



# What Works. The Work Program: CORE ISSUES 1

*What Works. The Work Program* is a set of resources designed to help schools and those who work in them improve outcomes for Indigenous students. The 'Core issues' series is an attempt to distil some topic-based key directions for practical action.

## Setting up for success

*Setting up for success*, the first in this series, is about shaping school structures to make sure what needs to be done gets done.

This is especially important for Indigenous students. Enrolment data indicate that there are few schools in Australia (about 4 percent of the total) where Indigenous students are in the majority and where their particular needs are being attended to as a matter of course. On the other hand just on 70 percent of Indigenous young people are attending schools where they represent five percent or very often less of their school's population. That means, to make a difference, a special effort is required by the 4,600 Australian schools they attend.

If your school has joined the *Dare to Lead* coalition it is committed to making these important differences:

- in the primary years, a 10 or more percent improvement in literacy performance levels at Year 5 over a period of three years, and
- in the secondary years, a 10 or more percent improvement in completion rates of recognised Year 12 courses (including embedded VET modules and courses) over the same period.

The achievement of these improvements requires focused attention.

While it may be useful for other schools as well, the content of this guide is targeted particularly at schools of the second type, that is where Indigenous students are in small minorities.

Schools organise themselves in different ways, and you might have better ideas about how to achieve the central ideas contained in the headings. But those ideas themselves are crucial if success is to be achieved.

## Supportive leadership

**INDICATOR: Your school's leadership provides positive, public and consistent support.**

The power of leadership is well established in school effectiveness research.

We are aware of the enormous number and range of demands on school leaders' attention and time. However we also know that where school leaders display a consistent public interest in an issue, encourage attention to it and acceptance of responsibility for the outcomes, the achievement of success is considerably more likely than where these factors are not present.

The success of your school's Indigenous students (even, and perhaps especially, where they are present in small numbers) is precisely one of these issues, one of the most urgent in Australian education.

The *What Works Workbook* contains a checklist of questions for school leaders which we have found no reason to revise.

- Are you as a leader actively involved in supporting and promoting the effort of improving outcomes for Indigenous students?
- Have the nature and purposes of the intended actions been made well known and efforts been made to establish joint ownership across the whole staff?
- Have clear, realistic but challenging targets for improvement been developed?
- Have action plans been developed which define tasks, assign responsibilities and establish timelines?
- Have the resources necessary to support the change process been provided?
- Has assistance, where required, from sources beyond the school been sought and provided?
- Is data about what is *really* happening within the school being collected and used as a basis for monitoring progress?
- Are successes, on any scale, noted and celebrated?

## A senior person responsible

**INDICATOR: A member of staff, preferably a senior one, has specific responsibility for the learning and progress of your school's Indigenous students.**

A common strategy to provide for the education of Indigenous students is to assign responsibility to an Indigenous teacher, education worker or aide, either formally or by default. If that person is party to the school executive's planning, monitoring and organisation processes with appropriate power to effect the course of events, that may be an excellent arrangement. Experience suggests, however, that circumstances like these are rare.

To maintain the focus on this issue as a mainstream concern, a good arrangement is to have this role as one of the school's defined positions of responsibility (with appropriate benefits/allowances) with a reference group or committee made up of at least one member of the school's executive, classroom teachers who have the most contact with the school's Indigenous students, Indigenous staff and community representatives where appropriate (remembering that this is a professional task and responsibility, and that the task of developing and maintaining community relationships is another major task. See below.).

This group should concern itself with at least the following issues:

- the effective induction of new students, and transition arrangements to other locations as they are required
- planning for the progress of the student group (*What Works* materials will help directly with this process.)
- monitoring of both individual progress and the progress of the group as a whole
- ensuring the existence of appropriate forms of cultural support and acknowledgment
- attendance and welfare issues
- processes of parent/caregiver contact, and
- providing information, leadership and professional learning to other school teams.

In some schools, such groups also audit and monitor the content of the curriculum and school practices and events for their reflection of the significance of contemporary and past Indigenous cultures and issues.

## A working partnership

**INDICATOR: Ways of effective two-way communication between school personnel and students' parents/care givers are operating.**

Relationships between people working in schools and Indigenous communities is a crucial issue and too complex to treat in a sentence or two here. A further publication which goes into more detail on this topic will be produced and circulated.

However, the bare minimum as the basis for a partnership is effective two-way communication about the primary function of the school, the education of individual students. It is no news to say that the support and interest of parents or care givers provides a crucial contribution to this process. The history of education in this country suggests that special efforts may need to be made to cultivate this interest and support among people who have had damaging and unsatisfactory experiences of schooling.

Communication with parents/care givers is another task often left to Indigenous teaching staff or aides/workers. If the task of improving outcomes is to be taken seriously this responsibility must be shared more widely.

## A working plan

**INDICATOR: A planned and consistent approach has been developed and is operating.**

The requirement is for a coherent, comprehensive and working plan for improvement achieving improved outcomes.

The elements of this plan that matter are:

- the active role of community partners to this process
- general goals related to the performance of Indigenous students
- clear and time-bounded targets for improvement
- strategies designed to achieve those targets
- assigned responsibilities
- data collection procedures, and
- monitoring and review procedures.

During the past few years we have noted the wide variety of ways in which the *What Works* materials are used. Given the diversity of circumstances of schools with Indigenous students in which use has occurred — big schools, small schools, metropolitan schools, schools in provincial towns and remote areas — that is entirely understandable.

However, it is worth re-iterating that one of the primary functions of the materials is to support the development of plans of this nature.

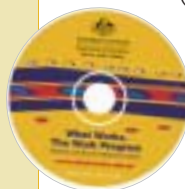
- **The Guidebook** provides some general background. The most important section for consideration when discussing the idea of improvement and the ways in which it might be achieved is 'Key Strategies for Improvement' on pages 14–20. The material in this section is a synthesis of decades of research and experience and is reflective of the policies and positions of all education agencies. It also provides the basis for practical professional action.



- **The Workbook** provides a process and tools for development of an effective working plan.



- The primary purpose of the **digital materials** on the CD-ROM and the website ([www.whatworks.edu.au](http://www.whatworks.edu.au)), some of which are now available in a publication called *Successful Practice*, is to provide practical ideas to support the development of your strategies and other elements of your plan and examples of successful practice in schools like yours.



# An effective way to use these materials

## Discuss the fundamentals of strategies for improvement

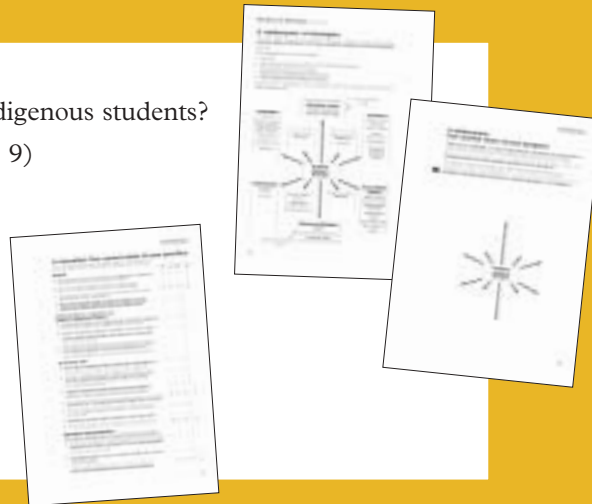
- Use the section 'Key Strategies for Improvement' (pp. 14–20) in *The Guidebook*.



## Audit your situation and performance

What are you currently doing to support your Indigenous students?

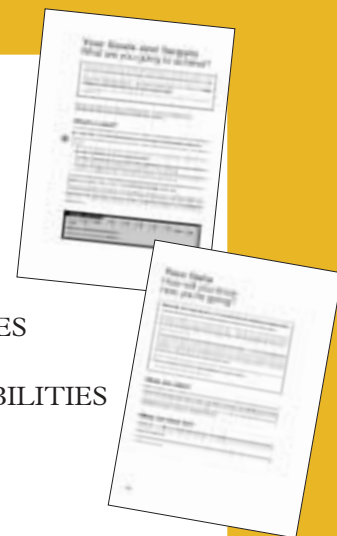
- Use the 'spidergram' in *The Workbook* (pp. 8 & 9)
  - How well are you doing?
  - What are you doing well?
  - What can you improve on?
  - What issues are of concern?
- Use your own and comparative data.
- Use the checklist in *The Workbook* (p. 7).



## Develop your plan

- Use the process contained in *The Workbook*. Have a close look at the sections on goals and targets (pp. 19–21) and data (pp. 22–29).
- Make sure your plan has:
  - Targets describing what you intend to achieve (with performance indicators, relevant baseline data and progressive results)
  - Strategies. Check these regularly for effectiveness. Check the *website* for ideas and help about the topics you are interested in.
  - Assigned responsibilities: what? by who? by when?
- Make sure you have a data collection process in place. It doesn't need to be complicated, just make sure that it tells you the sort of things you want and need to know related to what you are trying to do.

- ← TARGETS
- ← STRATEGIES
- ← RESPONSIBILITIES
- ← DATA



## Monitor and review your progress on a regular basis

- Collect and review data.  
The importance of this process can hardly be over-stated.  
Good decisions can only be made on the basis of information.
- Check your plan for continuing relevance and where necessary, revise it.

## Action informed by learning

**Indicator: There are structured professional learning opportunities for all staff which inform and support your efforts.**

It is a vote of confidence in education — the work of schools, our work — to say that one of the best and most important uses of professional learning is to help resolve issues and improve the performance of individuals, teams, faculties and other groups, and the school as a whole.

Speaking broadly, there is a great deal to be learnt about improving the educational performance of young Indigenous people — about focus, about the key issues, about inter-cultural relationships, and about the contemporary and historical issues which affect this work so powerfully.

Schools have shown time and time again that it is possible to do better by, and with, this group of young people and their communities. The foundation of this improvement has often been something as simple, and as complex, as the establishment of better personal relationships between school and community personnel. But there is frequently a good deal else to learn as well.

Time and opportunity to learn, which is structured into teachers' professional work is an important building block of improvement.

Some of the ideas which we have seen working and working well include:

- Training staff members in the use of the *What Works* package.
- Developing community feedback/evaluation processes and considering and acting on the information gained in these ways.
- Establishing contact with the schools or other learning institutions that your students come from and go on to.
- Visiting other schools to see what they are doing, and asking others to visit your school.
- Inviting visiting experts, including successful school leaders from elsewhere to speak and/or conduct workshops.
- Increasing the level of community contact with a view to learning more about local history and current community operation.
- Deliberately spending some time yarning with Elders.

- Participating in more formal cultural awareness training programs.
- Soliciting expert help/guidance on specific issues, e.g. forms of literacy or numeracy learning, or setting up enterprise activity.
- Conducting your own small scale research projects on issues that matter in your context. These might include case studies of the performance of particular individual or groups of students.
- Running, or participating in, cultural visits and tours.

Think about how you might learn your way to succeeding.

## Contacts

If you would like some help with accessing and using *What Works* materials contact:

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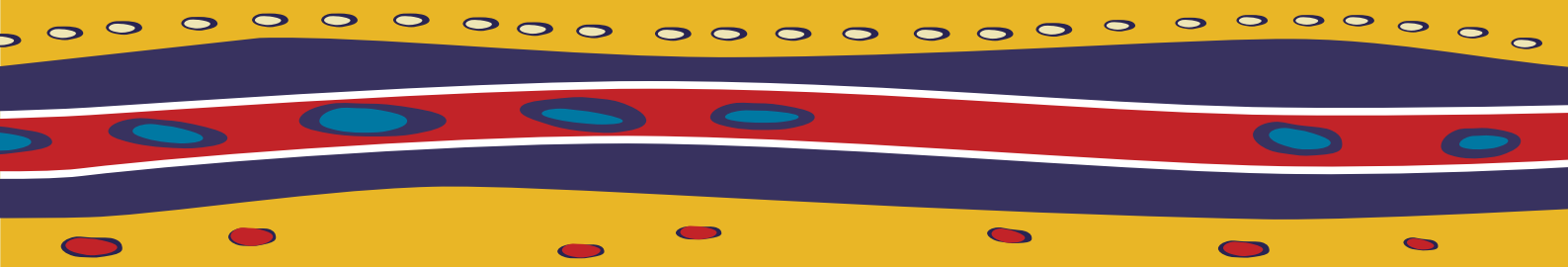
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# What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students



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[www.whatworks.edu.au](http://www.whatworks.edu.au)