The New South Wales Government is determined to break the unacceptable cycle of poor achievement, wellbeing and social outcomes in our most disadvantaged and isolated Aboriginal communities.

We know there is a significant gap between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy performance, school retention rates, school attendance, disciplinary action, and enrolment in tertiary and higher education.

Considerable resources have been allocated over the years to programs to address these issues, but the gaps still remain unacceptably large.

We cannot continue to operate schools in these communities in the same way we have in the past. It is time for a rethink; it is time for bold action.

The Department of Education and Communities has developed this strategy, Connected Communities, in consultation with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), principals’ groups and the NSW Teachers Federation.

Connected Communities is a new approach to how we deliver education and training in our most vulnerable communities – and to how we link this learning to other related services, such as health, welfare, early childhood education and care, and vocational education and training.

We want our schools to be the centre of these communities by delivering services that respond to local needs – in order to improve student learning, community wellbeing and social outcomes through effective leadership, good governance and genuine community partnerships.

The Connected Communities strategy will start in 2013 in up to fifteen geographically isolated schools and communities.

This discussion paper is a starting point for a conversation about how we can better serve these students and their communities.

We are seeking further input into the strategy by Friday 9 March 2012. We welcome your comments and suggestions by email to: connected.communities@det.nsw.edu.au.
Guiding principles

1. Early positive intervention with children and families.
2. Explicit teaching and relevant, engaging, intellectually stimulating and culturally inclusive curriculum.
3. Good governance and effective leadership.
4. Flexible staffing arrangements and school organisational structures.
5. Engagement and connection with parents/carers and the local community.
6. Work that is in partnership with the community, and which includes joint responsibilities, accountabilities and decision-making.
7. A place-based integrated service delivery model, which includes government and non-government agencies and community leaders in the design and delivery of the strategy.
8. Extended learning opportunities and real job pathways.

Leadership – the key to success

A bank of Australian and international research demonstrates that the right leaders who are given the appropriate authority and who work effectively with communities can make a significant difference to the education and wellbeing of young people in disadvantaged communities.

It is vital to the success of the Connected Communities strategy, therefore, that the right people are selected for leadership positions and have the authority to make decisions and act in the best interests of their students.

The strategy will be led by an Executive Director with responsibility for the recruitment, appointment and leadership of the Directors of the schools in the initial group of targeted schools. The position of Executive Director will be established at an equivalent level to Regional Director and will report directly to the Director-General of Education and Communities.

The Executive Director will seek out exceptional educational leaders from the Government, Catholic and Independent sectors who are committed to changing the academic and social outcomes of the most disadvantaged students in New South Wales. There will be a nationwide search for these leaders, who may in fact be already working in these communities. The Executive Director will have the authority to appoint Directors under flexible human resources arrangements.

Key features for each community

- Each Director, Connected Communities will hold the key leadership position in the school community. The Director will lead the implementation of the Connected Communities strategy supported by an executive team and a local advisory council. Decision-making responsibility and authority will be vested in the Director, who will be accountable to the Executive Director.
- Strong educational leadership focusing on the community from pre-birth right through to employment (encompassing the Stronger Start birth to Year 3 initiative through to Year 12 or equivalent training and/or employment).
- Flexible school organisation, including staffing arrangements. This may include creative incentive programs, more comprehensive staff housing solutions, and career development opportunities.
- Provision of early childhood education and care, including transport will be considered, where these are not already in place.
- An integrated services hub to provide support and assistance to students and their families. This could include provision of health services at the school or meals for students to counter poor health.
Use of school facilities for before and after school, evening, weekend and holiday programs to make the school a central focus for the community.

An improved business management model to more effectively use the considerable resources already dedicated to these schools.

Provision of relevant curriculum and programs tailored to the needs and interests of students and developed through community consultation.

Evidence-based learning structures designed to more effectively meet the needs of students in these communities. This could include a stronger focus on the Middle Years of schooling.

Use of technology to provide solutions to specific issues – for example, amplification to overcome hearing deficits (such as those caused by otitis media) in young Aboriginal children.

Clear implementation of personalised learning programs to support and extend each student. Technology platforms will be used to connect students with the best resources possible.

Arts and sport programs, including coaching and mentoring from experts, which are also designed to reduce absenteeism and disciplinary issues and improve retention and participation in education pathways.

A strong focus on vocational education and training.

Strong links with the TAFE and university sectors.

A literacy and numeracy program that acknowledges that English is the second language for some Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal languages and cultural studies programs.

Participation in Connecting to Country cultural immersion professional learning for all staff.

Customised capital works to improve the outcomes for students in that particular community.

Key goals

1. Aboriginal children under 5 years benefit from interagency actions to improve their social, physical and cognitive development

2. Aboriginal students are developmentally ready to benefit from schooling (e.g. in their physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication)

3. Aboriginal students are engaged in and benefit from schooling.

4. School-aged Aboriginal children and young people are enrolled in school. Attendance rates are equal to the state average.

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

6. Aboriginal students are staying at school until Year 12, or are in equivalent training or employment.

7. Aboriginal students make a successful transition from school to work or further training /study.

8. Aboriginal students and communities are empowered through the promotion of their identity, culture and leadership in community partnerships with government and non-government agencies.

9. Service delivery is comprehensive, integrated and responsive.

10. Service delivery builds the community’s capacity to collaborate with government, resolve priorities, set achievable goals and contribute to a self-reliant and empowered community.

Establishment process

1. Planning and development

   - Establishment of an Expert Advisory Group
   - Appointment of an Executive Director to manage the change process
   - Selection of sites
   - Development of model
   - Negotiation of integrated service delivery model (with government and non-government agencies)

2. Community ownership

   Early and extensive community consultation and information to influence the design of the strategy and to build community ownership and support.
3. Recruitment

The following executive staff will be recruited through merit selection processes for each of the identified Connected Communities sites:

- A Director for each site
- An executive leadership team for each site

All new staff will be selected on merit.

Current staff will have the option of committing to the new structure and reform agenda or relocating to a new school as a priority transfer.

Staff employment and incentive packages will be individually negotiated with the Director, Connected Communities.

The positions of Director, Connected Communities will be advertised nationwide, and the “best fit” candidate for each site will be chosen on merit. An initial tenure of five years will be offered and a salary package will be individually negotiated and directly linked to the agreed reform agenda.

Early appointment of Directors

A Director, Connected Communities will lead each of the identified Connected Communities sites. The Directors will be employed for three months before officially taking up their new position.

During this time they will:

- contribute to customising the overall design and development of the strategy to the local context (in consultation with the Expert Advisory Group)
- work in conjunction with the Executive Director, Connected Communities and their Regional Director to articulate the vision, establish the core goals and determine the immediate tasks to be actioned, including the process for establishing a local Connected Communities plan
- work collaboratively with the AECG to link with parents/carers, community members, government agencies and non-government organisations to forge productive relationships and gain a deeper understanding of their school and community context
- select their leadership team and staff for the start of the 2013 school year
- engage in professional learning opportunities such as the Connecting to Country initiative (mandatory) and visit successful schools serving remote Aboriginal communities locally and nationally (as part of the National Alliance Remote Indigenous Service – NARIS initiative).

The next steps

The development of this strategy has involved consultation with a number of stakeholders, including Aboriginal education and community representatives.

Based on current school data, analysis and relevant research, it is expected that fifteen schools will be initially selected for the Connected Communities strategy.

The strategy will be independently evaluated and reviewed after three years. Results of the review could result in the expansion of the strategy or its redevelopment based on lessons learned from the schools and their communities.

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