

# A conversation guide to improve Aboriginal student retention

Developed to support conversations between Directors  
Educational Leadership, Principals and School Leaders



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# A message from the Deputy Secretaries and Executive Director, Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships

**Aboriginal students in NSW schools today are the Elders of tomorrow. However, our current statistics show that on average less than half of all Year 9 Aboriginal students in NSW will complete Year 12 or attain a Higher School Certificate. We have a long way to go before we fulfil our commitment for Aboriginal students to be equally represented in achieving their HSC.**

As educators, it is our role to ensure that every student is supported to achieve their educational and post school destination pathway aspirations. We know that higher levels of educational attainment for Aboriginal students' leads to improved employment and health outcomes as well as contributing to higher economic life earning capacity.

This Conversation Guide is one part of a package of tools to support school leaders in their task of ensuring Aboriginal students attain their HSC at the same rate as non-Aboriginal students and fostering equality of opportunity for all Aboriginal people. The guide is based on evidence of what delivers results in schools, informed by what Aboriginal communities themselves tell us works. It aims to equip school leadership teams with the strategies and systems you can use to improve and support Aboriginal student retention and attendance rates.

This guide is closely informed by the AECG Partnership Agreement 2020-2030 [Walking Together, Working Together](#). In undertaking this important work and utilising this resource we encourage you to collaborate and seek the expertise and advice of your local AECG, a key partner for improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Improving HSC attainment - or any improvement in educational outcomes for Aboriginal students - will only be delivered in close partnership with Aboriginal communities. By working together, your efforts will make a difference to Aboriginal students and communities in NSW.

## **Leanne Nixon**

Deputy Secretary  
School Performance North

## **Murat Dizdar**

Deputy Secretary  
School Performance South

## **Karen Jones**

Executive Director  
Aboriginal Outcomes and  
Partnerships Directorate



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## Purpose of this resource

**As school leaders we have a responsibility to work innovatively with one another to challenge our thinking and hold each other to account. Meaningful, collaborative conversations are a critical way of achieving that end.**

This Conversation Guide (the 'guide') supports school leaders (Principals, DELs, PSLs, PCMs, leaders, and executives) to develop these conversations with teachers, Aboriginal students, parents, carers, and their communities as a critical way of achieving improvement in Aboriginal student retention and attendance rates.

The guide focuses on years 10-12 but outlines information of relevance across all secondary school settings. It is designed to support Aboriginal students regardless of the size of the school, the socio-economic status, or the metropolitan, rural or remote setting.

It provides

- a range of strategies for school leaders to consider trialling in their school to provide support to Aboriginal students
- discussion points and questions to help support dialogue between school leaders and other key players
- key tools and resources to support school leaders to plan and assess specific challenges and opportunities, ensure policy is followed and reporting is undertaken.

### Strategies

This document outlines key strategies, across seven areas, for schools to use in leading improvement in retention and attendance for Aboriginal students.

**1. Create a culturally inclusive environment**

**2. Strive for excellence**

**3. Establish a baseline**

**4. Plan and act early**

**5. Take action to address challenges**

**6. Utilise systemic support**

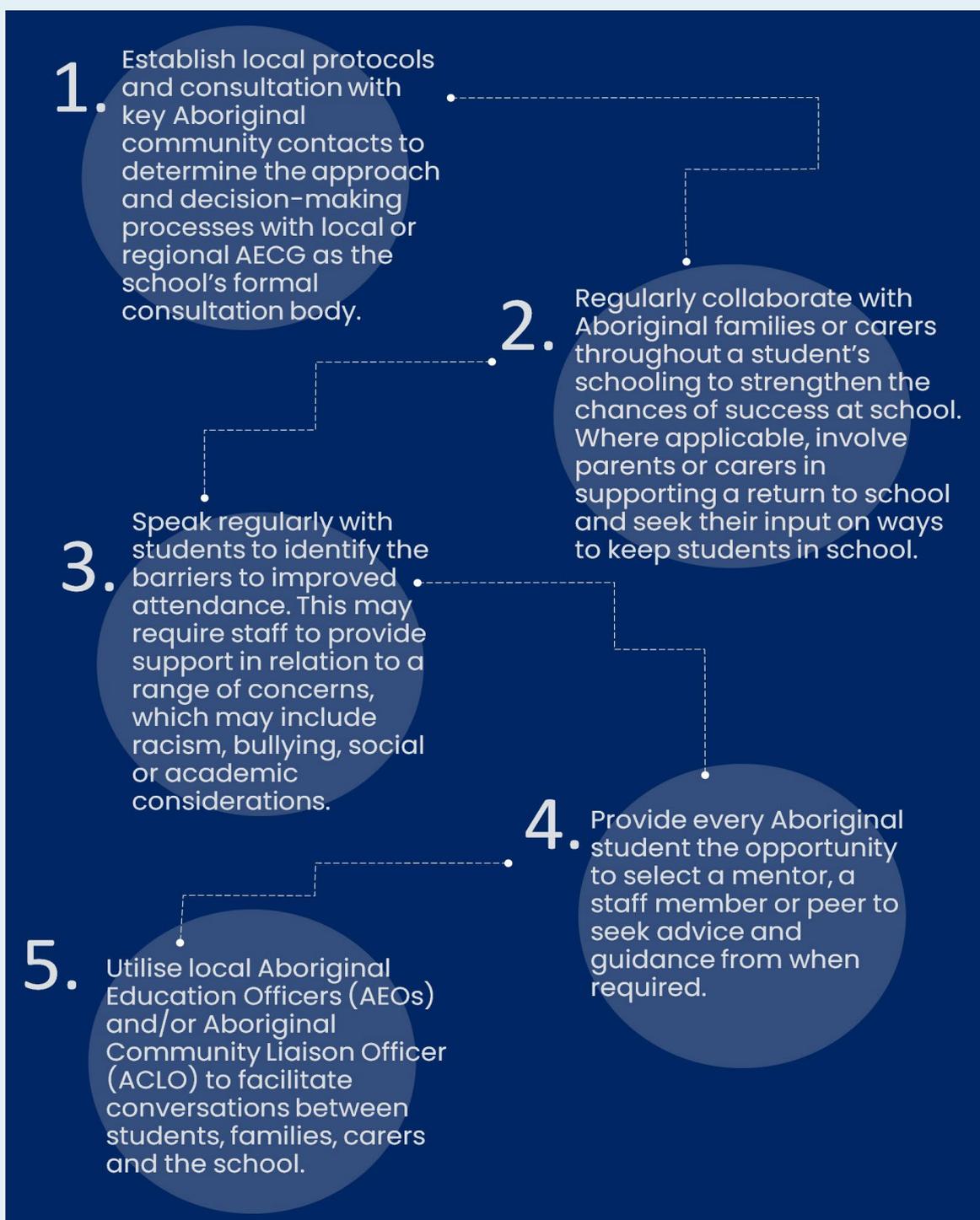
**7. Partner with agencies and NGOs**



# 1. Create a culturally inclusive environment

To support and encourage Aboriginal students to attend school, leaders should ensure they foster a culturally inclusive school environment while working in partnership with Aboriginal parents, carers, and communities. Parents and carers of Aboriginal students need to find schools culturally sensitive, welcoming, and respectful. It is essential that Aboriginal students find schools engaging and culturally safe places in which to learn. (Walking Together, Working Together)

The following is a guide to creating a culturally safe and inclusive school



School leaders are encouraged **to consider the following prompts to stimulate their conversation to bring about improvements to cultural inclusivity into the future.**

<i>Conversation aims</i>	<i>Conversation questions</i>
<p>Facilitate opportunities for Aboriginal parents, carers and community to be actively involved in the school setting and contributing towards decision making processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we continue to enhance the voice and leadership of Aboriginal students, parents, carers and AECG representatives in our school?</li> <li>• What processes are in place to regularly update the local AECG regarding Aboriginal student retention and attendance rates?</li> <li>• To what extent are we utilising advice, input, and support of the local AECG to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students?</li> <li>• What is the local Aboriginal language(s)? How successful are we in working with our community of schools and the local AECG to incorporate Aboriginal languages across K-12?</li> <li>• If we have been unable to work with a local AECG, what steps are we taking to regularly identify and discuss attendance patterns at the school with the Aboriginal community?</li> </ul>
<p>Provide a culturally sensitive and welcoming environment that supports student cultural identity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effectively are we working side by side with our local AECG to make the school a welcoming place for Aboriginal students, parents/carers, partners, and communities to facilitate life-long learning?</li> <li>• How can we continue to develop and differentiate Aboriginal cultural awareness training for all staff?</li> <li>• For Aboriginal students who are at risk academically and/or with attendance, what additional initiatives, e.g., mentoring, could be implemented that would lead to improved outcomes?</li> </ul>
<p>Provide a supportive and culturally inclusive learning environment that provides opportunities to connect with their culture in a range of school settings</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent and through what processes do we capture the positive cultural aspects and experiences of Aboriginal students enrolling from other schools?</li> <li>• How are we ensuring that future opportunities for newly enrolled Aboriginal students are effectively connecting to their cultural heritage?</li> <li>• To what extent and through what processes are we collaborating and setting Aboriginal students up for success in other culturally inclusive environments?</li> </ul>



## 2. Strive for excellence

School leaders are expected to **know, value and care for each student** and should use this guide to address the individual needs and contexts of their Aboriginal students.

The [School Excellence Framework](#) domain of learning outlines a pathway for schools to address Aboriginal retention and attendance. School leaders are encouraged to consider these elements in striving for excellence and refer to these prompts to stimulate conversation to ensure Aboriginal students are known, valued, and cared for at school.

Excerpt from [School Excellence Framework](#)

<i>Element s</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Excellence</i>	<i>Conversation questions</i>
<b>Learning Culture</b>	High expectations	The whole school community demonstrates aspirational expectations of learning progress and achievement for all students and is committed to the pursuit of excellence. Effective partnerships in learning with parents and students mean students are motivated to deliver their best and continually improve	How effective are we in partnering with Aboriginal students and their parents/carers to build commitment to the pursuit of excellence?
<b>Wellbeing</b>	Attendance	Teachers, parents and the community work together to support consistent and systematic processes that ensure student absences do not impact on learning outcomes.	Where Aboriginal student absences are impacting on learning outcomes, how are we personalising approaches to build student engagement and motivation levels?
	Transition and Continuity of Learning	The school engages in strong collaborations between parents, students and the community that inform and support continuity of learning for all students at transition points, including highly mobile students and students with atypical enrolment.	How are we continuing to foster and build collaborative support for each Aboriginal student?  How effective are we in providing ongoing guidance and advice to help Aboriginal students explore education and career options?



	Caring for Students	The school is organised so that all students have regular opportunities to meet with an identified staff member who can provide advice, support, and assistance to help students fulfil their potential.	Have we effectively analysed 'Tell Them from Me' data for Aboriginal students regarding how they feel about their culture whilst at school and how well their teachers understand their culture?  To what extent are we using this data analysis to improve the engagement levels of Aboriginal students and inform our practice?
<b>Reporting</b>	Student Reports	Student reports are personalised and comprehensive, providing detailed, clear and specific information about student learning, growth, next steps and improvement measures, as well as relevant contextual and/or comparative data	How can we improve processes to ensure Aboriginal student reports incorporate PLP information?  When developing PLPs to what extent are we working with parents/carers to gather relevant information and identify ways of improving Aboriginal student outcomes?
	Parent Engagement	Teachers directly and regularly engage with parents to improve understanding of student learning and strengthen student outcomes. Reporting to parents has been enhanced in response to feedback received.	



### 3. Establish a baseline

Research highlights a clear correlation between student attendance and the achievement of quality academic, socio-economic and health outcomes. Students with attendance rates below 90% may be educationally at risk and we must put in place plans that make it possible for students to achieve the 95% attendance target. Doing so is critical to students achieving all other types of educational targets.

#### **School leaders should:**

1. Know your school's trajectory for reaching the Premier's Priority (PP) and the NAPLAN state-based targets for Aboriginal education.
2. Know your school's rates of retention and attendance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students across school years, paying particular attention on attendance rates in years 10-12.
3. Monitor your school statistics for Aboriginal students continuing onto further education.
4. Pay close attention to the student exit survey process and associated data.

Scout is a key resource for school leaders to use to establish a baseline and monitor retention and attendance rates at their school.

The dashboard shows on one page:

- a) the number of students who have left school since the commencement of the school year
- b) those who for the past five weeks have recorded a zero percent attendance rate
- c) five weekly snapshots of individual attendance history.

Scout enables school leaders to have data-informed discussions about the Aboriginal senior students in their school. Scout data can inform conversations between the Principal and the DEL highlighting successes as well as future areas for focus. The real-time dashboard also allows school leaders to identify Aboriginal students who have recently unenrolled or who are still enrolled but have not attended school over the last 5 weeks.



School leaders are encouraged to also consider these prompts to stimulate their conversation on establishing baselines to inform future planning.

<i>Considerations</i>	<i>Conversation questions</i>
Understand the data on Aboriginal student attendance and retention at our school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are we recording, monitoring and analysing Aboriginal student attendance and retention data so that we have a baseline and measure for improvement?</li> <li>• What are the similarities and differences when comparing attendance rates for Aboriginal students to non-Aboriginal students?</li> </ul>
Collect evidence on Aboriginal students continuing education and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are our statistics for Aboriginal students continuing onto further education and employment and how does this data compare to non-Aboriginal students?</li> <li>• How effective are the Student Exit Surveys in collecting relevant data on Aboriginal students' continuing education and employment?</li> <li>• How effectively do we monitor Aboriginal students who sign out of school and list employment or an apprenticeship/traineeship as their destination?</li> <li>• For Aboriginal students who have signed out of school what would be the impact if we were in contact with them and their families or parent/carers at 5- or 10-week intervals?</li> <li>• If their post school pathway has not been successful, what can be done to encourage re-engagement?</li> </ul>
Use the Student Exit Survey effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do we use the Student Exit Survey to inform practice?</li> </ul>



## 4. Plan and act early

Once a baseline for improvement is identified, school leaders should utilise the following tools to drive continuous improvement in Aboriginal student engagement, retention, and attendance.

- Strategic Improvement Plans (SIPs)
- Implementation and Progress Monitoring (IPM)
- Personalised Learning Pathways (PLP)
- Learning Support Team (LST)

**School leaders should take the following steps as part of their planning to inform their activities and prevent Aboriginal students from leaving school.**

- Include baseline attendance rates in the SIPs in line with the PP and state targets.
- Incorporate retention and attendance as a key part of IPMs to inform the activities and interventions which will be undertaken and setting aspirational but achievable goals.
- It is best practice for school leaders to monitor the progress of their SIP by reviewing IPM activities at least twice a term. When reviewing IPM activities relating to Aboriginal student retention and attendance schools may reflect on their capacity to retain Aboriginal students through to the HSC and/or a successful post school destination pathway.
- Utilise RAM equity funding and human resources to best support approaches to improve Aboriginal engagement, retention, and attendance.
- Use PLPs as the main vehicle schools use to work with the student/family/carers on goal setting. Goal setting needs to include the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, a cultural goal and link subject selection to outline a clear map towards post-school destination pathways.

***Note: Attendance Plans should be established to improve student attendance rates as opposed to including attendance goals in PLPs.***

- Utilise the [Scout](#) dashboard as an evidence or impact point for schools in SPaRO by attaching screenshots and annotating samples and uploading onto the paperclips to support the IPMs.
- Ensure that either the LST or School Attendance Team play a key role in ensuring the emerging and specific needs of students with high potential and giftedness, disability and additional learning needs are met.



Mainstream school leaders can ask the following questions to inform their planning and effective use of tools.

- How effective are our documented thresholds in activating the Learning and Support Team or School Attendance Team to engage on systemic support for individual students? To what extent do we refer to our baseline data and revisit our IPMs to ensure an upwards trajectory?
- How effective are our processes in personally engaging with students around stage 5 and stage 6 subject choice and supporting their personal interests? What opportunities exist for stage 6 students to complete the HSC pathway and gain employment such as seasonal work or other local opportunities?
- How have we endeavoured to maintain broad curriculum offerings?
- To what extent have we engaged with supportive initiatives that have improved the attendance and engagement of Aboriginal students? To what extent have we supported stage 4 and 5 students to build independent work skills that enable them to access alternative forms of educational delivery in stage 6?
- How effective have we been in engaging with industry to secure school-based traineeships?
- How do we ensure that students are aware of all pathways available to them?
- What is the relationship between successful completion of the HSC for Aboriginal students and academic opportunities and/or employment?
- What are the most effective school engagement strategies that regularly provide incentives for Aboriginal students to remain at school?

## School calendar planning

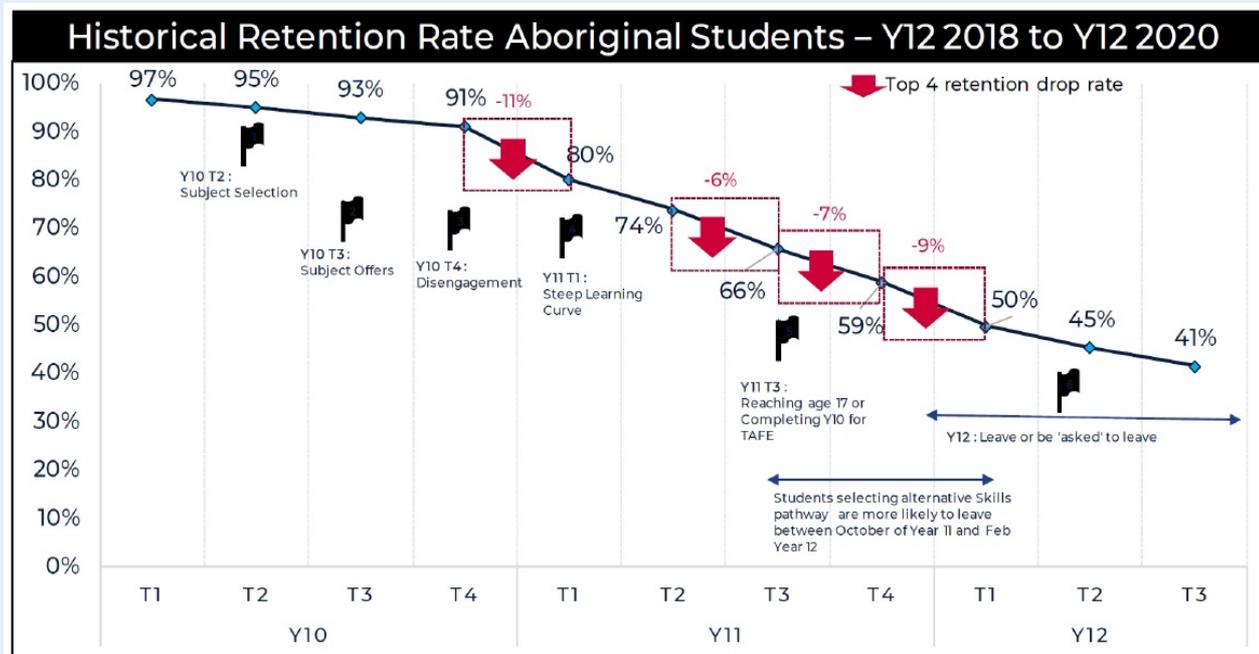
Supporting student transitions between stages of schooling is an important aspect of school retention. Systemic data indicates specific points during the annual school calendar for years 10-12 which present opportunities for school leaders to intervene and take action to support student retention. School leaders can use these points to guide the timing of conversations and planning to focus on specific intervention actions across the year.

Supporting the transition from primary to secondary and the transition from Year 9 to Year 10 are also important considerations for leaders to explore.



## Historical Retention Rate (Year 12 2018-2020) – Change Nothing Scenario

Historically ~41% of Year 9 Census cohorts have achieved their HSC with the largest drop (~11%) taking place in the transition from Year 10 to Year 11 Term 1.



### Intervention points

#### Year 10 – Term 2 – Subject selection

#### Year 10 - Term 3 - Subject offers

If subjects cannot run due to minimum class numbers not reached, this can also cause students to look for other opportunities / pathways.

#### Year 10 - Term 4 - Disengagement

Students often become disengaged at this point.

#### Year 11 - Term 1 – Steep Learning Curve

There is a steep learning curve in the way senior subjects are taught, assessed and the expectations compared to junior school.

#### Year 11 – Term 3 (or when they turn 17)

Students can leave school without a pathway

#### Year 12

\* Retention Rate is calculated based on Census at Year 9 and tracking the students through to Year 12.

The following are offered as prompts in conversations which could be aligned to ensure these intervention points are considered in your planning.

<i><b>Intervention point</b></i>	<i><b>Conversation questions</b></i>
In Term 2 of year 10 students are less likely to drop out if they are provided with their preferred subject selection options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How are we tailoring subject selection options to address the interests of our Aboriginal students?</li> </ul>
In Term 3 of year 10 if subjects cannot run due to minimum class numbers not reached it can cause students to look for other opportunities / pathways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What alternative options are available to support students if courses cannot run?</li> </ul>
In Term 4 of year 10 student disengagement is known to occur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What initiatives and support structures are implemented to keep Aboriginal students motivated and engaged?</li> </ul>
In Term 1 of year 11 there is a steep learning curve in the way senior subjects are taught, assessed and the expectations of staff compared to Stages 4 and 5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent are we collaborating with our Aboriginal community to consider their perspective and determine how we can more effectively support them now?</li> </ul>
During Term 3 or year 11 (or when they turn 17) students can leave school without a pathway of their own choice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent and through what processes are we supporting Aboriginal students who are leaving school to identify a pathway of their choosing?</li> </ul>
During year 12 students can leave or be 'asked' to leave at any time as they are 17. If they are not completing course requirements, have behaviour or attendance issues this also places pressure on them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How effectively are we supporting Aboriginal students to complete course requirements?</li> <li>If behavioural and attendance issues are evident, how effective are our documented intervention points in alleviating these as reasons for leaving school?</li> </ul>



## 5. Take action to address challenges

Schools are expected to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the activities in their IPMs. School data should accurately reflect the actual school retention and attendance rates. School leaders are expected to identify the opportunities for success as well as the challenges that need to be addressed. Should there not be an upwards trajectory; school leaders are asked to work together to take action to remediate risks and provide solutions to improve retention.

<b>Considerations</b>	<b>Actions</b>
Whole school processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we improve the 5-week systematic monitoring of all Aboriginal students' attendance levels to highlight emerging issues and identify students who need specific or wrap around support?</li> <li>• In what ways can we use the enrolment process as an opportunity to gain a close understanding of each student's needs?</li> <li>• How effective and efficient are our processes for:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Identifying when a student still of compulsory schooling age is removed from the Attendance Register?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• documenting evidence that Aboriginal students are engaged in full-time study, employment, or a combination of both (full-time is defined as an average of 25 hours per week or more)?</li> <li>• comprehensively completing Student Exit Surveys with the student/parent/carer and entering ERN?</li> </ul>
Tailored support to individual students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For Aboriginal students, whose attendance pattern drops below 50-70% how are we ensuring that attendance plans are actioned immediately to include relevant attendance goals?</li> <li>• To what extent are we utilising case management-style attendance Plans for Aboriginal students where attendance pattern is between 0-49%</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we improve our 5-week review of attendance plans, with input from, agreed to and signed off by student/parents/carers (AEO present if applicable)?</li> </ul>
Engagement with parents, carers, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How regularly are we engaging with the Aboriginal student/parent/carer to determine the contributing factors to attendance decline and where required adjust support?</li> <li>• How can we improve subject selection conversations with Aboriginal students/parents/carers with the purpose to improve engagement linked to student's aspirations? What mentoring initiatives exist that support Aboriginal students on attendance plans and what would be the benefits?</li> <li>• In what ways are we capturing information on the individual student's talents as well as asking questions such as "Who is your mob?"</li> </ul>
Mandatory reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effective and efficient are our documented thresholds in submitting weekly Child Wellbeing Unit notifications for Educational Neglect once a student drops into 0-70% attendance rate and when the student averages 30/100 school days missed? (Note: the student/family/carer's individual circumstances must be considered by the school.)</li> <li>• How efficiently and effectively are we implementing School Attendance Policy, Student Destination Unknown procedures once a student has not presented at school for a period exceeding 10 consecutive days and is believed to have left the school?</li> <li>• Contact the parent/carer to seek an explanation.</li> </ul>



## 6. Utilise systemic support

Strong systemic support is available to assist schools, students, and families.

Aboriginal Education and Engagement Teams provide **high level support and advice** to a network of schools and key stakeholders in the implementation of strategies relating to Aboriginal education and engagement. Your local team can be found via the [School Support Contacts](#) tile.

The team includes staff in these roles:

- Aboriginal Learning and Wellbeing Advisor who provides strategic support to a network of schools, communities, and key stakeholders on all aspects of Aboriginal education and engagement.
- Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer (ASLO) who works with the community and schools to support the regular attendance of students, with a particular focus on Aboriginal students.
- Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO) who works as part of a team to develop partnerships and understanding between the Aboriginal community and the Department of Education at all levels, thereby helping to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal school students.
- Learning and Wellbeing Officer (LWO)/ Assistant Principal Learning and Support (APLAS) and Home School Liaison Officer (HSLO) who are involved in referrals and intervention for students with 50-70% attendance.

The Aboriginal Education and Wellbeing Officer (E&WO) is your point of contact to provide advice and support to schools and educational services teams to **improve the learning outcomes** of Aboriginal students with a particular focus on literacy, numeracy, attendance, retention, and transitions. They support the development of culturally responsive teaching and learning practices and methodologies.

*(Please note, this section of the text is to be checked with relevant teams in the department for accuracy)*

<b>Considerations</b>	<b>Conversation questions</b>
Whole school processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How has the E&amp;WO been engaged to assist us in providing input that best caters for students' literacy and numeracy needs?</li><li>• How has the E&amp;WO been engaged to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into classroom teaching methods?</li><li>• How has the E&amp;WO been utilised to facilitate cultural training and development for all staff periodically?</li></ul>



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Tailored support to individual students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To what extent have we engaged the E&amp;WO in the PLP process around aspirational goal setting for Aboriginal students?</li></ul>
Engagement with parents, carers, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>How effectively have we involved the ASLO, ACLO and HSLO in supporting parents and carers in reconnecting their children to education?</li><li>How can we enhance promotion and communication to parents and carers around how to access ACLOs to proactively address concerns with their child's learning?</li></ul>



## 7. Partner with agencies and NGOs

Working side-by-side with other government agencies and Non-Government Organisations can provide valuable information for schools that can further strengthen planned support for Aboriginal students and families. Ideally interaction between these agencies is an integral part of the school facilitating holistic support to Aboriginal students and their families or carers.

To help achieve this goal the following tools are available to school leaders:

- Network Specialist Facilitator (NSF) to annually update you with the current NGOs in your area.
- Regular meetings with local or state-based services or agencies to assist in planning support for an Aboriginal student's return to school in collaboration with the parents or carers.
- Engaging with agencies or NGOs to better inform and support Aboriginal students with low levels of engagement or attendance.
- Building parent, carer and/or family awareness of the types of support that partner agencies and NGOs can offer their child and their support network.
- Facilitating parents and carers with access to partner agencies and NGOs to build positive relationships and explore avenues for support.
- With the support of the parents or carers permission, inviting agencies and NGOs to regular planning meetings in support of the Aboriginal student to ensure their needs are paramount.

<i>Considerations</i>	<i>Conversation questions</i>
Whole school processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How effective are our systems and processes for capturing the involvement of agencies and NGOs in individual Aboriginal student's lives and evidence of their involvement in future planning?</li> <li>• Who are our NGOs and what is their level of engagement and nature of their relationship with our school community?</li> </ul>
Tailored support to individual students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent are we creating an environment for the agencies and NGOs to promote their support services to individual Aboriginal students, their families, and carers?</li> <li>• How confident are our Aboriginal students to voice their concerns so we can provide appropriate support and follow departmental policy in relation to addressing concerns?</li> </ul>
Engagement with parents, carers, and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What evidence do we have that regular agency and NGO involvement is supporting Aboriginal students and families towards greater success?</li> <li>• Are we effectively gathering and responding to feedback from parents on how comfortable they feel about coming to school as an alternative pathway for seeking guidance, support, and assistance?</li> </ul>

**Note:** If there is no local AECG, refer to the regional or state AECG. If still unsure who to contact AOPD (Aboriginal Outcomes and Partnerships Directorate) can assist.



## Glossary

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AECG	NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (Inc.)
AEOs	Aboriginal Education Officers
ACLO	Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer
APLAS	Assistant Principal Learning and Support
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
CWU	Child Wellbeing Unit
DELs	Director, Educational Leadership
DSC	Delivery Support Coordination
ERN	Enrolment Registration Number
HSLO	Home School Liaison Officer
IPMs	Implementation and Progress Monitoring
LST	Learning and Support Team
LWO	Learning and Wellbeing Officer
NSF	Network Specialist Facilitator
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PSLs	Principal, School Leadership
PLP	Personalised Learning Pathways
PP	Premier's Priority
SKT	Safeguarding Kids Together
School Leaders	DELs, PSLs, Principals, leaders and executives
Scout	CESE dashboard
SDR	School Development Review
SEF	School Excellence Framework
SIM	Strategic Improvement Plan
SSP	Schools for specific purposes
SPaRO	School Planning and Reporting Online
TTFM	Tell Them from Me

