access to learning.

Its approach is culturally responsive to ensure transitions to school for Aboriginal students and their families are positive and to increase opportunities for student outcomes to be maximised.

School context

Bourke Public School draws its enrolment from the Shire of Bourke, situated on the banks of the Darling River, including the immediate township and surrounding areas. The school has a current enrolment of approximately 140 students across Kindergarten to Year 6 (84% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander), with 3 support classes. The school's FOEI of 184 indicates that the community experiences a high level of socioeconomic inequity.¹

Several Aboriginal staff are employed at the school, including 2 Aboriginal education officers and additional student learning support officers.

Supported by the Connected Communities Strategy, a senior leader community engagement officer leads, facilitates and builds partnerships between the school and its community.

Bourke Public School has a strong focus on Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL), digital technologies, and targeted and individualised learning and support processes. Equity, underpinned by a 'high expectation, high support' school ethos is the school's core focus.

The Early Years Transition Centre

Bourke Public School established the Early Years Transition Centre (EYTC) when it became a part of the Connected Communities Strategy. The school works collaboratively with the local preschool to ensure that 4-year-old children have access to 4 days of preschool per week.

This includes 2 days at Bourke Public School and 2 days at Bourke and District Children's Services (BDCS). Bourke Public School provides transport through a school bus to support students and families with access to the EYTC.

A model to support early years transition

Bourke Public School

¹ The Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) is a socioeconomic measure used to statistically compare schools and allocate funding.

The Transition to School program has been selected as the basis of the equity loading for socioeconomic background in the department's Resource Allocation Model. This means the EYTC is funded within the school's funding allocation and staffing entitlement. An early childhood teacher and additional student learning support staff are allocated to the EYTC.

Bourke Public School works collaboratively with BDCS to identify 3-year-old students whose parents/carers wish to enrol them, to ensure that any additional needs that children have can be catered for at the EYTC in the following year.

Staff have identified that this early transition fosters smoother transitions for children to the EYTC, and then from the EYTC to school. The school has also held transition times for students to attend the EYTC prior to enrolment to ensure that staff are aware of students' needs and any modifications or resources that may be needed, in preparation for their first day of school.

An analysis of school readiness highlighted the need to focus on academic success, connection to culture and self-efficacy for Aboriginal students. The EYTC attempts to equip each child with the skills necessary for starting school.

Early intervention

EYTC children who require additional support are identified as early as possible so appropriate support structures, interventions and services can be implemented to ensure children can learn, develop and transition from the EYTC to Kindergarten successfully.

EYTC also facilitates the completion of access requests, so that relevant support (for example, integration funding support or support class placement) can be organised and in place for day one of Kindergarten.

The Connected Communities Strategy has supported Bourke Public School to be a 'community hub' allowing the school to support the delivery of key services to students and families through government and non-government inter-agency collaboration (for example, collaboration with NSW Health and the local Aboriginal Health Service to complete health care assessments to support education learning pathways).

The EYTC provides a range of learning environments to cater for the physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language needs of all students. There are designated learning areas designed to engage students according to their interests and in working towards school readiness.

The learning areas encourage student-directed learning, and are across curriculum key learning areas including creative arts, English and mathematics, all of which include aspects of Aboriginal perspectives, culture and language.

The teaching and learning program being developed and delivered at the EYTC incorporates use of local Aboriginal Ngemba language, histories and culture, Aboriginal-authored texts and additional resources to ensure inclusivity and that students are reflected in learning sequences.

What's working

Component	Benefit
Early intervention	Early intervention means children and their families receive targeted support from a range of services. This contributes to ensuring children are developmentally ready to start school.
Transition to Kindergarten	An effective and positive transition to school ensures that teachers know each child and family. This ensures continuity of learning that meets the academic and wellbeing needs of all children.
Sounds Words Aboriginal language and Yarning (SWAY) program	By incorporating Aboriginal language and story, students and families are provided with culturally responsive opportunities to improve their literacy skills.
Communications and community partnerships	Bourke Public School strengthens relationships and community partnerships through an open, transparent and reciprocal communication approach.

Table 1. Strategies that enhance student preparedness and school readiness



Transition to Kindergarten

The EYTC supports the school to run a comprehensive transition to Kindergarten program. Having EYTC children onsite allows families to build strong and authentic relationships with staff. It also helps staff to know each child and their family and to plan for continuity of learning so that the academic and wellbeing needs of all children can be addressed.

Bourke Public School has a strong working relationship with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) to ensure ‘Aboriginal children are increasingly developmentally ready to benefit from schooling – in their physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication’ (NSW Department of Education, 2024).

The EYTC assists students in developing the skills required to support optimal learning when they start Kindergarten, enabling a strong and successful start to school. The EYTC is a catalyst for playgroups that provides parents, families and toddlers with opportunities to build familiarity with the school and the education system.

The Early Years Transition Centre excels at delivering foundational skills and early identification of student learning needs, which results in effective transition to Kindergarten and a successful start at school for students.

SWAY program

Developed by educators, Aboriginal education officers and speech pathologists at the Royal Far West School, SWAY is an oral language and literacy program based on Aboriginal knowledge, culture and stories. All staff in the EYTC are trained in SWAY.

This program embeds local Aboriginal language, culture and stories within the classroom and uses evidence-based teaching strategies to develop oral language and early literacy skills. Implementing this program has enabled the early identification of students needing additional support and referrals to specialist services to be completed.

The SWAY initiative allows Bourke Public School to respond to the NSW Department of Education’s focus on early intervention.

Communications and community partnerships

Bourke Public School and the EYTC provide a weekly sub-newsletter which showcases upcoming events, general school information and student achievements. The EYTC has a public-facing social media platform with a local community reach. The communications team regularly shares messages of importance with the local community.

Bourke Public School has a strong partnership with local services and organisations to ensure support for students and families is coordinated. Through these community relationships, EYTC students have coordinated access to health services and early intervention, including occupational therapy.

The Aboriginal Medical Service provides culturally responsive health screenings and dental care.

Support for students and families is provided at this key transition point through the implementation of quality, individualised

“We will continue to consult and work with our community, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and local early childhood services to support strong relationships and quality learning and transition experiences for each student who walks through the school gate for Kindergarten.”

(Executive Principal)

educational experiences and additional referrals, as required. Personalised educational experiences and collaborating with parents, carers and families to cater for students’ learning needs is a continual focus.

Children and families that attend the centre are engaged in the school setting for the entire year prior to officially beginning Kindergarten. Students are beginning Kindergarten with prior knowledge, established relationships with peers and educators, and an increased sense of belonging.

Next steps

Bourke Public School has been selected for one of 100 new public preschools in NSW. It is expected that the new preschool will open in 2027, pending building and regulatory approvals.

The school was considered for a new public preschool based on child development and socioeconomic data, projected demand for preschool, an infrastructure analysis and valuable insights gained through local feedback.

A high-quality early childhood education helps give children the best start in life by providing important opportunities to learn and develop.

A positive transition to school is important for a child’s long-term academic, social and wellbeing outcomes. Having a public preschool on the school site will help children prepare for this change and help school staff to support the individual needs of children as they move from the preschool to the Kindergarten classroom.

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Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Coonamble Public School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

Coonamble Public School values meeting the educational needs of every student, while also recognising the varying wellbeing needs of students. This case study highlights the success of the Maliyan wellbeing room, a Coonamble Public School wellbeing initiative.

The Maliyan wellbeing room was designed to cater for the social, emotional, behavioural and overall wellbeing needs of students from across the school. Maliyan is a Gamilaraay language word meaning eagle.

The local community and the school staff encourage the analogy of students soaring and learning high and far beyond expectations.

School context

Coonamble Public School is in the north-west of NSW, approximately 170 kilometres north of Dubbo on the Castlereagh River. It is a Connected Communities school and includes a NSW Department of Education preschool and a support unit of 4 classes.

There is a high Aboriginal student population. More than 85% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and staff report that the school has a strong focus on improving the learning and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal students to be equal to, or better than, the state average across learning and wellbeing metrics.

“The [Executive] Principal listens to me and we work together to fix issues. It makes me feel valued.”

(Senior Leader Community Engagement)

A responsive approach to student wellbeing

Coonamble Public School

What's working

Component	Benefit
Maliyan room	Students receive support for their emotional, spiritual, cultural and psychological needs in a dedicated, culturally responsive space.
Responsive wellbeing practice	The leadership team is active in ensuring programs and initiatives with a wellbeing focus are culturally responsive. Staff assigned to the Maliyan room prioritise building positive relationships with students, families and school personnel. These relationships enable staff to provide tailored support to students, improving engagement and wellbeing.
Guided empathy animal training	Animal therapy initiatives, including The Empathy Dog Training Academy, help students develop a sense of responsibility, regulate emotions and engage in learning. These initiatives complement the trauma-informed practices used by staff.
Bike program	Developed in partnership with AusCycling, this program includes the use of an in-school bike track as well as aspects of road safety, bike maintenance and repairs. It supports the wellbeing and the social, emotional and physical health of students across the school.

Table 2. Strategies that enhance responsive wellbeing practice

Maliyan room

The Maliyan room provides a room where students and families can access individualised support and where staff can immediately respond to the needs of students.

The Maliyan team hosts an assistant principal wellbeing, wellbeing teacher, external psychologist (3 days per week), 2 student learning support officers, learning and support teacher, 2 youth and culture mentors and a school chaplain.

Using an explicit scaffolded approach is prioritised to ensure students are ready to learn when they return to their classroom. Often this involves students participating in activities to facilitate self-regulation. Providing emotional support for students is of greatest importance.

Having a separate space that is engaging and emotionally, academically and culturally safe means students enjoy being there and they can practise expressing emotions in a regulated, non-threatening environment. The skills that are taught in this smaller space then influence the behaviour of students in larger settings across the school and in the community.

Responsive wellbeing practice

The school has developed strong relationships with students and families that are drawn on for initiatives directed towards the needs of individual students. The leadership team is active in communicating with families to ensure appropriate support is arranged for students. School structures and processes also facilitate a responsive approach that ensures effective, point-in-time support is provided.

For instance, teachers and support staff are proactive in communicating information to parents and families as required or making referrals to the learning and support team. This in turn provides adequate planning time and appropriate resourcing to support student learning.

The relationships are fundamental and foundational in supporting students in a safe and trusting environment. Aboriginal staff are present and often have an existing relationship with students across family groups and through kin.

Guided empathy animal training

The Empathy Dog Training Academy supports the already existing animal therapy initiatives used in the school. For example, aquaponics is an initiative that a group of students developed to honour the remembrance of a local community member. The aquaponics farming breeds yabbies and fish, also contributing to the growth of vegetables on school grounds.

The wellbeing dog, Buddy, visits classrooms to assist students to self-regulate and focus on their learning and is present in playgrounds during breaks. There are multiple therapy animals that interact with the students, staff and community upon entering the school grounds, including chickens and 2 goats. Students take responsibility for animal caretaking, which helps them develop empathy and respect for shared responsibilities.

Students also have the option to attend the Maliyan room to self-regulate their emotions when needed. This option complements the professional learning staff have undertaken on trauma-informed practice, and understanding how self-regulation relates to a student's ability to concentrate and retain information.

The bike program

Staff at Coonamble Public School regularly communicate with students and families to identify learning opportunities.

In response to these meetings, staff explore potential partnership opportunities to maximise student engagement and improve learning outcomes. An example includes their partnership with AusCycling, which is an education program developed to support the wellbeing and the social, emotional and physical health of students right across the school.

The bike program is a long-term program designed to teach students how to ride safely and maintain the mechanics of a bicycle. AusCycling donated bikes to the school at the beginning of the program.

Students are mentored and supported each step of the way to recognise the intricate parts of a bicycle. This learning is scaffolded and delivered outdoors with the desired outcome of impacting students' wellbeing and their ability to self-regulate.

This hands-on experience provides a varied setting for learners to interact and engage with staff and peers. Physical movement is a major component of this program, allowing an additional option for students to participate in healthy physical education.

Coonamble Public School staff maintain the existing bike track and repair track signs as required. Students assist one another and staff with bike maintenance and minor repairs. This program increases students' knowledge of the requirements for owning and operating a bicycle.

Next steps

Coonamble Public School is committed to strengthening its approach in connecting with the broader community more regularly. While families attend and engage in school events, the school leadership team envisions more outreach to establish genuine relationships and to support student learning, especially with families that may be reluctant to engage in school events.

The physical presence of parents and carers in the school is valued and parents and carers are encouraged to participate in the delivery of programs and activities. Staff recognise the positive effects of families being more involved in student learning, including in classrooms and other contexts.



'Positive learning environments' is one of the strategic directions articulated in the School Improvement Plan.

A future strategic focus will be aligned to the existing wellbeing model that staff have found to be highly effective. A more explicit process for attaining data to inform dialogue and decision-making is also a priority.

Staff believe a coordinated approach is crucial to support student wellbeing and increase opportunities for educational outcomes to be attained. A structured process for referring students from the Maliyan room to the learning and support team is being developed to incorporate Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) systems.

“We have learnt to be more responsive to the needs of our students and families.”

(Executive Principal)

Reference

Coonamble Public School (2023) Strategic Improvement Plan 2024–2027, NSW Department of Education, accessed 12 April 2024.



A model of respect, belonging and community

Dareton Public School

Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Dareton Public School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

Joining the Connected Communities Strategy in 2022, Dareton Public School (DPS) is approaching its 100-year anniversary in 2027. A goal of the Connected Communities Strategy is that 'Aboriginal students and communities report that the school values their identity, culture, goals and aspirations' (NSW Department of Education 2024). The purpose of this case study is to foreground strategies used to develop students' cultural identities and sense of belonging to school.

School context

Dareton Public School is located in the Sunraysia horticultural region in the far south-west of NSW, alongside the Murray River and Victorian border. Situated on the traditional lands of the Barkandji river people, 90% of its students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

Since 2019, enrolments have more than doubled, reaching just over 60 students across Kindergarten to Year 6 in 2023.

Applying the FOEI, the school's score of 215 (in 2023) indicates the high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage experienced in its community.¹

Placing Barkandji language and culture at the core of the school's culture is promoted as a strength of the school, for which it is recognised in national media reporting (refer to Mangan 2021). The school's motto of 'On task for excellence' is realised in the application of the school values of 'smart, safe, strong and proud'.

What's working

Dareton Public School uses an integrated approach to wellbeing. Alongside a commitment to educational equity, it prioritises strategies that foster students' sense of belonging and contribute to identity-building.²

The rapid development of sense of belonging for students and the school's wider community is submitted by school personnel as improving students' attendance rates and wellbeing outcomes, as well as increasing levels of academic engagement. This case study features 3 key components that the school has found to be successful, as detailed in Table 3.

¹ The Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) is a socioeconomic measure used to statistically compare schools and allocate funding.

² For example, the school's uniform and excursion policies provide clothing and financial assistance to students in need. Support to students' families during times of Sorry Business includes offering food hampers and supplies. In line with priorities in the Connected Communities Strategy, the school often facilitates access to medical, allied health, NDIS, paediatrician, dental, hearing and vision services.

Component	Benefit
Placing Barkandji language and culture at the centre of school culture	Embedding local Aboriginal language and culture across the school improves school culture.
Strong commitment to actively engage with community	Fostering a community-wide culture that embraces and values education provides students, parents, carers and the wider community with the opportunity to be connected, to succeed and to thrive.
Incorporating aspects of Barkandji culture within the school beautification strategy	Embedding aspects of local Aboriginal culture when making changes to the physical appearance of the school contributes to improved attendance rates and positive perceptions of the school by community members.

Table 3. Strategies that enhance Aboriginal student engagement

Placing Barkandji language and culture at the centre of school culture

At Dareton Public School, students' sense of belonging to school, and their cultural identities, are enhanced by the shared aspiration to strengthen school culture. The decision to place Barkandji language and culture at the core of school activities has been key to developing students' school and cultural identities, sense of belonging to school, and overall wellbeing.

This strategy is implemented alongside other elements in an integrated approach that includes sustained efforts to engage families

and community members, and to improve the physical appearance of the school. Supporting this integrated approach to embedding language and culture has led to the employment of more Aboriginal staff—including teachers and student learning support officers—as part of the Connected Communities Strategy.

To begin, an AECG Barkandji Language Nest tutor was recruited, who is also a parent at the school. In consultation with members of the community, language was embedded across the school, including incorporating Aboriginal cultural games into physical education lessons. DPS now hosts an annual Traditional Games Day for its community of schools, enabling students to share and celebrate Aboriginal culture with their peers.

“Our kids wouldn’t accept awards or anything. There was a culture of shame across the school. So, trying to get them to be proud of who they are, through all the work we’ve done on cultural sensitivity and cultural connection, in the school through the playground and the use of the totems as our core PBL [Positive Behaviour for Learning]³ focus as well, and our class names. That’s really helped the kids to sort of feel proud.”

(Executive Principal)

The language strategy included weekly lessons with staff, who all “speak some level of Barkandji now” (Executive Principal), as well as language classes with students that have fostered cultural identity and pride.

An example of the success of the Barkandji language program is the Acknowledgement of Country, spoken in Barkandji by a Year 4 student, as one of a select number of students at the department’s 2023 Nanga Mai Awards.

³ The school’s commitment to the department’s Positive Behaviour for Learning framework supports the goal of ensuring that the school is a safe and friendly environment for all students. Alongside commitments to prioritising trauma-informed practices and introducing ‘zones’ of regulation, applying the strategy supports students to understand their feelings and emotions and how to self-regulate.



Student, Dareton Public School

Identifying ways that community members could support the school by embedding language and culture has been a key component of the approach. Community consultation has contributed an element of cultural safety, as one teacher reflects:

“The fact that our AECG Language Nest tutor was a local parent of the school that [sic] lived at Namatjira Reserve with many of our families also gave instant authenticity to the classes... it had an instant impact on student connection and engagement but also in rebuilding our community’s trust in the staff and school and the new approaches we were using to create a place that they would feel culturally safe and respected in.”

(Teacher)

An additional benefit of this approach is that it builds cultural knowledge that extends beyond the school gates to students’ families – a goal identified by school staff. One parent/carer reflects:

“I think my son is really lucky to be able to learn a language that’s just nearly been forgotten and wiped out, and he’s learning something that not every kid will have a chance to pick up.”

(Parent)

Strong commitment to actively engage with community

A commitment to increasing opportunities for students’ families and community members to engage with the school has contributed to success in areas identified by staff, including students’ attendance and increased levels of engagement.

Alongside the consultation to incorporate Barkandji language and culture across the school, school staff regularly invite parents/ carers, family members, and members of the local community to co-design school initiatives. For example, the school’s Meet the Teacher Yarn and Feed provides a relaxed afternoon involving friendly yarns for parents and families to co-develop learning goals with their child’s teacher. A complementary strategy is the proactive use of social media. Staff believe that this has been instrumental in building trust with parents and carers and shifting narratives from behavioural issues to a focus on learning and culture.

Another example aimed at improving attendance was a pilot of [The Anxiety Project](#) in 2023. Parents were consulted to co-develop resources that aim to assist parents and staff to identify and alleviate anxious behaviours in children. Consultation has been a key component of the schools’ success in revitalising its attendance plan.

In addition to staff reports of increased rates of student attendance, consultation activities have provided avenues for voices in the school’s community to be heard and recognised.



Increased levels of engagement by parents/ carers have also been facilitated by bringing services like a weekly playgroup, and food and clothing bank, onto the school grounds with the School as Community Centres initiative which supports many of the key deliverables of the Connected Communities Strategy.

A dedicated culture room, for example, has also helped to welcome parents/carers into the school and establish a comfortable and safe space for ongoing sharing and participation in school activities.

In another wellbeing strategy, Dareton Public School was the first school in the area to introduce a ‘wellbeing’ dog. A local aunty was offered the role of School Liaison Support Officer (SLSO), and this included bringing her dog to school and into classrooms every day. As a community member, she provided valuable cultural connection to the students.

“You know our kids and their families are always #1. At our school we support them with anything they need support for. And if it’s Sorry Business, we support them.. uniform any little thing they need because Dareton Public School is to make sure that all kids (have what they need). You know, have that welcoming (open) approach to the community.”

(Aboriginal Education Officer)

A recent partnership with Coomealla High School (CHS) — also a Connected Communities school — to implement a transition to Year 7 program has increased cultural pathways for Year 6 students, where DPS students celebrate NAIDOC week activities at the high school alongside their secondary school counterparts, Elders and community members.

Leadership opportunities are also extended to CHS students, who conduct peer tutoring activities with DPS students.

Incorporating aspects of Barkandji culture within the school beautification strategy

Complementing the language strategy, Barkandji culture has also informed an approach to beautify the appearance of the school through the use of bilingual signage that features across the grounds and classrooms.

In another example, incorporating murals depicting local Aboriginal histories and stories was “another big thing to try and make the school look better and look like somewhere you wanted to be and felt proud of” (Executive Principal).

Attention to school uniforms, planting trees, building gardens and incorporating a large-scale representation of the Aboriginal flag on the basketball court are factors identified by staff that contribute towards better rates of student attendance.⁴

These actions have also improved community members’ perceptions of the school by providing a safe, welcoming environment where cultural sensitivity can be demonstrated, and all members of the community can feel invested in the school.

the academy will help foster cohesive local communities that extend connections between schools and the communities they serve.

The 3 key components of Dareton Public School’s integrated approach to wellbeing that feature in this case study include strategies used to successfully enhance students’ sense of belonging to school and identity formation. Staff believe that these strategies are now a sustainable part of the school’s operations that benefit every student, presenting ongoing opportunities for the school’s shared values — smart, safe, strong, and proud — to be enacted.

Next steps

Dareton Public School is now focusing on increasing opportunities for students’ voices to contribute to the operation of the school as well as more opportunities for the voices of parents and community members to be acknowledged and contribute to school planning.

In one example, the school is working towards the establishment of a Sunraysia Leadership Academy as part of the Sunraysia Community of Schools.

The initiative aims to develop student leadership at each school through opportunities to engage in community projects initiated by students. The Sunraysia Community of Schools hopes

⁴ A decision was made to incorporate colours from the Aboriginal flag in a vertical colour-block, to minimise potential for any offence that may be inadvertently caused.



References

- NSW Department of Education (2024) Connected Communities Strategy, The NSW Government Education website, accessed 14 February 2024.
- Mangan S (presenter) (4 June 2021) ‘Dareton Public School is using pride in culture to turn young lives around’ [broadcast], ABC listen, ABC Online Services.



Establishing authentic relationships through place-based induction

Menindee Central School

Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Menindee Central School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

This case study highlights the success of Menindee Central School (MCS) in developing a culturally responsive induction process. The induction process aims to ensure teachers, support staff and additional employees feel a sense of belonging, recognise the importance of place and are getting to know the students and their families authentically, quickly and efficiently.

Menindee Central School's vision is "...to prepare young people to lead rewarding and productive lives in a complex and dynamic world", and as a Connected Communities school, it is a place where people are encouraged to reach their potential in a caring, stimulating, culturally affirming environment.

A solid foundation for learning is established in the early years, with positive personal and academic growth fostered through the middle years, and sustained support of pathways into future education or employment is in place for the senior years.

The school leadership team prioritises getting to know community members, staff and students. According to staff, the foundation of an effective induction process is built and dependent on authentic relationships. These

relationships are strengthened by knowing family members and community groups, as well as important places.

School context

Menindee Central School is a remote school in far west NSW, situated 110 kilometres east of Broken Hill on the Darling River, the Paaka. The school provides education for students in Kindergarten to Year 12 and partners with a community preschool to support learning in the early years (Menindee Central School, 2023). Students in Years 11 and 12 engage with the Wilvandee Access Program, which links Menindee with central schools in Ivanhoe and Wilcannia to broaden curriculum offerings.

Approximately 73% of Menindee Central School's students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Menindee Central School, 2023) and many have lived in the town since they were born.

Many of Menindee Central School's students pursue employment pathways in regional centres that include Broken Hill, Dubbo and Mildura, while those who choose further study options typically relocate to larger cities such as Sydney or Adelaide.

Students at MCS are regularly exposed to new initiatives and experiences to ensure their

educational journey is progressive, culturally responsive and equitable. For example, the school has established close partnerships with local businesses that offer benefits to senior students through traineeship opportunities.

An interagency group coordinates a wrap-around suite of services in support of students and their families in the school community.

These supports can include assisting students with healthcare access, academic support and seeking employment opportunities.

The school regularly consults with and reports to its reference group and the local AECG around planning and procedures.

What's working

Component	Benefit
Place-based induction	MCS has developed a place-based induction process that is set locally, by local people. The induction process is directly connected to place, responsive to land, people, history and story.
Local histories, culture and language	Cultural knowledge and language are practised in school activities. Local Aboriginal people are open, honest and trusting in the sharing of local stories and oral histories.
Strong emphasis on strength-based relationships	Getting to know students, staff and families in a variety of planned activities is prioritised. Incidental interactions are valued and seen as an opportunity to connect and build trust and rapport. Interactions are intentional and planned to facilitate open communication.
Opportunities for students, staff and families	The intimate knowledge of students and family groups leads to responsive approaches to teaching and learning. This knowledge also guides the type of opportunities the school provides for students in a remote community, which guide the rewards for students who display outstanding behaviour and commitment to learning.

Table 4. Strategies that enhance a localised approach to inducting staff

Place-based induction

The leadership team in consultation with the School Reference Group at MCS have created an induction process for new staff that prioritises relationships with students and families.

This induction process involves the senior leader community engagement officer taking the new staff member around the community to meet the families of students and important community members and visit important cultural sites. This process has been established to ensure new staff members are able to understand some of the unique family and kin structures that exist in the lives of students.

This process has also been valuable for families and community members, who have the opportunity to meet new staff members in an informal setting. Feedback from staff members demonstrates extremely positive impacts on the ability of staff to form positive, sustainable relationships with students and families. The induction process is recognised by staff as positively impacting staff retention, student attendance and overall student engagement.

Local histories, culture and language is shared

The historic town of Menindee and the surrounding region have significant cultural sites and story.

The school ensures that these sites and stories are an important part of the curriculum for students and professional learning opportunities for staff.

For example, once staff have completed the induction process, they engage with the local AECG and participate in the Connecting to Country program, building their local network and cultural knowledge.

Connecting to Country is facilitated and delivered at a local community level with the involvement of local Aboriginal people. This program is divided into several workshops across 3 days, designed to build knowledge of local histories, cultures and language.

Strong emphasis on strength-based relationships

The leadership team and School Reference Group at MCS have a continual focus on centring relationships among school staff and community members. The way in which the leadership team undertakes this is ongoing and prioritised through school planning and resourcing.

MCS is a central hub of the community with a strong focus on ensuring students and staff feel a sense of belonging. MCS has become an important place for the community beyond its core business of educating children and young people.

“One of the best things that happens at our school is setting new staff up for success. We invest time in welcoming new staff members and introducing them to all members of the community.”

(Teacher)

The school supports individual families in a variety of ways including during Sorry Business and other significant life events. MCS also acts as a place for community engagement through hosting events after school hours and during school holidays.

Examples include movie nights in the school hall, catering out of the school kitchens and providing opportunities for students to participate in extracurricular activities in Menindee and Broken Hill.

“We have to be strategic around relationship building. Creating time and space for people to connect, staff, students and community members.”

(Executive Principal)

Opportunities for students, staff and families

The leadership team and School Reference Group at MCS are committed to providing opportunities to students, staff and families that take them beyond Menindee and allow them to experience different environments and cultures. These opportunities are directly linked to the learning goals of students and provide an extremely exciting reward for students who consistently display positive behaviour and commitment to their learning goals.

There are a number of examples that demonstrate the opportunities available to students. These include:

- Overseas travel and learning experiences. MCS have organised overseas trips to China, Japan, Canada, Tonga and New Zealand, allowing students, staff and families to experience a cultural exchange. This has also resulted in return trips where international students and staff visit MCS.
- Participation in the University of Newcastle’s Childrens’ University, prioritising learning outside of school. This has resulted in several trips to Newcastle and the Central Coast to participate in learning activities.
- Term-based reward structures have been built into school processes, allowing students to be rewarded for shorter-term improvements and commitments to learning. The term-based rewards include a special lunch, where food is ordered from Broken Hill and delivered to the students to enjoy.

These activities provide an experience for students, staff and families and an opportunity for stakeholders to experience these things together, strengthening the relationships between stakeholders.

Next steps

Menindee Central School will continue its commitment to strength-based, high-expectations relationships between students, families and staff. The Executive Principal remains committed to a place-based induction process for welcoming new teaching and support staff.

This induction process will be adjusted and adapted to people and events as required.



The adaptable approach to a localised Connecting to Country initiative is suitable to this setting, recognising the unique community and the need for place-based decision-making.

Place-based professional learning for staff will continue to guide the learning experiences and engagement of students and families at MCS. The leadership team is also exploring additional opportunities for students, staff and families.

This includes the possibility of attending a summer learning institute hosted by the First Nations University in Canada.

Reference

Menindee Central School (2023) Strategic Improvement Plan 2022–2026, NSW Department of Education, accessed 09 April 2024.



Cultural learning embedded across school practice

Moree East Public School

Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Moree East Public School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

At Moree East Public School (MEPS), culturally responsive decision-making is at the heart of every school planning cycle. The leadership team and additional staff have a great appreciation of local Aboriginal histories and cultures, embedding these knowledges not only into the curriculum but also across the school in other planning areas.

MEPS is on the lands of the Gomeroi people and acknowledges the traditional Gamilaraay language speakers in the region.

Gomeroi culture and Gamilaraay language are embedded within whole-school culture to support positive student, parent/carer, staff and community partnerships and to foster a shared responsibility for student learning and wellbeing.

The school has a current enrolment of 209 students and 87% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Due to the transient nature of family groups, the demographics vary slightly.

The school has an FOEI of 206, indicating that the community experiences a high level of socioeconomic inequity.¹

MEPS prioritises student inclusion and is committed to educating the whole child through quality education.

The school values a culture of teamwork, with community involvement encouraged in all aspects of school life.

School context

MEPS is a Connected Communities primary school located in north-west NSW and stands proudly on Gomeroi Country.

¹ The Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) is a socioeconomic measure used to statistically compare schools and allocate funding.

What's working

Component	Benefit
Gamilaraay language learning in daily learning	<p>Culture and language lessons have been timetabled for all Kindergarten to Year 6 student cohorts. The school has responded to community requests to ensure culture is embedded into teaching and learning programs. This has driven learning opportunities not only for students but for staff, families and community members.</p> <p>All school staff and students regularly engage and converse in Gamilaraay language, including simple greetings, short phrases, words related to counting, identifying animals and things related to the natural world.</p>
Cultural mentoring and support enhances teaching and learning	<p>A continued focus of mentoring and supporting students and teachers fosters a safe learning environment for all. A safe learning environment allows for individuals to take risks in attaining and sharing knowledge.</p>
Culturally centred professional learning	<p>Staff engage in a variety of professional learning opportunities to enhance their knowledge, understanding and capacity to support and engage effectively with students, families and community.</p> <p>MEPS is actively engaged in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance (ATSIMA) network to further support staff in fostering a strengths-based approach, in supporting Aboriginal students' mathematics skills.</p>
School as a hub	<p>The school is engaged with a number of key organisations to support students and families within the context of Gomeroi culture and plays a crucial role in leading collaboration.</p>

Table 5. Strategies that enhance Aboriginal student engagement and sense of belonging

Gamilaraay language in daily learning

Opportunities to embed Gomeroi culture and language are highly valued and deeply ingrained in daily school activities and practices. MEPS offers Gamilaraay language and Gomeroi culture classes and facilitates language learning for staff and community through NSW TAFE courses.

Visual representations of language and culture are displayed across the school. For example, the school has a large and welcoming entrance mural which is used as a teaching tool regarding Dreaming stories, and culture and language development. All classrooms display signage that is approved through consultation with the local AECG and local Elders and language knowledge holders.

In addition to visual representations, language is actively used across different school and community events – for example, during sport and Indigenous games, classroom programs and conversing on the school's 'bun bun' (grasshopper) bus which supports transporting students to and from school, Acknowledgement of Country in Gamilaraay language and other key events in the community.

Students also sing the national anthem and a repertoire of songs in Gamilaraay language at assemblies and significant events. Language and culture are integrated in students' daily learning, supporting student engagement.

Cultural mentoring and support enhances teaching and learning

The school funds above-establishment teaching and non-teaching staff to support a higher ratio of one-to-one support and reduced class sizes. Trained student learning support officers (SLSOs) provide small-group tuition to deliver a variety of programs that focus on improving the learning outcomes of students.

Aboriginal staff including the senior leader community engagement, Aboriginal education officers and SLSOs provide cultural mentoring and support to teachers and students on a daily basis. The school adopts a Positive Behaviour for Learning approach which is culturally responsive, with attendance and behaviour targets rewarded in a variety of ways.

Term reward days include excursions and incursions, where students participate in a 'variation to school routine' experience, often facilitated by an external provider, which often builds cultural knowledge and understanding. The additional non-teaching staff contribute to a continued focus on mentoring and supporting students and teachers, fostering a safe learning environment for all.

A safe learning environment allows for individuals to take risks in attaining and sharing knowledge. There is a strong underlying current of Aboriginal ways of doing, being and knowing at MEPS. The leadership team is innovative and committed to making each student feel known, valued and cared for.

A variety of programs are run out of the Schools as Community Centre, which supports children and their families prior to starting school. This includes the substantial increase in the number of playgroups operating each week and the flow-on attendance of children from babies

to 5 years old, parents/carers, family members and community since 2017.

Playgroups also promote Gomeri Culture and Gamilaraay language as part of the daily program. The centre also holds key events and engages in external community events.

Staffing arrangements are planned to ensure a balance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff to support individuals and groups of students across the school. Mentors provide social, emotional, academic and cultural support.

Culturally centred professional learning

Culture and language are well embedded in staff development. For every new staff member (extending to key partners and visitors), the senior leader community engagement conducts individual and small-group induction tours of the local area, building a strong foundation for future learning.

There is also whole-staff professional learning, which is available online, face-to-face and on Country. These opportunities assist with building shared knowledge, understandings, and positive relationships with the whole school community.

Besides professional learning provided by the department, cultural learning and support are also available through local networks and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mathematics Alliance (ATSIMA).

From 2023, MEPS has worked with the local high school and local services to engage in professional learning together, on Country. This strengthens local networks and works towards a collaborative approach to support students and families. Teachers can also receive support from ATSIMA to strengthen their pedagogy in the classroom.

The Goompi Model, proposed by ATSIMA, is used by teachers to connect mathematics and culture. The model ensures that students experience mathematics that is part of their living world and a part of who they are from their individual culture perspective.

School as a hub

MEPS engages with local Aboriginal non-government organisations to support playgroups, transition to Kindergarten and transition to high school programs, as well as key school events such as the school fete and NAIDOC Week, and targeted events such as the Local Service Provider Day held at the school.

The local Moree AECG is a strong partner, working alongside the school to support with educational advice, guidance, and representation at key events.

The school engages with non-Aboriginal organisations to foster a greater understanding of Gomeri Culture and Gamilaraay language. MEPS works closely with Rotary NSW and has built a wider network of support and friendship across areas of Sydney, with links to Moree groups.

Members of Rotary NSW support the school with literacy development, help at key events and visit the school each year. They share their positive experiences, knowledge and understanding of Gomeri culture across their networks.

The building of strong relationships with local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers has been paramount to supporting students and families in health and wellbeing, access to services and during times of crisis (flood/evacuation centre) where reportedly, reciprocal strong support is evident.

Next steps

Moree East Public School is committed to ensuring local Aboriginal histories and culture are being taught and incorporated into teaching and learning programs.

The leadership team has a strong strategic focus to maintain established relationships with the local community and elevate their voices.

Several staff and community members have had the opportunity to access the Gamilaraay Language Certificates I and II through NSW TAFE delivered onsite at the school. While this stakeholder engagement began in 2019, MEPS' Cultural Leadership team intends to extend this offering well into the future.

“Our School Reference Group is so invested, they are not just students, they are our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews.”

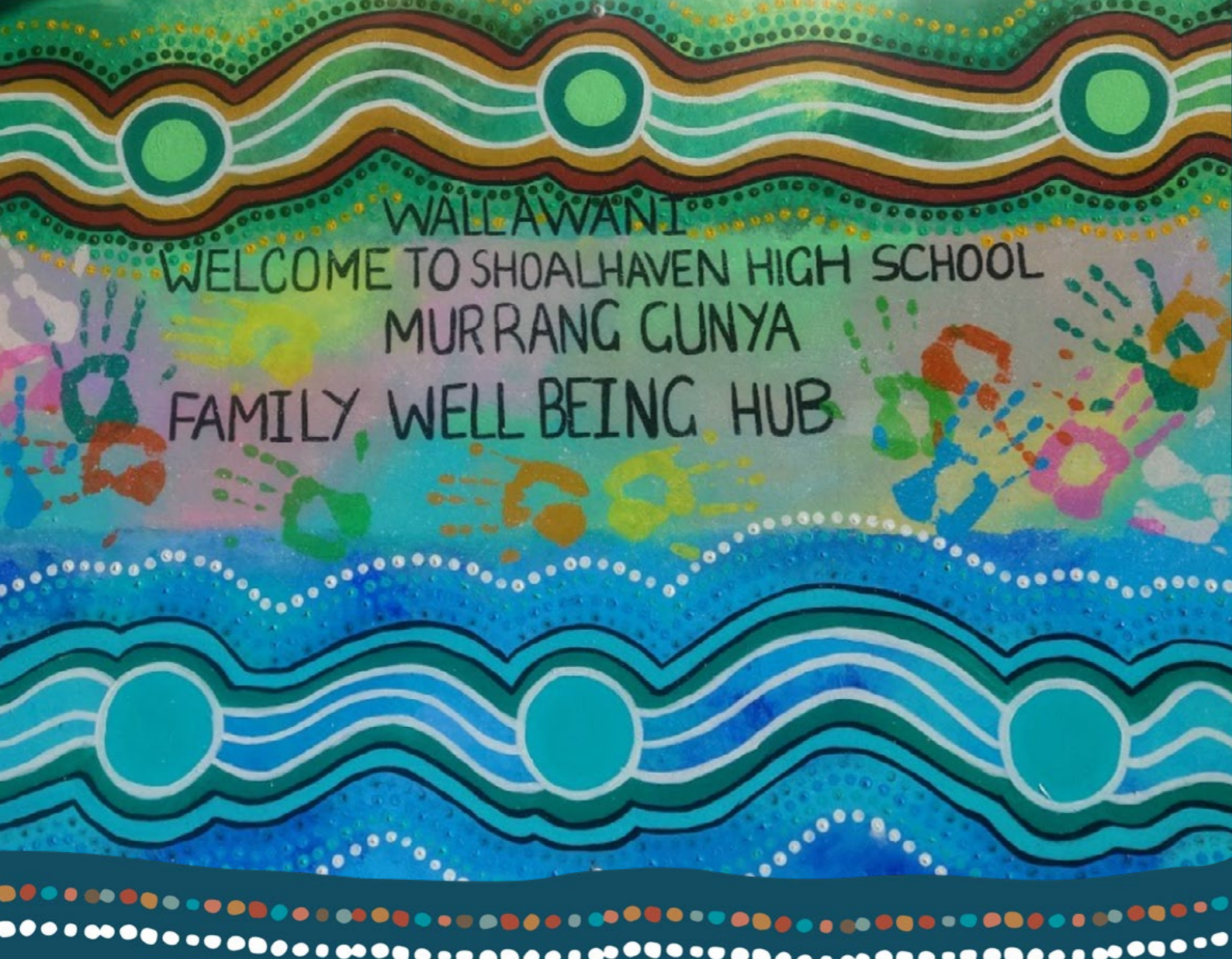
(SRG Chair)

“We need greater flexibility for students to engage in a curriculum that meets their needs.”

(Executive Principal)

Reference

Moree East Public School (2023) Strategic Improvement Plan 2023–2026, NSW Department of Education, accessed 11 April 2024.



Breaking down barriers – the family wellbeing hub

Shoalhaven High School

Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Shoalhaven High School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

Shoalhaven High School (SHS) is one of the 33 schools across NSW that implement the Connected Communities Strategy. Since joining the strategy in 2021, the goals of improving students' engagement and wellbeing have been prioritised to address concerns related to student non-attendance. This includes the establishment of the Murrang Gunya Family Wellbeing Hub (the hub).

Staff are committed to promoting holistic educational experiences, and trauma-informed practices are valued.

Murrang Gunya Family Wellbeing Hub

SHS established the hub onsite in 2022 (Shoalhaven High School, 2022). It serves as a safe space for students and families to meet with school staff or access various services that might otherwise be inaccessible.

School context

SHS is a comprehensive high school located in Nowra on the NSW south coast. The school has a FOEI score of 156, which indicates that the community experiences a high level of socioeconomic inequity.¹

Initiated before the school's involvement in the Connected Communities Strategy, the resourcing and flexibility of the strategy has ensured the hub operates full time. For example, a Head Teacher, Attendance and Wellbeing, is funded to oversee planning and coordination of the hub's services and activities, and additional administrative and support staff have also been employed.

There are 639 students enrolled across Years 7 to 12, with approximately 11% of students utilising the school's support unit (Shoalhaven High School, 2022). Around 32% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 2 Aboriginal education officers are employed alongside 95 other staff.

The operation of the hub is supported by school funds and a Regional Renewal grant. Table 6 features 3 key components that the school has found to be successful in operating the hub.

¹ The Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) is a socioeconomic measure used to statistically compare schools and allocate funding.

What's working

Component	Benefit
Critical, free and accessible service outreach for students and their families	The hub is providing students and their families with free and timely access to services they would not normally have, breaking down common barriers faced by regional communities to seek the support needed to meet their child's learning needs.
A designated safe and welcoming space for students and families	Through curating a culturally safe and welcoming environment, community members who require support are enabled and encouraged to access these critical services.
Facilitates improvements in student attendance and engagement	The hub contributes towards improving students' attendance and their ability to participate in school-based activities by addressing individual disadvantages, conditions and circumstances that might act as barriers to their engagement.

Table 6. Strategies that enhance student wellbeing and facilitate attendance

Critical, free and accessible service outreach for students and their families

The SHS Murrang Gunya Family Wellbeing Hub is equipped with 2 consulting rooms and provides various free services corresponding to the needs of students and their families.

Since 2022, 23 services have been operating out of the hub. Through the hub, students regularly access occupational therapy, speech therapy,

optometry, telehealth, mental health, dental and other services to support their wellbeing needs. Having fast, accessible and free use of these services during school hours on the school grounds breaks down common barriers associated with access, including wait times for appointments and transport, to ensure students are receiving prompt support for their needs.

The hub has gained momentum and recognition among services. Currently services are being delivered through the hub almost daily, with the facility being booked by external providers for most of the year.



Bounce Dentistry will be in the school Monday 8 May to Friday 19 May.

A hard copy will be going home to students this week.



“It allows students to access services that they wouldn’t normally access. There might be transport issues, or parents/carers may need assistance to organise those appointments. So, it’s really important that those students are then not missing out...”

(Head Teacher)

A designated safe and welcoming space for students and families

The hub, being aligned with trauma-informed strategies for engagement, serves as a safe space for students with diverse wellbeing needs. In the hub, instead of immediate discipline for escalated behaviours, students can take time out, receive extra study time and access support when needed.

School staff have commented that this helps students to calm down and communicate more effectively.

Providing meals, including a breakfast club, and laundry facilities addresses wellbeing, especially for those in transient housing.

The hub is not only designed for students but also welcomes their families in an open and relaxed environment, fostering better communication with school staff.

Its accessible side entrance aids community members, particularly those with trauma-related school experiences, to feel comfortable in the space. Staff report that this has improved school–community connections, especially for those facing hardships, such as insecure housing.

“This then evolved into meetings and spaces for clinicians to work from as well as generating an environment that families feel comfortable in accessing to support the educational needs of their children.”

(Executive Principal)

Facilitates improvements in student attendance and engagement

The hub’s implementation and activity has coincided with improved student engagement and overall attendance since Term 2 2022.

Notably, there are more students attending school 90% of the time or more in the term, especially those attending a support class.

According to staff, students who have repeatedly accessed the hub have demonstrated increased engagement at school, but more importantly, increased use of regulation strategies to engage in their daily education.

Having a safe space to regulate behaviours in a supporting environment has helped students with challenging behaviours increase their attendance and engage in supports within the school.

Students also engage with breakfast club each Tuesday and Thursday which provides a healthy and positive start to the day. In addition to food, the hub also offers other resources that support students’ wellbeing and educational needs, such as personal hygiene products, school stationery and clothing.

Additionally, the hub also decreases the amount of time students spend leaving school to attend external appointments, ensuring that students have minimal disruption within regular school hours. In this way, the hub is also supporting their learning needs.

“It actually reduces their time lost here at school... So, if it’s a half hour appointment, we get them from class, they have their half hour and they go straight back to class. So that’s been really, really beneficial.”

(Head Teacher)



Next steps

The hub will continue to offer more services supporting students’ educational needs and fostering positive community relationships.

Recently, the hub coordinated The Smith Family scholarships whereby parents/carers and student recipients met with representatives from The Smith Family to sign up for a scholarship that will support them financially through their schooling as long as their attendance remains above 85%.

Shoalhaven High School plans to continually strive for improved student attendance by looking after the wellbeing of the students as well as the needs of families and the community.

Reference

Shoalhaven High School. (2022). 2022 Annual Report. NSW Department of Education.



Acknowledgement of Country and contributing people

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands of which Taree High School sits and surrounding regions. We acknowledge the contributions by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to education and the local community more broadly.

Introduction

Taree High School (THS) prioritises genuine relationships and positive partnerships across the school and community. These relationships are a continual focus in the daily operational interactions between colleagues, students and families. The relationships between Aboriginal people and the broader school staff break down barriers in accessing education.

These relationships also support Aboriginal students and families to feel safe in the school context. The Executive Principal models what positive relationships look like in practice. She has demonstrated a set of leadership qualities over an extended period of time that has built relationships based on trust and respect.

According to staff, the executive principal understands the importance of being visible and approachable to the local community and personnel beyond the school. This leadership style has ensured Aboriginal leaders within the school and the community feel empowered to contribute to ongoing school improvement.

The senior leader community engagement, Elders in residence, Aboriginal education officers and other local Aboriginal community members collectively create a sense of cultural empowerment.

The Biripi people, the Traditional Custodians of the land, are actively involved in the teaching and learning of their knowledge, stories, language and histories. According to staff, the cultural leadership that exists in the school community and among the local Aboriginal people has a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and personal growth, and their engagement in school and the broader community.

School context

Taree High School, situated in the Manning Valley, stands as a beacon of comprehensive and inclusive education, serving a diverse cohort of 680 students from Years 7 to 12, including a proud 22% representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (Taree High School, 2023).

The commitment to excellence is reflected in the school's dedication to fostering an environment where every student can thrive. Grounded in respect for the Biripi people, the school celebrates a vibrant blend of culture, language and history.

Leadership that supports student and community engagement

Taree High School

The people of Taree have a deep connection to the land and waters. The rich tapestry of Gathang language and culture is not merely acknowledged, but intricately woven into the school's educational ethos, demonstrating a strong commitment to community and heritage.

As a champion of the Connected Communities Strategy, Taree High School leads the way in implementing innovative programs aimed at improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and their families. This commitment extends beyond academic achievement to embrace and honour the diverse cultural heritage that defines the THS community.

What's working

Component	Benefit
Leadership team highly values culture and relationships	The leadership team has a strong relationship with the Aboriginal education team and the local Aboriginal community. These relationships have been built over a long period of time and now result in a shared sense of accountability and trust. This partnership is ongoing and a continuous priority.
Cultural leadership	The local Aboriginal community are actively engaged in the cultural exchange and sharing of story. The school provides time and space through a variety of school and community initiatives, so that students and staff can engage with Aboriginal staff as well as leaders and Elders from the community.
Ngarralbaa room – to listen, learn and know	Gathang language on Biripi Country is the foundation for all cultural learning. Ngarralbaa is the place name of the room that is the community hub room. This room provides a space for connection, collaboration and yarning. This room provides a space for students and community to connect and share.
Relationships	Strong relationships between the school and the Aboriginal community have been formed over a long period of time. The right people in the right jobs have empowered and amplified local voices to be heard.

Table 7. Strategies that strengthen cultural leadership and facilitate positive interactions

Leadership team highly values culture and relationships

Aboriginal students and staff all speak extremely positively about the leadership of the school. They feel as though their cultural knowledge and cultural networks are valued within the school. There is strong Aboriginal representation on the leadership team and their expertise is called on to add value to all school-based decisions.

The leaders of the school are visible in the community and are proactive in building positive relationships with all stakeholders. This forms a strong foundation for all engagement and school improvement initiatives.

Cultural leadership

The role of leadership in enabling the full potential of local Aboriginal community members to foster trust and respect and steer program development is an important element in sustaining safe environments. Taree High School prioritises building relationships with local Aboriginal community members, including families and Elders, AECG members and other local Aboriginal organisations.

The staff recognise time and space is required to develop trusting and reciprocal relationships, to co-develop and co-deliver programs that address the needs that are set locally. The school leaders allow time and space to engage with and receive input from the local Aboriginal community to develop programs that address local needs.

Aboriginal employees at THS are connected and grounded in their cultural identity and have a broad network and close relationships with local Aboriginal people.

This in turn has an impact on Aboriginal students and the positive relationships being forged to strengthen cultural knowledges and ways of interacting and connecting.

The cultural nuances and cultural stories related to people and place – combined with consistent positive relationships with Elders, Aboriginal staff and peers – creates an environment where students feel known, valued and cared for.

This contributes to the way in which students see themselves in the world and are connected to their community, and their ability to take risks associated with their learning.

The THS leadership team, the Aboriginal education team and the senior leader community engagement have a coordinated approach to strengthen the personalised learning plans (PLPs) of Aboriginal students. The cultural leadership that exists in the THS community has a positive impact on student outcomes. This approach complements the PLP and academic learning goals co-created between students, families and staff.

“If it wasn't for the team here, I wouldn't be where I am, it's just as simple as that. This is my culture and this is a part of me, I got emotional... If we don't have our language we've lost a part of ourselves forever, and if we don't learn and cherish that and pass it on...”

(High school graduate and community member)

Ngarralbaa room – to listen, learn and know

The Ngarralbaa room acts as a hub in the school and provides a dedicated space for Aboriginal people. A variety of program delivery is facilitated from Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal community members in the space and these are inclusive of all students.

It is common to have large groups of students in this room, yarning, laughing and connecting in a culturally reaffirming way.

The Aboriginal community value the Ngarralbaa room as a space where Aboriginal students can feel a strong sense of belonging and connection. This can be demonstrated by the sewing program, where Elders sit and work with students on the design and creation of clothing and apparel.

This helps students to connect with local Elders and Aboriginal staff in a culturally safe way, yarning and connecting culturally. The students display their finished products at a large community event, with students, staff and families celebrating these achievements together.

“We started with 10 girls and now we’ve got 30 girls in the dance group... It wasn’t just dance, it was a sisterhood and it’s our culture. They go into the local schools and daycare centres and these girls are leading it now.”

(Senior Leader Community Engagement Officer)

Relationships

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the positive relationships that have been formed across the school community:

- The school leadership team is consistently visible across the school and the community, role modelling the importance of connecting with students, staff and community members informally.

The leadership team members are strategic in how they spend their time, and prioritising connections with people means students and staff feel valued.

- Having stability in the leadership team over a long period of time has meant that the Aboriginal community has developed strong relationships and a sense of trust over generations of Aboriginal families.

This stability has resulted in shared accountability and a strong sense of belonging. This also has a positive impact on how other relationships are formed across the school.

- The school’s leadership team trust the Aboriginal leaders within the school and value the contribution they make. This has resulted in relationships with open communication and collective accountability.

Next steps

Taree High School has coordinated with the local feeder primary schools, including consulting with Aboriginal education staff in the region to strategically align students to school transition support and personalised learning goals.

This coordinated approach will ensure school personnel and local Aboriginal students and families are involved and engaged in co-developing the process. Engaging with local leadership teams and Aboriginal staff across the network creates a greater sense of belonging and empowerment to plan and set up students for success.

The focal point of this initiative increases cultural leadership opportunities and strengthens cross-school partnerships, positively impacting all levels of leadership.

The next big vision for THS is to develop and deliver micro lessons catered to points of need for parents, caregivers and extended family.

The Ngarralbaa room operates similar to a community hub model, with a strong sense of cultural belonging for students and families. The Ngarralbaa space and the intended micro lessons will become another platform of community and cultural engagement.

This strategic direction as outlined in the School Improvement Plan emphasises the importance of students participating in community events that are not directly facilitated by the school.

Reference

Taree High School (2023) Strategic Improvement Plan 2024–2027, NSW Department of Education, accessed 27 March 2024.



Appendix 2: Discussion guide

Yarning interview guide

Yarns

1. What information would you like us to know as part of this evaluation?

Leadership stakeholders:

Yarns

1. What elements of the strategy work well?
2. What elements have been challenging, previously and recently?
3. How long have you been involved in this strategy? What have you been most proud of?
4. Do you believe the strategy has been effective? Why, why not?
5. What do you hope this evaluation achieves?
6. What more would you like to share with us?

Community stakeholders:

Yarns

1. What information would you like us to know as part of this evaluation?
2. What elements of the strategy work well?
3. What elements have been challenging, previously and recently?
4. Why do you think this school/ community was chosen to be part of the Connected Communities Strategy?
5. Reflecting on this school/ community, what are you most proud of?
6. Do you believe the strategy has been effective? Why? Why not?
7. If you could design the Connected Communities Strategy, what would you do differently?
8. What do you hope this evaluation achieves?
9. What more would you like to share with us?