



Australian Government

**Australian Institute of
Health and Welfare**

SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project

Final report



Australian Government

**Australian Institute of
Health and Welfare**

*Authoritative information and statistics
to promote better health and wellbeing*

SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project

Final report

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Canberra

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare is a major national agency which provides reliable, regular and relevant information and statistics on Australia's health and welfare. The Institute's mission is authoritative information and statistics to promote better health and wellbeing.

Copyright and Terms of Use

© Education Services Australia 2014, as the legal entity for the Education Council.

The copyright material in this document is subject to the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth), and is owned by Education Services Australia as the legal entity for the Education Council or, where indicated, by a party other than Education Services Australia.

Education Services Australia 2014 and the Education Council support and encourage use of its material for all legitimate purposes.

This document is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence unless indicated otherwise [Excluded Material].



Except in relation to any Excluded Material this licence allows you to:

- Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format
- Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material
- for any purpose, even commercially

provided you attribute Education Services Australia 2014, as the legal entity for the Education Council as the source of the copyright material. The Education Council requests attribution as: Education Services Australia 2014, as the legal entity for the Education Council.

Address inquiries regarding copyright to:

The Secretary, Education Council, PO Box 202, Carlton South, Victoria Australia 3053 or email enquiries@ec.edu.au

ISBN 978-1-74249-565-1

Suggested citation

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014. SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project: Final report. Canberra: AIHW.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Board Chair

Dr Mukesh C Haikerwal AO

Director

David Kalisch

Any enquiries about or comments on this publication should be directed to:

Media and Strategic Engagement Unit

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

GPO Box 570

Canberra ACT 2601

Tel: (02) 6244 1032

Email: info@aihw.gov.au

Contents

- Contentsiv**
- Acknowledgments..... vi**
- Abbreviations.....vii**
- Summary viii**
- 1 Introduction.....1**
 - Overview of methodology2
 - Literature review2
 - Community engagement3
 - Development of a potential online evidence base.....8
- 2 Findings9**
 - Issues affecting attendance and effective strategies for addressing them10
 - Student factors16
 - Family factors21
 - Structural/community factors26
 - School factors30
 - Variations34
 - Feedback on policies/funding.....35
 - Key lessons36
 - How schools might use these findings.....39
- 3 Case studies40**
 - School 141
 - School 243
 - School 346
 - Summary48
- 4 Sharing the evidence – a web-based strategy50**
 - Guiding principles51
 - Content.....51
 - High-level requirements for website development52
 - Purpose/potential users of the website52
 - Functionality53
 - Issues related to developing the online evidence base53
 - Moderated collaboration.....54

Communication strategy.....	55
Appendix A Information sent to state Education Department contacts for nominations of schools	56
Email sent to contacts	56
Document 1: Schools profile for school attendance project	56
Document 2: Template used to identify schools for the Project.....	58
Appendix B Matrix of schools for the consultation.....	60
Appendix C Community profiles.....	61
References.....	62
List of tables	63
List of figures	64
List of boxes.....	65
Attachment A: SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project:	
Literature review	66

Acknowledgments

The SCSEEC Successful School Attendance Strategies Evidence-based Project (the Project) was carried out by staff of the Indigenous and Children's Group at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. It was funded by National Project Funding from the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC). The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (now the Department of Education) supplied ongoing project and contract management. An external Project Team provided direction and guidance, and the Institute gratefully acknowledges its contribution to this work.

The Institute would like to thank the jurisdictional departmental contacts and the Association of Independent Schools for nominating potential schools for inclusion in the Project and for assisting with ethics approvals. Importantly, the Institute also wishes to thank the 9 schools and their staff members who participated in the consultation phase. The Project would not have been possible without their contributions.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AEW	Aboriginal education worker
AIEO	Aboriginal and Islander education officer
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AIO, ALO	Aboriginal liaison officer
ATSIEAP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
LOTE	Languages other than English
MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
NAIDOC	National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee
SCSEEC	Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood

Summary

Governments, schools and communities throughout Australia are working to improve school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students using strategies such as incentive programs, improvement to literacy and numeracy skills, school-family partnerships, transport to school, attendance monitoring, ensuring that school is a welcoming place for Indigenous students, and programs that focus on non-academic achievement as a way of engaging students in school.

Currently, however, little is known about the effectiveness of these strategies and the key factors which underpin programs and strategies which are successful. The SCSEEC Successful School Attendance Strategies Evidence-based Project (the Project) was designed to fill this gap in the evidence by bringing together published data on effectiveness with the on-the-ground experiences of schools and communities who have been successful in improving the attendance of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

This report details the Project findings, and shows that schools which improved their attendance undertook 4 key steps. They all:

- recognised the importance of attendance as an issue for the school
- identified individual students for whom non-attendance is an issue
- investigated and understood the reasons behind non-attendance
- developed and implemented effective strategies to address those issues to enhance the likelihood that children and young people attend school regularly.

Linked to these steps, this report includes information and insights about:

- the 4 key domains that can be barriers or enhancers to school attendance (school factors, family factors, student factors, community/structural factors)
- 9 strategies with demonstrated effectiveness and the various ways in which schools implemented those strategies
- lessons for developing and implementing strategies that are effective in improving the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the long-term which represent the key underpinning factors that the schools have said are essential to have in place before specific strategies can be implemented successfully
- the 6 elements that the schools reported as being critical to successfully improving and maintaining attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students because they address the factors underpinning non-attendance.

In addition, the report includes 3 case studies which highlight the experiences of schools that have either raised or maintained high levels of attendance among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Each of the case studies includes a description of the school, the community, the key issues facing the school related to attendance, the strategies used to improve attendance, key lessons/mechanisms for other schools and ongoing issues/future plans.

The report also includes information and feedback from the consultations about how this type of information could potentially be shared through the development of a dedicated school attendance 'one-stop-shop' website.

1 Introduction

Most Australian children attend school regularly. However, school attendance rates are lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than for other students; the greatest gaps are at high school level and the lowest rates of attendance occur in the more remote areas of Australia (ABS 2011; ACARA unpublished data).

Closing this gap in school attendance is critical to reducing the gaps in educational outcomes and in employment in later life. This also has an impact on closing the gap in life expectancy and child mortality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians as recognised in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap initiatives.

Governments, schools and communities throughout Australia are actively using a wide variety of strategies to improve school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Yet, there is currently scarce evidence about the effectiveness of particular strategies and the factors that underpin their success, or about their applicability to particular school or community settings (MCEECDYA 2010; Purdie & Buckley 2010).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (ATSIEAP) for 2010–14 (MCEECDYA 2010) recognised the need to enhance available evidence (National Collaborative Action 22):

MCEECDYA [the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, now the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC)] will dedicate National Project Funds in 2011 to further develop a better evidence base of what works in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance. The evidence base will consider a range of contextual information, including the way in which schools respond to the diverse linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts in which they operate (MCEECDYA 2010:18).

To progress this action, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) was commissioned to conduct the SCSEEC Successful School Attendance Strategies Evidence-based Project (the Project), which was carried out by staff of the Indigenous and Children's Group. The Project combined the findings of a comprehensive literature review with qualitative evidence from a series of consultations held with 9 diverse school communities in 2 jurisdictions to produce a final project report to the ATSIEAP Working Group. The report concluded:

- There is now a body of evidence demonstrating that there are effective strategies for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that address identified barriers to regular school attendance.
- One effective potential method to share that evidence would be a 'one-stop-shop' web portal, combining a searchable evidence base with practical implementation tools and opportunities for sharing ideas among education practitioners and school communities.

This paper draws upon that final project report. However, its focus is on presenting and discussing the findings that education policy makers, practitioners, schools and school communities are likely to find useful for their own work on improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The report is structured as follows:

- The rest of this chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to conduct the Project.

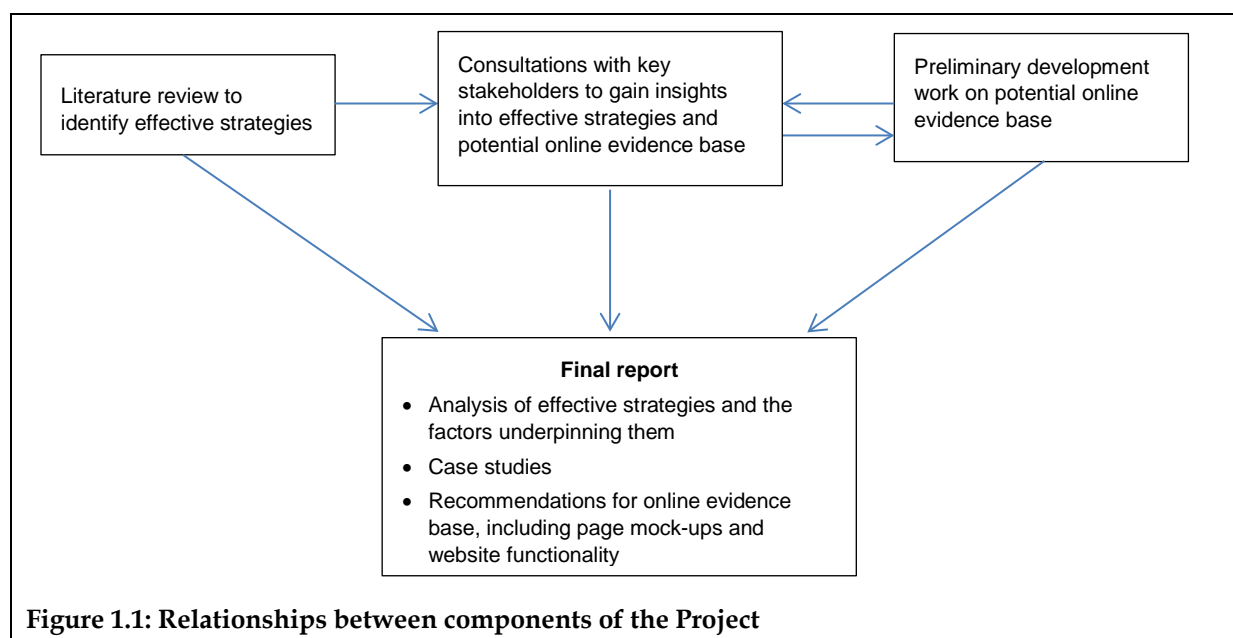
- Chapter 2 brings together the findings from the literature review and the consultations to discuss the issues affecting students' attendance and to illustrate how schools have dealt with these issues in a practical and effective manner. It also discusses the types of policies, structures and services that support schools in this role. In addition, it describes 6 key school-level elements that can help improve attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as well as lessons drawn from the experiences of those schools that other schools can use to develop and implement effective strategies.
- Chapter 3 provides in-depth case studies of 3 schools included in the consultations.
- Chapter 4 summarises the developmental work on a potential web-based method for sharing the evidence on effective attendance strategies.

Overview of methodology

The project had 3 main components:

- an expert literature review of attendance strategies and policies that successfully increase school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- a coordinated stakeholder consultation process on effective school attendance strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the assessment of community engagement requirements for an effective online tool
- detailed recommendations for developing an online evidence-based tool.

As shown in Figure 1.1, the 3 main components in the project were interrelated. This section describes each of these components/processes.



Literature review

The literature review had 2 purposes:

- (1) to examine the individual, contextual and structural factors that influence school attendance (and non-attendance) among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;

to summarise the policy context; and to review national and international evidence on effective attendance strategies and the mechanisms behind them

- (2) to use the evidence to help select the school communities for the consultation component of the Project and to develop the consultation tools.

The completed literature review is included at Attachment A. Nine separate strategies were found to have a demonstrated level of effectiveness in increasing school attendance:

- incentive programs
- student engagement programs, including extracurricular and out-of-school activities
- literacy and numeracy programs
- nutrition programs
- attendance monitoring
- whole-of-school approaches
- school, family, and community partnerships
- transport
- parental consequences for poor attendance.

The literature review discusses each of these strategies and the barrier to school attendance each attempts to address. The review also provides examples of successful programs and the size of the impact they have had on attendance; where available, it presents evidence about the mechanisms that seem to underpin their success.

It is important to note, however, that the published literature can go only so far in guiding schools wishing to implement similar strategies. Having a detailed understanding of the experiences of schools and communities in their selection and implementation of successful strategies is critical in developing an evidence base that can offer practical advice to other schools and communities.

Thus, the next step was to engage directly with schools and communities who have used these strategies successfully to gather their perspectives on the key factors underpinning success and the lessons that they would pass on to other schools and communities.

Community engagement

The Project Team provided the AIHW with the names and details of a designated contact in the Education departments in 4 jurisdictions whose role would be to assist the AIHW in community selection and in guiding the process of ethics approval.

The AIHW connected with each of these contacts, explaining the purpose of the Project and asking for assistance in providing examples of schools for possible inclusion.

Next, the AIHW developed an overview of the effective strategies identified in the literature review and a template for jurisdictions to provide the names of schools that matched these strategies and sent these documents to the jurisdictions (see Appendix A).

One state provided a list of 13 possible schools (10 government and 3 independent) and another provided a list of 24 possible schools (23 government and 1 independent). Together, they provided coverage across locations, school size, primary/high school, and the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled at the school. The schools also covered all but 1 of the 9 strategies (parental consequences). The contacts also

had the option of nominating schools using strategies other than the previously identified 9 strategies.

The intent of the Project was to develop an understanding of the mechanisms underpinning effective strategies and to seek feedback on developing a potential online tool; it was not to seek a nationally representative sample. Hence, DEEWR and the AIHW agreed on a set of 12 schools to engage with initially: 6 from each state, including 2 metropolitan (metro) schools, 2 regional and 2 remote. The final list included 3 schools from 1 state and 6 from the other. The other 2 states were to be used as backup if necessary.

The coverage of schools is included as Appendix B.

Engagement process

Prior to contacting the schools, the AIHW sought appropriate ethics approval (internally and from the 2 states). The principals of the 3 independent schools had already given their permission to be contacted before the names of their schools were supplied to the AIHW. Their Association of Independent Schools advised that no additional ethics approval was required. Ethics approval from the Department of Education in the other state was received on 13 August 2012.

Based on templates from the ethics applications, the AIHW developed a series of letters explaining the project and inviting participation, along with consent forms for school administrators, school staff and community members.

The engagement process was as follows:

- Letters were sent/faxed to principals/site administrators explaining the Project and seeking their willingness to participate, with a follow-up phone call from the AIHW to answer any questions.
- The principal/site administrator was asked to nominate a staff member to liaise with the AIHW. A team member from the AIHW then contacted this liaison person to discuss the Project and to ask for guidance on whom to approach and how best to approach them. The AIHW supplied letters of invitation and consent forms, either directly to the proposed participants or to the liaison person to give out on its behalf, depending upon the school's preference and experience.

Content of the interview and focus group guides

Separate interview and focus group guides were developed for school staff and community members who had been involved with the successful strategies (which could include parents). The questions sought information about the broader context, details of the strategy/strategies chosen and their selection and implementation, underlying mechanisms/lessons learned, and feedback on the online evidence base. There was also the opportunity to provide any other feedback.

Participation

Nine schools were initially approached to participate in the Project; 8 agreed to participate and 1 declined. The name of a replacement school with similar characteristics to the school that chose not to participate was sought from the state contact. That replacement school agreed to participate, making a total of 9 schools participating in the consultation phase. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the schools that participated.

Table 1.1: Characteristics of participating schools

Characteristic	Number of schools	Per cent
School sector		
Government	6	66.7
Non-government	3	33.3
Type		
Primary school	4	44.4
Combined primary and high school	3	33.3
High school	2	22.2
Geographic location		
Metropolitan	3	33.3
Regional	4	44.4
Remote	2	22.2
Total number of students in the school		
<50	1	11.1
50–99	1	11.1
100–199	3	33.3
200–299	0	0.0
300+	4	44.4
Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students		
<50	1	11.1
50–74	5	55.5
75–99	2	22.2
100+	1	11.1
Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students		
<25 %	4	44.4
25–49%	2	22.2
50–74%	1	11.1
75%+	2	22.2
Focus School funding		
Yes	3	33.3
No	6	66.7
Recipient of Smarter Schools National Participation funding		
Yes	6	66.7
No	3	33.3

The consultations included interviews/focus groups with a total of 24 participants from a range of roles within the 9 schools. With permission of participants, all interviews/focus group discussions were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

Each school was asked whether there were parents or community members it could suggest that the AIHW should interview (who had been involved with the initial identification of attendance as an issue and/or the development of attendance strategies). None of the schools was able to identify such potential participants.

Three of the 9 schools were non-government. Two of the non-government schools were faith-based, but accepted students of all backgrounds. One of the faith-based schools was part of a larger system of schools, while the other was not. However, all 3 of the independent schools were part of their state's Association of Independent Schools and were able to access resources and supports through the Association.

There was a mix of primary, secondary and combined primary and high schools. In addition, all the 7 schools with primary students ran pre-primary or preschool programs on the school site. These programs included structured playgroups, mother's groups, preschool programs, and transition-to-school programs.

Four of the schools were in regional areas, 3 were in metropolitan areas, and 2 were in remote areas (as defined by the departments of education). There was a range of school sizes: 2 of the schools had fewer than 100 students, and most had more than 300 students.

Both the total number and percentage of the student population who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are important from a resource and programming perspective. Most of the schools had more than 50 students who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, representing from 13% to 93% of the student body.

Three of the schools included in the project received Australian Government Focus School funding to further the agreed National Collaborative Action 26 of the ATSIEAP, and 6 schools received funding from the Smarter Schools National Partnerships Programs (5 from Low Socio-economic Status School Communities, 1 from Teacher Quality, and 3 from Literacy/Numeracy).

Community profiles of the areas in which the schools are located are included in Appendix C. It is important to note, however, that these data pertain to the total population in these areas and do not necessarily reflect the families of the students in each school. For example, students in particular schools may be more disadvantaged than may appear from aggregate community statistics. In addition, these statistics reflect the area in which the school is located, not necessarily the area in which the students reside (which is an important issue for regional schools where students may travel long distances to school).

Table 1.2 presents the characteristics of the 24 staff who participated in the interviews/focus groups. A principal or vice-principal was interviewed at every school. All 9 of the schools considered attendance to be the responsibility of all staff members at the school as reflected in the range of participants.

Aboriginal education officers/liaison officers were interviewed at 7 of the 9 schools, and their roles were discussed in-depth at the other 2 schools. The terminology for the Aboriginal education/liaison positions differed between states and between schools within states. Included in this group are staff members whose responsibilities (at the minimum) include supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the school, developing/integrating/promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture within the school, and developing relationships with families and the community. Two were trained

teachers, and a number also had other responsibilities including attendance monitoring for all students and additional educational/emotional support for any students who required it (not only those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander).

Table 1.2: Characteristics of participants

Role	Male	Female	Total	
			No.	%
Principal	3	4	7	29.2
Vice-/deputy principal	3	1	4	16.7
Aboriginal education/liaison officer	3	5	8	33.3
Student/welfare services	3	0	3	12.5
Administrative	0	1	1	4.2
Program-specific	0	1	1	4.2
Total	12	12	24	100

Coverage of strategies

Table 1.3 shows the types of strategies initially identified by the state contacts. Table 1.4 shows that, in practice, each of the 9 schools was employing nearly all of them.

Table 1.3: Initially identified strategies

Strategy	Metro. primary	Metro. primary	Metro. high	Regional high	Regional primary	Remote primary	Regional K-12	Regional K-12	Remote primary
Incentives	X		X	X				X	X
Student engagement			X	X				X	X
Literacy/numeracy	X		X			X	X	X	X
Nutrition			X					X	
Attendance monitoring		X	X					X	X
Whole-of-school approach			X			X	X	X	X
Community partnerships	X		X			X	X	X	X
Transport		X						X	X
Other					X				

Notes: The ninth strategy, parental consequences, is not reflected as it is a government, not a school-initiated, policy. Metro. = metropolitan. Other was an option offered to the state contacts for strategies that did not fit into one of the 9 previously identified.

Thus, as shown in Table 1.4, the 9 schools included in the Project provided excellent coverage of strategies across locations, school sectors and school types. All were similar in that they all experienced challenges related to attendance and were actively working to address attendance on multiple levels. However, as will be discussed later, the ways in

which they implemented the particular strategies depended upon their local circumstances, resources and needs.

Table 1.4: Strategies being used by schools as identified through the consultations

Strategy	Metro. primary	Metro. primary	Metro. high	Regional high	Regional primary	Remote primary	Regional K-12	Regional K-12	Remote primary
Incentives	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Student engagement	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Literacy/numeracy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Nutrition	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Attendance monitoring	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Whole-of-school approach	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Community partnerships	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Transport		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Other	X				X				

Notes: The ninth strategy, parental consequences, is not reflected as it is a government, not a school-initiated, policy. Metro. = metropolitan. Comp. = composite (K-12). Other was an option offered to the state contacts for strategies that did not fit into one of the 9 previously identified.

Development of a potential online evidence base

The Online Communications Unit at the AIHW worked with the team to progress the development and design of a potential online evidence base. Initial work focused on mapping out a general site structure and navigation, along with the prospective user roles. A matrix of the potential users of the website, and their purpose for using this material and associated information, was developed. The AIHW then funded Colmar Brunton to conduct preliminary research using online focus groups.

The Unit created a wireframe (page schematics of websites) based on the feedback from the initial set of consultations with schools. This wireframe and style tiles (visual references of font and colour) were taken on the next round of school consultations. This iterative process continued, whereby the feedback from each set of consultations was used to further develop both wireframes and style tiles. The final versions were included in the project report to the ATSIEAP Working Group. A summary of the key elements and findings from this process is presented in Chapter 4 of this report.

2 Findings

At the local school level, closing the gap in school attendance rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students requires several key elements:

- recognising the importance of attendance as an issue for the school
- identifying individual students for whom non-attendance is an issue
- understanding the reasons behind the non-attendance
- developing and implementing effective strategies that address these issues and enhance the likelihood that children and young people will attend school regularly.

The 9 schools participating in the Project followed these steps, although the particular triggers for focusing on attendance varied across schools, depending upon local issues or context. For example, a regional school's focus on attendance was driven by its concern about attendance as a symptom of larger issues in their students' overall welfare. At another school, the entry of a new principal brought a new focus on attendance: *attendance was quite low and it was identified that there was an area of concern...when I asked about attendance, the response from the staff was 'you make all the phone calls, and you can do all this stuff' and I'm like 'no, this is a holistic approach about all of us and what are we going to do as a school'. And now they're really good with that.*

These efforts at a local level can be supported or hampered by other services, the local community, and by policy initiatives at the jurisdictional level. For example, the attendance and reporting requirements of state and Australian governments signify the importance of attendance as an issue and facilitate the monitoring of individual students' attendance patterns. From a practical perspective, however, school communities then have to identify and implement effective strategies that address the particular issues underpinning non-attendance among their students.

This chapter brings together the findings from the literature review and the consultations to discuss the issues affecting students' attendance and to illustrate how schools have dealt with these issues in a practical and effective manner. It also discusses the types of policies, structures and services that support schools in this role.

The consultations demonstrated that there is a hierarchy of attendance levels and intensity of attendance issues at every school. Figure 2.1 depicts this hierarchy. In practice, the shape is unlikely to be a perfect pyramid (as shown here); however, the figure is designed to represent both the general pattern of attendance (where the largest groups of students attend school regularly) and the level of intensity of issues (where the highest intensity is at the highest level).

The size and composition of each section of the pyramid varies between schools. In practice, schools decide how to allocate resources between the sections to try to ensure not only that the bottom sections of the pyramid are the largest (to prevent at risk students from moving 'up' to more serious attendance issues), but also students with serious attendance issues (the top section) are moved back 'down'.

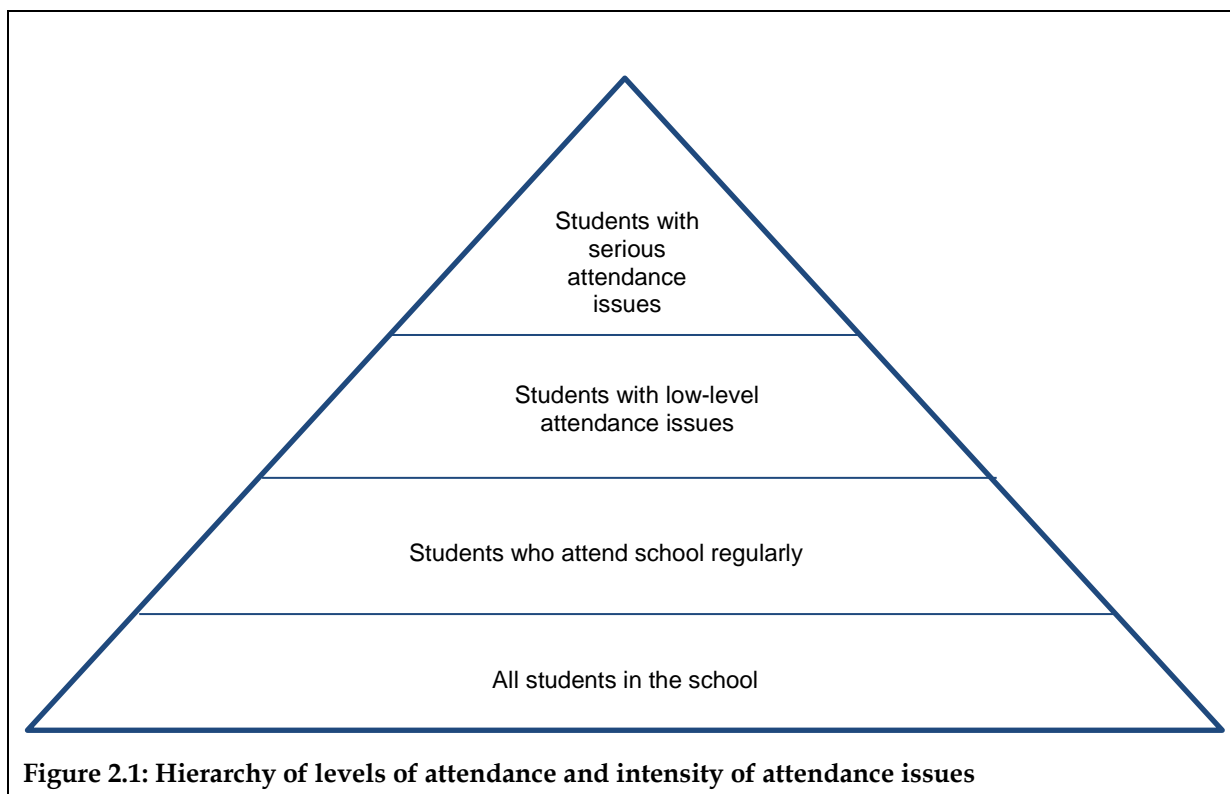


Figure 2.1: Hierarchy of levels of attendance and intensity of attendance issues

It is important to note that, although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have higher rates of non-attendance than other students at an aggregate level, the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will be in the lower levels of the pyramid. Additionally, schools emphasised that non-attendance is not just an Indigenous issue; in schools with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students, there will be a mix of students in the higher levels.

Issues affecting attendance and effective strategies for addressing them

Improving school attendance requires firstly identifying the underlying factors why some students do not attend school regularly and then implementing strategies to target those issues effectively. The factors affecting attendance and non-attendance at school among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are multifaceted and complex, and may vary across communities, geographic locations, school sectors and school type. They will thus require a range of strategies. As discussed in the literature review, these factors can be categorised into 4 sets of issues affecting attendance (in either a positive or negative manner):

- school factors
- family factors
- structural/community factors
- student factors.

In the past, much of the 'blame' for the poorer attendance rates of Indigenous students was assigned to students, families and individual communities who were thought to be less supportive of education in general and who assigned lower priorities to attending school than parents from other backgrounds (Bourke et al. 2000). More recent work, however, has stressed the importance of the interaction between all 4 of these sets of factors affecting attendance. For example, if parents had poor experiences in their own past with the education system, they may feel uncomfortable in their children's school unless the school actively encourages and engages them in a welcoming manner and demonstrates a positive understanding of and commitment to Aboriginal culture.

Box 2.1 provides an overview of key elements within each of the 4 domains. All the factors were cited (without prompting) by the 9 schools included in the consultations as being barriers to attendance among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, although their level of importance varied across the schools depending upon local contexts and histories.

Box 2.1: Factors affecting non-attendance among Indigenous students by domain

School factors

- Culturally appropriate curriculum and school environment
- Cultural understanding
- Language
- Indigenous staff members
- Bullying and suspension policies
- School leadership

Family factors

- Family's socioeconomic status
- Experience with education
- Parents' levels of literacy and numeracy

Structural/community factors

- Remoteness
- Transport
- Community involvement
- Education experiences
- Employment opportunities

Student factors

- Child's health
- Level of school readiness
- Safe and secure environment
- Attachment to school/education

Understanding these factors provides opportunities for clear and targeted interventions. For example, if a barrier to school attendance is physical (for example, transport) or financial (for example, the cost of uniforms), strategies can be adopted that target these barriers specifically. If a barrier is a lack of cultural understanding on the part of school staff, appropriate interventions may consist of staff development, training and mentoring.

Box 2.2 lists the effective strategies identified in the literature review, which were reinforced in the consultations, by the type of domain they target.

Box 2.2: Effective strategies by domains targeted

School factors

- Whole-of-school approaches
- Attendance monitoring programs

Family factors

- Parental consequences for poor attendance
- School/family/community partnerships

Structural/community factors

- School/family/community partnerships
- Transport

Student factors

- Literacy and numeracy programs
- Incentive programs
- Student engagement programs
- Nutrition programs

Because the nature of the factors varies by local context, and because there were different triggers for the focus on attendance in the first place, schools used a range of the strategies (as outlined in Box 2.2) to address their particular barriers.

Schools differed in the way they selected strategies: some arose organically and others were targeted interventions (such as external programs brought into the school). One of the key messages to emerge from the consultations about the ways in which these schools were able to improve the attendance of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was that there was no 'one size fits all' approach. It was also found to be necessary that schools be both innovative and committed.

Table 2.1 provides examples of the specific ways in which the 9 schools implemented these particular types of strategies (with parental consequences the only strategy not to be covered). Table 2.1 also illustrates that there are both similarities and differences in the ways in which the schools applied the strategies. For example, some schools used personalised learning plans as a means of student engagement, while others used sporting programs, playgroups and preschool programs, links to post-school options, and cultural programs.

The consultations provided rich feedback on how the schools chose strategies, implemented them, and the challenges they faced. Below we present some of the details of these strategies by the domain they address, including information on the practical experiences of schools.

Information is presented on the domains themselves and the schools' lived experiences of these factors, and on how they deal with them in an ongoing basis. The quotes that follow in the report present a realistic picture of the challenges that the schools face in raising/maintaining attendance levels among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students specifically, and among all students in general. These recounts illustrate both the successes and (sometimes) the ongoing frustrations experienced by a group of schools which were selected because they have had success at addressing these factors.

Table 2.1: Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools

Strategy	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6	School 7	School 8	School 9
Incentives	Awards, rewards	Awards, rewards, chocolate wheel School passport program	Awards, rewards Level of attendance required for extracurricular activities	Online rewards program School jumper Itunes and Westfield vouchers 85% level of attendance required for end-of-year trip to amusement park	Reward chart	Rewards	Participation at camp based on attendance and behaviour	90% level of attendance required for end-of-term treat	Awards assemblies End-of-year Indigenous award
Student engagement	Personalised learning plans Link to post-school options	Personalised learning plans Playgroup and preschool program	Sporting program Personalised learning plans	Police Citizens Youth Clubs programs Personalised learning plans	Indigenous club, undertaking cultural activities such as painting, cooking, gardens and dancing Homework club Playgroup Student counsellors	Cultural days Goal setting Program for 0–4 year olds	Link to scholarship options	Integration programs Link to other programs	Homework centre Cultural perspective across the curriculum

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued): Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools

Strategy	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6	School 7	School 8	School 9
Literacy/ numeracy	One-on-one tutoring	One-on-one or small group tutoring	One-on-one or small group tutoring Ensuring learning resources meet students' needs	In-class teacher aides	Local language is taught	Local language is taught	Make own books to provide cultural context Reading to students 3 or more times a week	One-on-one in-class tutoring Promoting alternative thinking strategies	Individual tuition
Nutrition	Provide food when required	Provide food when required Run a nutrition program	Food program	Provide food when required	Provide food when required	Provide food when required	Provide food when required	Provide food when required	Provide food when required
Attendance monitoring	Daily monitoring, follow-up by Indigenous support officer	Daily monitoring, follow-up by vice-principal and Aboriginal education workers	Daily monitoring, follow-up by principal, welfare team, teachers and Aboriginal education workers	Letters Attendance lunches with parents at the end of the month	Daily monitoring overseen by the deputy principal and Aboriginal worker	Daily monitoring, with follow-up by the Aboriginal and Islander education officer	Daily monitoring, with follow-up by the deputy principal and attendance officer	Daily follow-up by Aboriginal liaison officer via phone calls, letters and meetings with parents, overseen by principal Individual attendance targets	Daily monitoring with follow-up phone calls

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued): Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools

Strategy	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6	School 7	School 8	School 9
Whole-of-school approach	Overall philosophy Teaching and behaviour management approaches Staff development	Overall philosophy Teaching and behaviour management approaches Staff development	Overall philosophy Teaching and behaviour management approaches Staff development	Liaison officers with ethnic backgrounds Half-day program	Overall philosophy Staff development Resources to aid home-to-school bridging Teaching and behaviour management	Overall philosophy Holistic approach	Overall philosophy Holistic approach Classes formed on skill level rather than year level	Overall philosophy Holistic approach Focus on late arrivals	Overall philosophy In-school suspension
School/family/community partnerships	Inviting community into the school Home visits Respect	Community partnership agreement Home visits Community liaison officer	Aspirational program that involves the community Community partnership agreement	Home visits Parent meetings fortnightly Community lunches	Home visits Partner with liaison officer at the local GP to pick up students for appointments	Respect Extended services coordinator School presence at community meetings	Cultural program	Home visits Attendance focus in most newsletters Relationship building	Home visits when required School presence at community events (including funerals)
Transport	School coordinates bus transport for all students Will pick up individual students from their homes when there are attendance issues	School coordinates bus transport if necessary	School coordinates bus transport for all students	School coordinates bus transport to and from the station and the school	Not necessary	Aboriginal and Islander education officer drives to locate students not attending school	Attendance officer picks up students not in attendance in the morning	Bus is provided to pick up students	Transport provided by staff members

Student factors

While parents are ultimately accountable for their child's attendance at school, research has shown there are a number of critical factors at the individual student level that affect whether a child or young person attends school. Box 2.3 summarises these issues and presents options for strategies that address them, followed by a discussion of the issues.

Box 2.3: Summary of issues at the student level, and strategy options

Issues

- Child's physical health
- Child's mental health
- Extent to which basic needs are being met at home
- School readiness upon entry
- Success at school
- Attachment to school
- Attachment to education
- Nature of relationships at school

Strategy options

- Provision of early learning programs/activities (for example, preschool or playgroup)
- Extracurricular activities
- Sporting programs
- Case management
- Health screening
- Interagency links
- Individualised learning plans
- Literacy and numeracy/academic achievement programs
- Nutrition programs
- Incentive programs
- Post-school options
- Aboriginal education workers

Issues affecting attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- *Child's health:* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have significantly poorer health than other children, including higher rates of illness, infection and disability. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are also 3 times more likely to be diagnosed with severe otitis media and have significantly higher rates of hearing loss (Burns and Thompson 2013). In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people have rates of high or very high levels of psychological distress that are 3 times those for other young people (AHMAC 2008). These health issues affect attendance both directly and indirectly: children who are sick are more likely to miss school, and the consequences of ongoing health problems may affect performance at school (which, in turn, may affect attendance).
- *Extent to which basic needs are being met at home:* The extent to which a child's basic needs – such as for food, shelter, clothing – are being met at home affects not only whether they attend school but also their performance at school (which then affects attendance again). Children without proper clothing or uniforms may be reluctant to attend school because of embarrassment. Nutritional intake affects children's energy levels, their levels of concentration and their ability to learn at school, and has been linked to disruptive behaviours within the classroom (Winicki & Jemison 2003). Previous research has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, particularly those in

remote areas, have higher rates of under-nutrition and food insecurity than other children (AIHW 2011).

- *School readiness upon entry:* Level of school readiness when entering school and whether the child has attended an early childhood education program affects the child's achievement at school as well as their attendance.
- *Success at school:* Students with poor literacy and numeracy skills may feel uncomfortable in school because of their lack of progress in these areas and may be thus more reluctant to attend. Data show that reading, writing and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are far below those for other students (MCEECDYA 2010). In particular, failure to acquire basic reading skills in the early years makes it difficult to attain educational parity (Adams 1998; Dunn 1999).
- *Attachment to learning:* Engagement in learning is critical to academic achievement and to providing students with the understandings, knowledge, skills and confidence to move on into training, employment and higher education.
- *Attachment to education:* The extent to which students value education and perceive that it has relevance for their own achievement affects attendance. For example, the consultations demonstrated that highly motivated students are able to overcome considerable obstacles in their personal lives to attend school.
- *Nature of relationships at school:* Students who feel safe and secure with teachers and other staff members, as well as with their peers, feel more comfortable coming to school and tend to be more engaged with the school.

The literature review found a number of effective strategies targeting these individual student factors. These included:

- student engagement programs/extracurricular activities (for example, the Jalaris Kids Future Club, the Song Room, Drumbeat, Girls from Oz)
- sporting programs (for example, the Clontarf Foundation, Kicking Goals)
- case management approaches (for example, Youth Connections)
- strategies to improve students' literacy and numeracy skills/success at school (for example, scaffolded literacy, personalised learning plans)
- nutrition programs (for example, School Nutrition Program; and Foodbank, the Western Australian School Breakfast Program)
- incentive programs (for example, School Passport, the 'No School/No Pool' policy).

All of these issues were mentioned during consultations with the 9 schools. For example:

We've got a couple of Indigenous children at the moment who have come in in Year 10. One of them can't read and she can't write, literally, and yet she has an amazing brain. So part of my role is to work with the teachers on how we can support this young person to realise she has amazing potential, and to try and modify tasks so that she can actually access what's going on. And that's a huge challenge in a school, because she literally can't read and write, and yet she can converse about onomatopoeia, she is an amazing young person. And she's someone, unless we treat her differently, she will be just another statistic.

The school visits also confirmed the relationship between these factors at the student level and attendance, and provided insight into the issues themselves and how the schools were dealing with them. For example, participants in the consultations reported that physical and mental health issues were salient issues for most (but not all) of their schools. For example, at a regional school, the staff reported that:

The health facilities for these children are absolutely disgraceful...we have one community speech pathologist who's booked out for the next 2 years. Audiologists – don't have one. Dentists. It's everything. Across the board. These all affect children. I have children in Year 10 who can't read because they haven't been able to hear for most of their life. And now they've dropped the screening program in kindergarten. So there's no mechanism to screen these children. I have to pound on the door, ring the parents and say 'have you booked them into [the local Aboriginal medical service] for a hearing test?', ring the medical service 'have you tested these children?'. Yes, we've been referred to a specialist. When can you see the specialist? November next year. Meanwhile, that crucial time of learning, from pre-kindy to Year 2 is finished...there's no backup, there's no organisation, there's no one I can ring up and say 'I have 3 children in kindergarten with serious hearing difficulties', which we do. These kids have had perforated eardrums. They've had glue-ear for 5 years. They're not going to get that skill back. And so they're going to go into high school with prolonged hearing difficulties and it's going to affect the rest of their lives...I've seen the third member of the same family in pre-kindy, the teacher telling me he can't hear. And all of those things do impact on attendance and learning and behaviour.

Interestingly, hearing issues were reported as being more prevalent in the regional and metropolitan schools than in the remote schools.

Mental health issues among the students (as well as their families) were quite common at both the primary and high school level, and required the involvement of both school staff and external services.

A young person that I was working with yesterday...came in and had a chat and there was some self-harming and suicide, and so obviously I involved my school psych in that and we did a safety plan where she identified her key people...and that's not an isolated incident. Our ICSEA [Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage] is around 919, and so our young people generally come to school with a whole range of other things that are going on for them...but it only takes one person to be welcoming to that young person and they will pick and choose their support structure and their support network...And we have external agencies that come in and support our young people like the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Unit and Anglicare.

Strategies schools used to meet the physical and mental health needs of their students included ensuring that student support/welfare teams contain appropriately skilled staff (for example, some schools with high needs have a school psychologist and social worker), working with the families to organise screening and follow-up therapies if necessary, taking students to medical appointments themselves, liaising with other services and using a case management approach to ensure that the needs are being followed up (as part of its building program, a high school is constructing an integrated onsite community service centre), providing an onsite school nurse (funded partly through school funds and partly through external funds), and liaising with the local Division of General Practice (now Medicare Local) or Aboriginal Medical Service to provide health services onsite at least once a week.

At a regional school, the Medicare Local's Aboriginal worker picks students up from school, takes them to appointments, gets prescriptions filled if necessary, then drops them back to school. Taking an innovative approach, another school has partnered with a local university to have its third-year speech pathology students come and screen all the children in the school and provide them with follow-up care, while another school is considering using funding to hire its own speech pathologist.

Schools also worked hard to meet the basic needs of a small fraction of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as an overall welfare issue as well as a way of encouraging them to come to school. Children felt shame when they did not have the basic fundamentals such as uniforms, or facilities at home to wash their clothes.

If they come to school and they're not dressed properly or groomed or those issues, we'll brush their hair, we will dress them in uniform, shower them if necessary, provide breakfast if necessary, provide lunch if necessary. We have provided huge lunches, huge breakfasts, but obviously funding is tighter and, again, we want to put responsibility back on the parents, because we're taking on the parent role and we don't want to do that. We're educators. And we want the parents to start taking that responsibility. So again it's about addressing that with parents and communicating that with parents.

We've got children at the school here that are unsupervised. They go home and they free range. Indigenous and Caucasian. And then they bail up at school the next day expecting to learn, and it's just never going to happen. They're flat out trying to stay awake. And they haven't had breakfast, they haven't brought lunch to school, there's a whole range of issues there, and hence we then link in with providing them with things like food and other initial support. Some need a sleep sometimes. Sometimes it's saying 'go on up to the sick bay now and have a sleep'. When you wake up you'll feel better and then we'll get you back into class.

The schools used a number of strategies to address students' basic needs. However, as noted above, some schools felt a tension in trying to ensure that children's basic needs were met without then taking on the parenting role. These strategies included providing food directly – although the approaches varied from organised programs (for which everyone was eligible) to having students come to the office and ask for food privately when they were hungry to reduce the risk of embarrassment. In addition, teachers and staff would check with students to ensure that they had either brought or ordered lunch that day. Some schools sent food home with the children on weekends. Schools also provided uniforms and shoes where needed, or washed uniforms at the school.

All 9 of the schools in the consultations cited the acquisition of basic skills and school achievement as fundamental to students' overall outcomes, their engagement with school, and their attendance.

We're trialling some teacher's aides at the moment, because I think the one-on-one work is incredibly important. I mean a student feels that they're actively achieving and learning something. They will come more often if they're feeling that sense of success...We're getting students here that their literacy and numeracy is shocking. We ask ourselves, how did they miss it from pre-primary, primary... so what we're constantly hearing is that once they get into high school, and because they don't have those reading abilities, they're kind of like at the back of the class. When they're asked a question, automatically they become intimidated and then they play up...they put their protection mechanism on...so the one-on-one, they really appreciate it, because there's the shame factor that's not there anymore.

The strategies used to promote engagement and success at the student level included setting short-term goals that were mutually agreed (for example, through personalised learning plans), rewarding positive behaviour (through awards or incentives), dealing with students on a one-on-one basis to address literacy and numeracy issues, ensuring that materials were appropriate to the age group (for example, not giving activities aimed at young primary students to teenagers), and providing opportunities for success outside traditional academic routes (through art, sports or dance). Some schools had homework centres as well, but cited

difficulties with organising these when a number of the students lived an hour's bus ride away and the school then had to find alternate transportation home.

One of the schools had a newly established sporting initiative. While, in general, the staff emphasised the positive effect of the program, they highlighted that it had had some unforeseen consequences as well. It succeeded in its goal of bringing young Aboriginal men back to the school who had previously been disengaged with education. However, some of these young men had some behavioural issues which affected other teachers and students and was an additional challenge for the school to deal with.

As this staff member noted, the program increased their enrolment statistics, but may have decreased the attendance rates because the students still had attendance issues: *they engage very well in the [sporting] part of the program and need a little bit more encouragement in terms of the educational side of the program and our attendance figures are probably going to go down because some of those young people are sitting on 30/40% attendance, which is better than 0 which it was before.* There had also been instances where these returning students were encouraging other students with high attendance to 'cut school' with them.

In addition, because only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys were eligible for the program, there was some resentment both from girls and from non-Indigenous boys. This required the school to try to offer alternative programs for female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; they would also have liked to have had a similar program for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, no matter what their Indigenous status. In addition, the initial attendance requirements for outings/excursions with the sporting program were lower than for the school's outings, which again led to some resentment within the school. The school then had to work with the program to ensure that the attendance goals were consistent.

The school leadership also had to 'sell' the program to other staff:

You have to contextualise that [this sports initiative] here on our site is still in its early days – talk to us 3 or 4 years down the track and there would be a significant difference in attendance and engagement... From a narrow-minded sort of blinkers-on perspective, a staff member might just perceive that [this sports initiative] has brought some feral kids back to their class and is then giving this kid rewards for coming to school, so they're like 'thank you ...', so, yes, that can be interesting.

In spite of the challenges, however, the program was already showing positive effects. As reported by the principal: *the head of police here made a comment at one of our last meetings, saying that for a particular individual, since he's been part of [this sports initiative], he has ceased to come to their attention. Okay, that's one individual. But that's a huge outcome for that individual.*

Schools also provided information and support for post-school options. This included trying to build students' aspirations about what they could achieve after high school (through formal programs and as a general priority within their teaching/counselling), and then helping make those post-school options a reality by providing information and direct links to the opportunities (including finding scholarships, filling out forms, helping prepare students for job interviews, and so on). Several of the schools also used school trips/camps as a way both to expose the students to opportunities beyond their current communities and to broaden their perspectives. This was felt to be particularly important for students in late primary/early high school as a way of developing aspirations that they could then work towards.

What I've learnt over the last couple of years is that you've got to start young. So the lesson I actually had with the kids today was exactly that. Think about our camps, what kind of jobs did

you see happening? The Year 6/7s was very focused on that this year. But just getting the younger kids talking...what are the jobs around? From that, that's when we're going to start doing a whole heap on just goal setting – 'that looks like an interesting job', but doing it young. I think they need to be focused. And they need to see there's more of the world, but you can still come back.

One school, however, felt that other agencies/organisations set the bar too low for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in terms of their expectations – for example, assuming that Technical and Further Education (TAFE) was a more realistic option for students to achieve than university. Schools also provided role models, with former students who had received tertiary education returning to the school as staff.

In terms of incentives, a high school was trialling an innovative online incentive program, whereby students bank reward points for attendance as well as good behaviour, academic achievement, and so on. They can then redeem these reward points for items such as Ipods or even bicycles. This program, as well as being a reward system, is also being used to teach students about budgeting: the students have to decide for themselves if they want to use fewer points immediately for a lesser reward or save them for something bigger. Another school found that these types of rewards or incentives at an individual level were less effective than having activity-based incentives that students could attend with their peers.

Aboriginal education/liasion workers were cited as an important element of a number of these strategies, both in the literature review and the consultations. One staff member described their position:

I work solely with the students – or I liaise with the teachers obviously – but I basically look after all their needs really, from liaising with the families, dealing with their health issues, dealing with day-to-day personality issues, behavioural issues, liaising with the principal and vice-principal regarding issues to do with family welfare, attendance, helping them with their day-to-day work, communicating with teachers of specific needs and the way that Aboriginal children learn and the issues that they face. For instance, the importance of family and travelling to funerals is a big one, and how important that is to Indigenous people. So basically, yeah, I work full time and I put on NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee] days, I take children to the diabetes clinic. I pretty much cover everything. And I give the children a voice.

Family factors

There are a number of factors at a family level that have been linked with school attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bourke et al. 2000; Purdie & Buckley 2010). Box 2.4 summarises these issues and presents options for strategies to address them; it is followed by a discussion of the issues.

Box 2.4: Summary of issues at the family level, and strategy options

Issues:

- Family's socioeconomic status
- Family members' experience with education
- Family views on education and attendance
- Parents' level of literacy and numeracy
- Family health/caring issues
- Family structure/stability
- Mobility/transiency

Strategy options:

- Relationship-building, including contact for positive reasons
- Notification of non-attendance
- Reinforcement of the importance of attendance
- Home visits
- School/family partnerships
- Parental consequences
- Aboriginal education/liaison officers
- Tri-border attendance strategy
- School passport

Family issues affecting attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- *Family's socioeconomic status:* Poorer socioeconomic status has been linked to unstable or overcrowded housing environments, poorer access to health care and early childhood education, inadequate food and clothing, and so on – all of which affect attendance. Indigenous families are significantly over-represented on all indicators of poor socioeconomic status (AIHW 2011).
- *Family members' experience with education:* Whether family members have had a positive or negative experience with the education system in the past may affect the family's level of comfort in dealing and engaging with schools.
- *Family views on education and attendance:* When education is highly valued in the family, children are more likely to attend school. This is also related to the extent to which family members condone absences from school for reasons other than illness.
- Parents' own levels of literacy and numeracy.
- *Family health/caring issues:* Caring responsibilities at home can potentially conflict with school attendance. This factor is especially pertinent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, given the higher levels of ill health in the Indigenous population (for example, AIHW 2011).
- *Family structure/stability:* Issues related to family environment – for example, the stability of relationships, the presence or absence of substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic violence, whether the child is in out-of-home care, and so on – all affect students' overall welfare as well as their school attendance. A regional school reported that 30% of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were currently in out-of-home care.
- *Mobility/transiency:* Two types of mobility affect attendance: permanent/semi-permanent moves between areas, and temporary absences (for example, a month or 2 spent in another area). The extent to which families move between areas can affect a number of factors related to attendance. These include having to enrol in a new school, make the transition to a new school environment and to develop supportive relationships with teachers and students. Temporary mobility disrupts attendance at school and may hamper the ongoing development of literacy and numeracy skills.

The literature review found a number of effective strategies targeted at these family factors. These included:

- School/family/community partnerships (for example, Communities for Children, Families and Schools Together – FAST program, Follow the Dream: Partnerships for Success)
- School Passport program
- Tri-border attendance strategy
- Parental consequences (for example, SEAM [School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure]; Cape York Welfare Reform). It is important to note that parental consequences is a government-initiated strategy and not an option for schools to use themselves.

All the family-related issues and the strategies from the literature review (except parental consequences) were raised in the consultations. All 9 schools discussed the fact that breaking down barriers between families, communities and the school and developing a trusting relationship were fundamental elements for improving school attendance and for understanding the particular circumstances affecting individual students. For example:

We have a Year 11 student – I spent some time at her home the other night. There's been a death in the family, and sometimes that out-of-school support is part of, you know, just going along and being part of the community. Certainly her grandma appreciated both the chaplain and myself coming. She [the student] is overwhelmed at the moment. She has assignments that are outstanding, assignments are coming, she wants to move out of home, the family member who's died has had mental illness, there's been great stress in the family, and so school is just part of what you're dealing with. In order for them to be successful at school, you're actually dealing with their whole life. So you've got to be looking at creating that support network for all aspects of their lives.

One of the challenges schools faced was families' prior experiences with government agencies in general, and with education in particular. One school had a large number of students being cared for by grandmothers who were members of the Stolen Generation, and thus needed extra support to feel comfortable at school. Schools reported that it was important to recognise that these barriers are real, and work to bridge them.

The schools used numerous strategies to build relationships with families. This included having staff who were well respected within the local community, whether they were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or not. Some of the key strategies that worked for the schools included treating families and members of the community with respect, contacting them when the students had done well in school, inviting them into the school for positive occasions (assemblies, performances, barbeques, student awards, NAIDOC week) so that contact was not always focused on what was 'wrong' with their families or their children, and engaging with them on occasions outside of school. Schools reported that informal contact at the local shops, when staff members stopped to chat with families and students, was an effective way of building connections. Being present at funerals, at family events when invited and at community events were other useful practices, which had symbolic as well as practical consequences.

Schools were asked whether they had more formal processes in place for building partnerships, such as a working committee made up of parents, staff and community representatives. One school had tried this approach, but found that the people who volunteered to be on the committee were not necessarily representative of their communities, and that more personalised approaches to building partnerships worked

better in practice. However, another school that had developed a community partnership agreement found:

The creation of this has probably had more community involvement and actually had more success than the implementation of it. Because its creation was actually the thing that was bringing them up here and getting them involved in the school...now it's finished they're like 'oh well, we did that, we've done our part for that'. And new staff come in as well who read it and think 'oh well, this is interesting but what do I actually do?'...I would almost be willing to say that if you had something where we revisited it once a year or over a period of 6 months or something, you would probably have more community involvement than if you just try and implement what's on there.

Schools also used several strategies to work with families to develop goals and aspirations for the students, including the personalised learning plans, but also through home visits and meetings. *With the Indigenous family – it'd be the same with anyone, but particularly the Indigenous families because it's probably not something that's been done historically – [the important thing] is to engage with them as equals. So you're sitting down with them and being very direct with them and saying 'if you want your children to succeed then you need to partner with us'. It's not going to be one-way traffic, and we'll admit when we haven't got it right...just be up-front and honest with them, engage them as partners in their child's education.*

In addition to developing goals and aspirations, schools also worked to reinforce the importance of attendance using a number of strategies. These included incentives/rewards for good attendance as well as promoting its importance:

Through the newsletter, I certainly drum it in really hard about attendance – you know, if your child is away 1 day a week that equates to 2 years of their life, etc...So every newsletter there is something about attendance. If it's not in every newsletter that might just be one that was missed...School Council are aware of our attendance. That's presented all the time at School Council and our P & C [Parents and Citizens]...and this year what we've done is to write to every parent and tell every parent what their child's percentage is.

As another way of building early engagement with education, all the primary/combined schools ran playgroups, preschools or transition programs. These served several important functions: the early childhood education experience for the children (which affects their school readiness), a chance for families to build connections with each other, as a way to engage families early on with the school as well as promoting the value of education, and as an opportunity to run programs for the families (including parenting programs as well as arts and cultural programs):

The 0 to 4 program. That's where we've been doing it now for 2 or 3 years, officially. And this year is just seems to be clicking into place, and we had all the babies except 3 babies in the community. So we had 6 or 7 kids I think, which is pretty good, and all of the 4 year-olds, all the 4- and 3-year-olds were here, so we're just missing 2- and 1-year-olds. We had a baby and everything, and all the mums were here, and they were all engaged...And that I reckon is the key. When mums are involved at baby level, they can see that school is important for a baby, and the communication that you can get from a mothers' group and all that sort of stuff – whatever it looks like, because once again every school has their own deal. I think that's important. And we won't see that effect yet. We won't see the effect of what we've been doing for the past 3 years until next year when those 3 ½ to 4-year-olds are enrolled.

One school has begun to hold an onsite group for pregnant women in order to deliver antenatal care services as well as to begin the engagement process:

It's just getting parents used to being there, and listening to school talk, too. Because a lot of the time we talk school talk...I talk school talk so they can get used to it, and sometimes they're getting letters home or whatever, they bring it to me to read, so you break it down for them, but a lot of our parents are fairly skilled, fairly skilled up. So they've had a lot of workshops – they've been workshopped right out I think.

While most families supported education and worked in partnership with the schools (even if they required extra supports to get their children to school), some families condoned their children's absence from school. This might be because the students didn't want to go, there were competing family or community priorities, or the students were helping to care for younger siblings or other family members:

One thing that happens with Aboriginal students especially is that you often find by high school some of the kids are starting to babysit [the children of] their often older brothers and sisters who might only be 21, 22, and then their parents and grandparents are either out, might not be around, may be incapable of looking after kids themselves, so those students might come in late, and it's important that staff understand in the school that it's not always (it is sometimes), but that it's not always that those kids are coming in late because they've spent the morning wandering town. They may have been getting breakfast for little Johnny, walking him to school, finding out Nan's got no money, sorting that out, you know, then coming to school not in a particularly good mood and late. That means our office staff too have to be quite resilient at the front desk. They deal with some quite confronting sorts of circumstances, but by them being welcoming it can really start the kid's day off. So if those kids are identified to the front office staff, so when the student arrives at school, it's not even the teacher that's prepared for them. It's admin, too, to say 'great to see you here,' 'oh, did you bring a note from Mum? It would have been good if you did bring a note. You know if you did bring a note it would help with Abstudy and all that sort of thing'. You know, all positive reasons, so that's very important, the arrival at school for those kids.

In some cases, families were happy for schools to take an authoritative role with the students; in others, conflict between schools and families continued over attendance, and other agencies such as the police or community services were required to intervene.

Two of the schools (1 metropolitan and 1 remote) reported that transiency was an important issue for their school. In the case of the remote school, it was short-term transiency where students would leave the community on weekends to visit relatives (often their parents) in another town where they were working or had housing, then return to the school for the middle days of the week. In this case, the school encouraged the students to attend schools in these other towns on the days when they were away from the community, and developed relationships with those other schools to check on attendance. (They also used the Tri-border attendance system to check their attendance.) As well, the school encouraged any child visiting the local area to attend their school while they were there.

The metropolitan school faced a different type of transiency where students moved areas for months at a time, and then re-enrolled in the school.

A pattern is appearing. There's certain schools in xxxx and xxxx where our families are starting to go and visit. Now we think we've worked out that housing around here is at a premium, whether it be government housing or rentals – it's very hard to get government housing. A lot of these families will go and stay with another family, then move with another family, then finally get caught up by the housing department or someone else, and time to move on. Then they have relatives in xxxx or xxxx,, so they go with them for a while. And vice versa. So it keeps swapping.

The school decided to go through the full enrolment process (including psychosocial assessments) every time the student re-entered the school:

We always meet with the parents before the kid starts, just so that we can get all the background information that we need. And something may have happened. It might be something quite extreme and at risk may have gone on in that time that they've been apart. So that's an area we continue to get better at, and we provide the staff with as much information as possible so that they're not going in cold, the students aren't going in cold. You know, tour of the school, make sure they've got the uniform, all the stuff to help them fit in. We find that's very important. Again, about the area itself—high incidence of domestic violence, high instances of drug abuse, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse...it's just all there. Out of our children, we assess the social, emotional and risk factors, and it's a high 90% of students that are affected by one or more risk factors that affect their education.

The vice-principal also planned to visit the other 2 schools to which students primarily moved in order to develop a partnership for addressing the specific needs of those children.

Structural/community factors

There are a number of structural or community factors that have been linked to school attendance (Barnes 2004; Purdie & Buckley 2010). Box 2.5 summarises these issues and presents options for strategies that address them, followed by a discussion of the issues.

Box 2.5: Summary of issues at the structural/community level, and strategy options

Issues:

- Geophysical characteristics
- Service availability
- Transport
- Community involvement
- Positive/negative experience of education
- Employment opportunities and post-school education and training

Strategy options:

- School bus/transportation
- Mobile classrooms
- Development of partnerships between schools/families/communities

Structural/community issues affecting attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- *Geospatial characteristics:* These characteristics include the physical location of the school in relation to where students live, weather-related factors, and the size of the community.
- *Service availability:* Better availability of health and community services can improve attendance by addressing the welfare needs of children and families.
- *Transport:* Availability of transport options can affect attendance levels.
- *Community involvement:* Relationships between the school and community services go beyond the simple physical or 'on the books' availability of services. They entail the nature of the relationship schools have with the community. Services may appear to be available; however, their true availability is affected by issues such as waiting lists and internal priorities. For example, a number of schools cited the priorities of the relevant Child Protection departments, which focused primarily on the safety needs of younger children.

- *Experience of education:* The level of community support for education is affected by the experiences (positive or negative) local community members had with the educational system in general, and with individual schools in particular.
- *Employment/training opportunities:* The socioeconomic context of the local community, and opportunities it affords for post-school education and employment are closely linked to the aspirations of students and to their perceptions of the value of education.

The literature review found several effective strategies for developing broader partnerships between communities, community service, families and schools which were discussed in the previous section. The literature review also found 2 effective transport strategies: the Walking School Bus and Mobile Classrooms.

The importance of community/structural issues was validated in the school consultations. All 9 schools were either in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas or the school population itself was disadvantaged compared with the surrounding community. About half of the schools were characterised by both historical and current levels of mistrust between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. For example, staff at 2 schools reported that their Indigenous students were subject to racist comments in the broader community and in local sporting events; staff at another school found it difficult to schedule sporting events against other schools because the other schools perceived their students as 'too rough'.

Transport was an issue in regional areas, where some students travelled 90 minutes one way to get to school (it was not an issue for the remote schools included in the consultations). One of the practical implications of this travel distance was that it was difficult for the school to organise after-school activities (such as homework clubs) because alternative transportation home was unavailable.

The development of partnerships between families, schools and communities was found to be an essential component of improved school attendance rates in both the literature review and the consultations. Creating a positive relationship between families, communities and schools led families to feel more comfortable at the school and to contact the school when issues did arise so that they could work in partnership.

As a way of developing relationships between the community and the school, a primary school runs a cultural program for students, families and community members:

It's been going for about 5 years now. It just aims to bring community into the school. Providing the opportunity for them to take traditional activities, I suppose, keep those traditions going...what have we had this year? We've had family tree days, we've had traditional cooking days, we had a damper making and jewellery making. It's run by all the AIOs [Aboriginal liaison officers]. So they have ownership of the program. They decide on what activities to run. I'm just there to make sure that all the paperwork side of things is done. Then keep them on task I suppose, not that that's hard. They're pretty good at it. These guys do all the work themselves. They have ownership of it. It belongs to them and to the community. It doesn't belong to the school so much. We just provide the facilities and the support and time.

Some schools reported that there were divisions within the local community about the importance and value of education that discouraged students and families from fully engaging in school. For example, some students faced negativity in their community from a small minority who accused them of thinking they were better than other people who had not gone through school. Several of the Aboriginal education workers reported receiving negative feedback themselves for their roles in the schools: *of the AIEO [Aboriginal and Islander education officer] at the other school, his family would say 'what, are you better than us because you work at the school?' ...And he'd cop it from everybody.*

Family and community views on the value of education also affected the aspirations of individual students:

Children come to school with very low levels of expectations of themselves – they don't aspire to significant goals for post-school life – and I think a key element in that is simply the homes in the community that they're coming from, where parents to a large extent have left school in the junior years of secondary school. There's a very low level of tertiary education in the community and the children are just not being actively supported – you know, it exists in pockets – but across the board actively supported to aspire to something of significance after school. And for that reason, their view of themselves, their hopes for the future, what they see themselves as having the potential to achieve, it's quite diminished in comparison to their peers in a capital city or in another regional location where there's a different community flavour. For me, personally, as a principal, if I had to identify one key thing as being a limiting factor in terms of the potential success for students in the school, [it] would be that they're coming out of that kind of environment.

Counteracting that, however, were a number of community members who encouraged students to attend. In fact, this school was characterised by an extremely supportive community:

Within the community, there's an expectation that the kids will go to school, and that education is important and that it's the way forward. I've worked in a lot of communities and this is the only one where parents push kids to go to school every day. And I don't know why that is, or why it is different from other communities. But it is there and it's very noticeable...A lot of the parents here have been away for school themselves. The vast majority of our high school kids go away on scholarships to Perth or Darwin or we've had kids go to Melbourne for scholarships. So our kids go everywhere for scholarships. And the parents have as well, so there's that expectation of 'I went away for school so you're going to go away for school as well. So to do that you need to go to school every day, you need to do your homework, you need to make sure you're participating and attending every day'.

The staff member contrasted the experience at that school with the experience at a similar school where the community did not support education:

I'd have to say we do nothing different here from what we did at xxxx, which is where I was before. Over there, we would do home visits every day, we had incentive programs, we had prizes and attendance awards and all that sort of stuff. The attendance was still horrid. There they actually had a bus run that they did every morning, that would go and pick kids up from their house and take them to school. They got breakfast at school every day, they got clean clothes and shoes if they needed it. Everyone was still caring and, you know, all the same things you do no matter which kid you were teaching – interested in their lives, wanted to know more, wanted to help, school-based attendance officer. Teachers would still do home visits for both positive and negative, exactly the same thing. The only thing that I can point to is the community expectation about the importance of school.

What is important about this point is that changing how a community functions and views education is beyond the capacity of individual schools; it is directly linked to the broader issues addressed by the Closing the Gap policies. The approaches taken by schools in these situations has been to begin by developing positive relationships with individual families and community members, to set achievable goals for individual students, and to realise that the flow-on effects for the greater community are likely to take years before they come to fruition. Schools have also worked to connect community members with training and employment opportunities, not just the students at their schools.

As well as the relationships with and support of the broader community, the availability of – and relationships with – community services were vital to schools. A number of children were in out-of-home care, and some students were also dealing with issues of child abuse/child neglect, sexual abuse, domestic violence and substance misuse, and/or had family members in prison. The complex issues meant that schools were heavily involved with broader community services as well as with individual families.

I would say one of our big differences is our involvement with these outside agencies to the point where parents pick up on, and the community picks up on, us working together... Youth justice will come up and we'll give them a meeting room and they'll talk [here]... the community service people will pick up little Johnny and take him out cleaning walls or whatever and then bring him back to school, not leaving him wandering the streets for the rest of the afternoon. So that's worked. Child protection will come up. Instead of the kid having to go down there, they'll come up to see how they're going and they will use the meeting room... I keep an open communication with the police. We're out to sort of share information. I make sure to keep that open too. If I'm suspecting there's drugs in town or something I say 'you know we've got a few kids turning up with drugs'. If they hear that such and such is going to thump such and such they'll ring the school to say 'keep an eye out for this or that today'. That is behaviour, but it affects attendance because if the kids come and thump each other and get suspended for 5 days and then it's just ongoing and ongoing... When you say about the police, too, young xxxx was telling me yesterday, that she found the police really supportive. She was able to identify that police here were different to [another town]. That they will take you home, they won't just throw you in a holding cell. And they will go to your families and say 'hey look' to the matriarch of the family 'can you keep the girls in for the next week because of feuding with another mob'.

How well those relationships worked across areas varied. For example, in 2 areas, police were seen as a resource – they worked with schools, ran programs for Indigenous youth at the local Police Citizens Youth Club, and responded quickly to issues. In another area, however, the school stopped calling the police because of a perceived lack of appropriate responses. While all suspected cases of abuse and neglect were reported to the authorities, how well they were followed up varied.

The impact that non-response can have for families who are actively seeking help (and for schools) was discussed by one of the regional schools:

I notice the process, too, that parents and families seem to go through, which is just a difficulty so I'll outline it. What usually happens when a student – and this goes across the cultures and it's not just Aboriginal – when a student has some problems at school, the first sort of instance the parent can often be quite defensive 'oh, this is somehow the school's fault' you know. The second time around I usually manage to figure out a way to get the parent on side, and then they're like 'great, I'll help you with this. Yes, I suddenly see where you're coming from. Hang on a minute, 8 teachers have told me about this so it must be true. We'll pull him into line in no time at all'. And then the next stage, the third stage, is when the parent realises 'this hasn't worked, I need help with trying to get my son, daughter, cousin or whatever into line; how can you help me?' and they'll ring me. I can tell you what I think would work. But they don't have, probably, the emotional staying power to put it in place.

So then they'll ring DCP [Department of Child Protection]. DCP will say no-one's been beaten, no-one's being sexually abused, now we've got too much to do with 5-year-olds at the moment, so see you later. They'll ring the police to say 'will you bring my kid to school?' The police will go 'well, we're dealing with a murder case right now; we're not interested in your kid not attending school', so there's no-one to help them. Then they get really sad. The next time I see them, they'll probably be crying when they come up here to my office. Frustrated, tears, all the rest of it, don't know what to do. The kids say 'I'll run away if you don't back off and everything'. And then after

that, they'll cut all their phone numbers off...you can't contact them. They don't hate you; if they see you, they'll give you an embarrassed sort of 'hey, how you're going?' and huddle past into Woolworths, you know.

Schools used a number of different strategies to cultivate these relationships, including sitting on inter-agency forums, working groups and formal committees.

An additional community-related strategy that was present in several of the areas was an initiative by the local council/chamber of commerce that no students were allowed in local stores during school hours, as a way of discouraging non-attendance and truancy.

School factors

There are a number of school factors that affect school attendance (Barnes 2004; MCEECDYA 2010; Purdie & Buckley 2010). These school factors are critically important not only because they affect all students and parents/carers within the school, but also because they are amenable to change if backed by appropriate policies, funding, leadership and training. Box 2.6 summarises these issues and presents options for strategies that address them, followed by a discussion of the issues themselves.

Characteristics of the school which affect attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- the nature of the school environment – schools with an environment that students and families perceive as physically, emotionally and culturally safe encourage higher attendance. For example, this includes the language of instruction and the presence of visual symbols of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
- classroom teaching practices in which teachers demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and culture, and encourage students' engagement in learning and achievement, as well as attendance
- a culturally appropriate approach to behaviour management issues
- a stable, highly skilled staff who are able to build relationships with both students and families (which promotes attendance)
- practices and policies around attendance monitoring and follow-up that identify students at risk early on and provide a structure whereby the issues underpinning non-attendance are addressed.

As well as the strategies initiated by schools, which have been discussed in the previous sections, the literature review identified several types of effective strategies that address these school issues specifically. These strategies included whole-of-school approaches (state-wide Middle Years reform), employing Aboriginal education workers or support officers, and implementing attendance monitoring programs (for example, Every Day Counts).

Box 2.6: Summary of issues at the school level, and strategy options

Issues:

- Culturally inclusive curriculum and school environment
- Staff understanding of culture
- Staff turnover rates
- Presence/absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
- Staff recruitment, development and engagement
- Language of instruction
- School policies on bullying and suspension
- School leadership

Strategy options:

- Attendance monitoring officer/program
- Staff development
- Whole-of-school approach
- Tri-border attendance strategy
- Communication between schools
- Aboriginal education/liaison officers

One of the most important factors cited by the schools and in the literature in this regard was the importance of having a strong leader who was committed not just to school attendance, but also to the overall welfare and wellbeing of the students. The impact of leadership was demonstrated in:

- the overall philosophy or vision for the school and the students; in particular, high expectations for student achievement and behaviour
- the allocation of resources/positions to focus specifically on the academic and welfare needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- the flexibility for staff to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families/carers in a culturally appropriate manner
- school-based policies, programs and practices that are culturally inclusive (for example, where an acknowledgement of country begins every assembly)
- strong attendance monitoring and follow-up policies
- identifying and dealing with issues such as bullying or the display of racist slurs/behaviour by other students
- policies that support parental notification for positive feedback as well as the raising of concerns
- ongoing staff development.

These issues were discussed by 3 staff members at a primary school:

I think what works too is having good principals...if you've got a good principal, it makes a huge difference. Especially when that principal will listen to the parent. Even if it's nothing to do with school sometimes.

I think it's also about supporting the programs that you guys come up with as well, trying to find the money so we can do it. And we get some money come in, we've got attendance money.

You can get airy-fairy principals where, you know, it's just pushed aside to the AIO and whatever, but when you've got a good principal, then you're on a roll really, you really are on a very good roll...xxxx was a very good principal, had a great understanding of Aboriginal culture, same with [the current principal].

The importance of well-qualified and committed staff to support the principal and implement these policies was also acknowledged. According to this principal:

If the teachers are enthusiastic and caring and create an environment that kids want to be in and learn – they see it's learning. I've really learnt at this school with staff I've had, that sometimes it doesn't have to be all bright and bubbly, it has to be real. And the kids have got to feel it. Kids aren't dumb. They know when it's just 'play away,' and it's like 'why are we doing this?' They can do all the fun stuff in the world, but it's got to be real, it's got to be relevant, and they've got to feel like they're actually achieving. And that's the thing I think that this school has been so blessed to have, for many years, even before my time: a number of quality staff is important. And it kind of goes in a cycle – you've got quality staff that care, then I think the parents want the kids to come to school. Because they can see it's being purposeful.

Thus, strong leadership and a cohesive, well-trained and committed staff are able to create environments that are physically, culturally and emotionally safe that children want to be in, even in the face of challenging circumstances.

The staff at this school, whether you're an education assistant, an Aboriginal officer, teacher, admin, there's no demarcation between, you've got your role, you're supported, and everyone works as 'a staff', and that's the beauty of this place. It's probably the best staff gathered in one spot that you would see anywhere. Chosen because of their skills. And they want to be here as well. So it works both ways. That's a snapshot of our community. It is challenging, but what we've tried to create is this little beacon in the middle of it, which is this school. So that the children want to come here. They respect the school. And when they arrive here they know that they've got to code switch. They're in school mode, and whatever's happening at home, we'll help them with it, but we don't want all the aggression in the school, we don't want that sort of stuff. So that's pretty much where we're at. And it is working. Five, 6 years ago it was a dysfunctional environment. Now it's not, but we still have the same challenges. And that's the difference. The challenges if anything have intensified.

According to another school:

Breaking through some of those barriers...it's almost like this invisible glass ceiling for some of the students to get them to think 'what is possible?' And I think for that reason, for us, the key element that we have worked on as a group of leaders within the school is, for us, culture is king. It's all about creating a culture here which is strong enough to withstand the diminishing impacts of the community and home life and other things, so when students come here they develop a deep sense of loyalty and appreciation of the school and its programs and the staff. I firmly believe that as a school we will only rise to the level that our staff allow us to, so it's about getting the right people onsite, and we work very hard at that, and all of those sort of intangible elements coming together to create a culture where the students feel safe, they feel at home, they feel as though this is a place where they can come and experience learning, but also be supported to have a dream, to have a hope and an aspiration for something beyond school.

Particular strategies that schools and staff have used to create a welcoming cultural environment have included involving the students in Aboriginal artworks, displaying names for things in traditional language as well as in English, putting up an Aboriginal seasons wheel, always doing a welcome to country before assemblies, and providing cultural-specific activities at the school (for example, dance, art).

One school provided a separate 'enclave' in an old demountable room, which was given a traditional language name. According to staff: *anything Aboriginal that happens, happens in that room.* This includes cultural activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students once a week during school time, playgroups, parent meetings, artwork, cooking, the antenatal group, and so on. It is also where the Aboriginal and Islander education/liason officers sit.

In addition, the school brings in a number of Aboriginal performers and sportspeople, flies the Aboriginal flag, has Aboriginal artwork by students and local communities members mounted on the buildings, and teaches the local Aboriginal language.

Attendance monitoring and follow-up strategies were not just present at each of the schools, but also their importance was emphasised in several key ways. The first was through dedicated attendance officers: *if you're looking at improving attendance in any school, if you don't have a dedicated person to look at that, the principal does not have the time to address the needs of every child in the school.* The second was setting up a process whereby attendance was the responsibility of the whole school, not just the attendance officer. One of the principals described the situation at the school when they arrived, and how they worked to change it. The nature of the following experience was also echoed by other schools:

But maybe we'll go back to the beginning to when I first arrived. So Mary [the Aboriginal education worker, not her real name] was doing the job off and on. She was sending out attendance letters because we have a system that you just send out letters, which is fine, and that's about compliance and I don't know if you were doing much follow-up from there... Mary and I had a conversation and we looked at the structure of what she was doing and we said 'can we take this on further?' And obviously I needed to ask the question about 'are you happy to do this across the whole school?' because the attendance was an issue across every child. Well, not every child but you know we've got high risk. We don't actually discriminate between the Aboriginal children and the non-Aboriginal children, we say they are our at risk group. So the children who are at risk... so Mary was fantastic in saying yes so we talked about attendance and we talked about the attendance policies.

When I asked about attendance, the response from staff was 'you make all the phone calls, and you do all this stuff' and I'm like 'no, this is a holistic approach about all of us and what are we going to do as a school'. And now they're really good with that aren't they? And that's when I felt, no, if we can allocate that time... so we ensure there's time allocated to Mary for that. And it is a priority, so if we have to pull her out of class for attendance, well then, that is, that's just how it is. Because if we don't get the kids to school and engaged, we're not going to lift numeracy and literacy. So it's that balance isn't it? So then from there we met with staff, then I started asking for individual attendance targets from all staff which they kind of freaked out about, didn't they? So then we sat down and went through and Mary and I would go through the attendance data and we started highlighting the children and saying 'well, these children are at risk'. If we knew any other issues regarding those children, we would then, you know, be looking at those issues. And then we would say 'okay, these are the children that we feel as a whole school we need to target', so then staff went 'okay, we can do individual targets'.

So I developed a proforma for them, sent it out, they did that and sent it back in, which is really good, and then I think that we sent them through the District Office. And that was great because I suppose the thing that we looked at wasn't necessarily those kids who are under 50%. I think we targeted those kids who were moderately at risk, those 50 to 79 and to move that forward. So every time we drew an attendance order, it goes out to staff, they see it, and then we look at a whole school and say 'look, let's move this target from 75 to 80, let's get that ...' – and that's a huge target. They moved 2 points which is great in the year, 2 percentage points. But everyone's aware and it's part of people's conversations now... When staff set individual targets, they go and work with the children regarding those individual targets. We then send letters out and have meetings with parents whose children have attendance issues. We haven't got to an attendance panel yet but I don't have an issue with going to attendance panels.

When we look at targets, we also look at strategies to support the children with those targets. And it's not just about you will come about 80% of the time. It's about 'well, little Johnny, if we want you to be here 80% of the time, well, how am I, as a classroom teacher, going to try to get you

there?’ How are we as a school going to support this family to get them there? And so we do spend a lot of time and effort engaging and trying to do all these strategies. So that first meeting is about looking at the strategies and saying ‘well, this is what we’re doing as a school; what are you doing as a parent?’ And, again, trying to empower the parent to take more responsibility for their decision making [in] not getting the children to school.

The specific role of Aboriginal education/liaison/support workers was discussed with each school. Staff at all 9 schools believed that this was an important role and that, particularly where students had home lives that were characterised by high levels of stress and disruption, the staff member provided stability in the students’ lives. Staff also felt that, in addition to home visits and building connections with families and the community, the role was to support other staff members’ learning and development about Indigenous issues, culture, practices and ways of communication. This then also provided key symbolic value to the schools (and was highlighted in the discussion of factors at the student level). These issues were illustrated in the following discussion between a vice-principal and an Aboriginal teacher who also fulfilled the role of support officer:

The school embraces it from within...from K1 right through to Year 12. I’m in the different classrooms teaching...bringing an Aboriginal perspective in there, so that’s coming across loud and clear all the time: that we do acknowledge Aboriginal people here, and we have got high regard for that. I noticed that at some of the assemblies, there is a lot of the Aboriginal community who will come and watch that, so they obviously feel comfortable coming into the school and all that sort of stuff [unlike] in previous schools I’ve been in that wasn’t the case.

There were differences of opinion on whether the Aboriginal education/liaison/support worker needed to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and whether they needed to come from that particular community. What they felt was important was that the person who filled that role had some form of qualification, that they had the ability to communicate well, and that whether or not they were from the community they were able to stay neutral in any community disputes.

In the case of a particular school, in fact, a deliberate decision was made by the school to hire someone who was not Indigenous, but who was well known and respected in the community. The reason for this was that the local community was extremely divided by skin and family groups, and the school felt that it was more important to have someone who was seen as impartial than someone who was Indigenous. In other schools, however, having someone of Indigenous background was seen as essential to develop the connections between school, family and community because of the racial divides between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. These differing strategies reinforce the importance of schools understanding their own local communities.

Variations

An important question is whether there was any discernible variation in any of the following: the issues underpinning non-attendance; the particular strategies used (or their effectiveness) according to school size, school location (remote, regional, metropolitan); the percentage of students who were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; whether the school was primary, secondary or combined; and the sector to which the school belonged (for example, independent systemic, independent stand-alone, or government).

An analysis of these factors demonstrated several key points:

- Issues hypothesised to be most relevant for remote areas were sometimes more relevant for regional areas. For example, in the 2 remote schools that took part in the

consultations, transportation/distance was not an issue because everyone lived close to the school. It was the regional schools whose students had to travel the greatest distances. Similarly, 1 of the remote schools and 2 of the regional schools were the only ones to report a particular lack of services (in these cases, of the regional areas: services were physically there, but not accessible because of waiting lists, priorities, and so on. One of the remote schools experienced both a shortage of services and problems with their accessibility). Transiency was a key issue for 1 of the metropolitan schools and 1 of the remote schools.

- An issue which was faced only by remote schools was that many students left the area to go to high school. They could either go fairly locally and board during the week, or go to cities that were far from their homes. Hence, the remote schools put a great deal of effort into working with families to make the arrangements.
- Because of age/developmental differences in the students, high schools faced different issues regarding attendance than primary schools. Hence, they used different types of strategies, more directly related to aspirations and post-school options. However, the importance of creating a safe and welcoming school environment existed for both types of schools. Both primary and high schools also discussed that the transition period from primary to high school was a critical time for students and families, and that the attendance of some students who had high attendance during primary school dropped off during high school.
- In general, independent schools had more freedom in allocating resources and choosing staff. Furthermore, because their students had elected to go there, the schools had slightly more leverage with the students' families.

Feedback on policies/funding

The schools recognised the importance of the Closing the Gap initiatives broadly, and the Smarter Schools National Partnership agreements in particular. One of the schools had used their National Partnership funding to hire its Indigenous support officer.

However, schools also raised concerns about policies and funding in general (not just related to the National Partnerships). One concern was frustration in getting short-term grants or funding initiatives rather than recurrent funding. Three (3-) or 5-year funding cycles meant that by the time a strategy was working in practice, its continued funding was threatened. Jurisdictional funding rules often meant that resource allocations were uncertain; this sometimes made staffing decisions difficult.

Schools believed that attendance monitoring and Aboriginal education workers/liaison officers were essential to the success of their attendance programs, and thought these positions should receive specific, ongoing funding: *I think they need to fund a school-based attendance officer permanently, because it's only a 1-year rolling contract. And if the funds are there next year then there will be a position, and if there's no funds then there's no position.*

Some participants noted the importance of broader social policies. For example, one staff member referred to the importance of alcohol management policies: *a few families [who are our parents], they had their names down for housing here because it was a safe environment. We're meant to be dry, at the moment we're not so dry, but that does help, too. That's actually really big – you know, the community values kids' safety.*

Key lessons

The key lessons for developing and implementing strategies that are effective in improving the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the long-term are presented in Box 2.7. These lessons represent the key underpinning factors that the schools have said are essential to have in place before specific strategies can be implemented successfully; they are backed by findings from the literature review (for example, Boulden 2006; Bourke et al. 2000; Purdie & Buckley 2010). They can be viewed as a set of necessary, but not sufficient, factors for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. According to a principal, these elements represent the 'what', while the individual strategies represent the 'how you get there'.

For example, this school felt the key to its success was: *Fundamentally it's a multifaceted approach that we have and it's predominantly built on relationships, and that's relationships with young people and relationships with the parents and the community...we have an aspirant program and a sports program for Aboriginal students, and an engagement program, plus a case management approach, and attendance officers and home visits...It's a very welcoming school and predominantly our young people seem to be happy to come here.*

Working from a supportive (rather than punitive) approach was also characteristic of the 9 schools. One school discussed its approach to home visits when students were having attendance problems: *how can I help you get him back into school? And they might say 'we're embarrassed because we've got no food.' 'Oh right, I'll organise a food parcel through such and such a group, and we'll organise lunch, and we'll do this, we'll do this, we'll see your kid tomorrow, won't we?'*

These lessons were developed using an iterative process. An analysis of the transcripts from the first set of consultations yielded several key themes stated by all 3 schools as being critical elements in developing effective attendance strategies. These themes were then matched against the findings from the literature review. Schools in the second set of consultations were asked the same open-ended questions about issues they would highlight/lessons learned for other schools. The key themes that had emerged to date were also checked with them to ascertain whether our understanding of them was correct and whether there were any additional factors. These lessons were then discussed in detail with the principal of the final school who confirmed their importance.

Box 2.7. Key lessons for developing and implementing effective attendance strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

- Improving/ maintaining attendance requires strong leadership from the principal, who not only allocates resources and priorities, but also sets the tone that attendance is an important whole-of-school issue. Following on from this is having highly skilled, well-trained and committed staff.
- Ongoing collection and monitoring of attendance data at an individual student level (as well as at a school level) with dedicated processes in place for follow-up is vital to identifying attendance patterns as well as at risk students. This includes having at least 1 dedicated staff member whose role is to follow up attendance issues with students and families.
- Improving attendance among at risk students requires a focus on the whole child, including their physical and mental health, their family situations, their literacy and numeracy skills, their social skills and their aspirations. Addressing these issues requires close working relationships with services outside the school.
- The school environment needs to be a safe and welcoming place where students want to be. This includes cultural safety, physical safety and emotional safety (for example, no racism and bullying), as well as having appropriate teaching and behaviour management practices.
- The school needs to have a culture of high expectations that all students can achieve, balanced with appropriate individual goals and supports to develop academic and social skills.
- Developing a trusting relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families, the local community and the school is essential to maintain and improve attendance levels. It requires commitment from all staff, and needs to be viewed as an ongoing and long term process. A key element in this process is open, honest and respectful communication.
- Schools, students and families need to be 'on the same page' with regard to the importance of education in general and attendance at school specifically, which, particularly for high school students, involves building the connection between education and post-school options.
- Improving attendance requires a multifaceted approach, and what works in certain schools may not be as effective in others because of particular local circumstances.
- Once policies, staff, programs and/or structures are in place that are effective in improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, they need to be embedded within the school in order to be sustainable (which may require ongoing funding). Long-term sustainability requires that they not depend upon a single individual who may leave that role.

These key lessons can be distilled into a set of 6 key elements for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Figure 2.2). These 6 elements were present in all 9 of the schools selected for inclusion in the consultations. It is important to note that the schools were selected precisely because they either had consistently high levels of attendance among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or because they had managed to raise their levels of attendance.



These key elements relate directly to the 6 priority domains of the ATSIEAP:

- readiness for school
- engagement and connections
- literacy and numeracy, leadership
- attendance
- quality teaching and workforce development
- pathways to post-school options.

For example, the readiness for school domain affects students’ engagement with and success at school. The engagement and connections domain has a direct link to building good relationships with families and the community, and the quality teaching and workforce development domain affects whether students view particular schools as safe places that they want to be.

The reason why these 6 elements are essential to successfully improving and maintaining attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is that they address the factors underpinning non-attendance. For example, schools that have been successful at building relationships with families and communities have demonstrated an understanding of the reasons why relationships may have been strained in the past and have chosen strategies to address those issues specifically.

How schools might use these findings

There are numerous ways that schools and school communities can use these findings. As well as using the key lessons in Box 2.7 as a 'starting point' for an initial discussion about attendance in their own school, schools could also:

- use the 4 domains to begin to identify the particular barriers to school attendance that are relevant for their communities
- use the 6 key elements in Figure 2.2 as a framework to identify strengths/areas of improvement for their school
- assess whether any of the strategies in the report might be appropriate for their school.

3 Case studies

The purpose of the case studies is to highlight the key elements in the experiences of schools that have either raised or maintained high levels of attendance among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Three case studies are presented, covering regional and metropolitan schools; primary, secondary and combined schools; and both the government and independent sectors. No case study for remote schools is presented because the unique attributes/challenges of the 2 remote schools included in the Project could lead to their being identified (which contravenes the conditions of the ethics agreement).

Each of the case studies includes:

- a description of the school
- a description of the community
- a description of the key issues facing the school related to attendance
- a description of the strategies used to improve attendance
- key lessons/mechanisms for other schools
- a description of ongoing issues/future plans

Future case studies could be based around a template to ensure that information is collected against the 4 domains affecting attendance (Box 2.1), each of the 6 key elements for improving school attendance (Box 2.7) and the specific strategies (Box 2.2).

The case studies in this chapter provide coverage of:

- 8 of the 9 strategies from the literature review (with parental consequences being the only strategy not to be covered). Following the case studies, is a summary table that provides an overview of examples of the types of strategies used in the case study schools
- all 4 categories of factors affecting school attendance:
 - student factors
 - family factors
 - structural/community factors
 - school factors
- all 6 key elements for improving school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:
 - make school a place students want to be
 - build good relationships with families and communities
 - reinforce value of attendance and education
 - monitor and follow up attendance
 - take a holistic approach to identifying and meeting children’s needs
 - increase students’ engagement with and success at school.

To take full advantage of the richness of the information provided by the schools, the case studies are provided in narrative form.

School 1

School 1 is an independent, faith-based school with between 300 and 500 students, a quarter of whom are Indigenous. The school consists of a preschool, primary school and high school. It is located close to a major highway but in bush surroundings, a short drive from the closest town centre. Some students travel up to 1.5 hours by bus to attend the school.

The school has undergone a growth in enrolments in recent years. This includes a doubling in the number of Indigenous students, a factor partly attributed to a change in housing policy which has seen a number of community members returning to the local area.

Approximately 11% of the local population is Indigenous, and there is a large difference in the highest year of school completed (17% of Indigenous adults in the local area completed Year 12 compared with 28% of non-Indigenous adults). The area is characterised by high levels of Indigenous unemployment (approximately 30%) and reported tensions between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, which have a historical legacy. There is also friction within the Indigenous community itself. While health and community services are available, they are not always accessible, with long wait lists for basic services.

The situations of the Indigenous students at the school reflect those in the broader community. Staff report that a number of the Indigenous children have challenging home situations, with an estimated 20% of the students facing issues of alcohol or drug abuse within their families.

The school has several key philosophical principles (described below) that reflect the ways in which it structures its staffing, invests its resources and addresses issues related to school attendance by its Indigenous students. These principles align well with the 6 key elements for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These principles include:

- The school, the teachers and the families need to believe in students' potential. Students are given a '*fresh start*' when they enter the school – although previous behaviour/issues are recognised, they are not allowed to define the student. Staff need to be seen as '*agents of change*'.
- Part of the role of the school is to work with the students and families to '*create dreams*'. The school sets high expectations for both behaviour and schoolwork, but also provides supports to ensure that students can meet those expectations. Practical paths need to be provided to higher education, traineeships, jobs, and so on.
- School needs to be a '*safe place*', particularly for those with difficult home lives. School also needs to be viewed as a safe place for families, which requires '*intentional*' efforts to break down barriers and make families feel welcome.
- In order to be effective, schools need to deal with the '*whole child*', which means addressing their basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, safety, health, sleep), their emotional needs (for example, to have a stable adult in their lives who cares about them and to provide counselling when appropriate), and their academic needs (many students have come to the school who are illiterate). Students will have difficulty concentrating and learning if they come to school hungry, ill or with a lack of sleep: *sometimes welfare comes first and school second*.
- Building engagement, loyalty and pride in the school is an important goal, and can be fostered by making students and families feel valued and accepted.

On a practical level, the school uses a number of strategies to achieve these goals. The school used National Partnership funds to employ an Indigenous support officer whose role is to liaise with families and teachers, help teachers understand the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children learn and work, and give children a voice. The officer focuses on all aspects of children's welfare, and will do home visits, pick children up and take them to school, take them to health appointments (for example, the diabetes clinic), and liaise with community services.

The school provides the Indigenous support officer with discretionary funds to address students' needs in ways that respect students' dignity. For example, the officer keeps a supply of healthy food; students who come to school hungry or don't have lunch are provided with food discreetly. Some students have had issues with their uniforms and school shoes being taken by others at home or are unable to wash them because they don't have a washing machine; those students can keep their uniforms and shoes at school. The Indigenous support officer will wash the uniforms, and the students will get dressed at school.

The staff also work on the practical aspects of developing and encouraging post-school options by investigating scholarships and opportunities, completing paperwork/application forms, and helping navigate practicalities (for example, housing).

A large part of the Indigenous support officer's role is to build bridges with the local community. Importantly, this task is seen as an important component of all staff members' roles, not just something done by the Indigenous support officer. This has required an understanding of the issues underpinning the reluctance on the part of some families to engage with the school. For example, a number of students were living with grandmothers or aunts and uncles who were members of the Stolen Generation. Staff had to work together to recognise this issue and to develop ways of creating a safe environment for these children at the school.

The strategies for developing these relationships and creating a safe environment have included formal occasions such as NAIDOC week, assemblies, barbeques, contact with families to let them know when things are going well with the students, informal contact outside school, home visits, and spending time with families on occasions such as funerals.

NAIDOC week celebrations indicate the thought and effort that went into making it an important symbolic event for the whole school and community. The celebration went on for the whole week, and included events such as Indigenous games, an art display by a prominent Indigenous artist, dance performances, lunch, the construction of a tent embassy, and a special NAIDOC week uniform designed by the students.

Staff members work to identify the best contact person for each student, which may be an auntie or grandmother. The school also reaches out to community leaders before events to invite them personally so they are aware of the event and are encouraged to attend.

Examples of incidents that show families do see the school as a partner included an occasion when a family felt that they couldn't say no to their children staying home from school; they wanted the school to say no. Another example is when a new child from the community came to the school and displayed inappropriate behaviour with other children (that is, fighting/bullying); the other families said that they sent their children to this particular school precisely so that their children would not be exposed to that type of behaviour (which many had experienced in the community).

Students' individual academic needs are met through tutoring and one-on-one work with teachers and academic aides. Because of the extent of hearing problems and the lack of

community-funded services to address them, the school is considering hiring a speech pathologist on a part-time basis.

Attendance data are collected electronically and monitored daily, with phone calls to families when children do not attend. When students miss 30 days, the schools are required to report them to Child Protective Services, which often then refers them back to the school for management.

The principal and staff acknowledge that these successes have required long-term and ongoing effort. It has taken time over the years to develop the culture of inclusion within the school staff, and has required some changes in staff.

The factors that have enabled this success have included:

- strong leadership
- flexibility to select staff with both the appropriate skills and philosophy. Part of this philosophy includes treating everyone with respect and dignity
- an Indigenous support officer who is highly skilled and highly respected within the school and community
- evidence that, at a basic level, families believe in the school and its goals by virtue of the fact that they chose to send their children there
- commitment on the part of staff and a willingness to go 'above and beyond'
- the ability to expel students who, after repeated attempts to work with them and their families, continue to display disruptive behaviour
- the return to school, as role models, of students who have completed Year 12 and gone on to employment or higher education
- the National Partnership funding, which enabled the school to hire the Indigenous support officer.

In spite of their successes, however, the school continues to struggle on several fronts. One is the small set of family and community members who do not engage in education and actively discourage attendance and achievement. The second is the lack of partnership from other community services/organisations which should be working together with the school to address students' welfare needs – in particular, with the police, Child Protective Services, and local health services. The school believes this stems from several factors – lack of resources, a view that the school can/should be able to deal with the issues on their own (particularly as they are a non-government school), a view of low expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families, and the historical legacy of poor relationships between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

School 2

School 2 is a medium-sized (between 100 and 200 students), government-sector primary school in a metropolitan area, and is in a residential setting. Physically, the school is bright and welcoming. Approximately half the students are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The school is located in a low socioeconomic area, which is characterised by high unemployment rates, high rates of government housing, high numbers of children with English as a second language and a 'super transient' / mobile population. According to the principal, the area also has a high incidence of domestic violence, drug abuse, alcohol abuse and sexual abuse, all of which affect the students in the school. The school has an onsite

social worker, child psychologist, chaplain and school nurse to address these broader welfare issues.

When the current principal and vice-principal came on board, the school had extremely poor attendance among its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, poor relationships with the families and larger community and low staff morale. The school had a local reputation as 'dysfunctional' and went through a period of decline in student numbers.

Recently, however, it has experienced a resurgence. Attendance is a priority for the school: *this has been our mantra for a long time. You get the kids into school and they can actually learn something.* Although the challenges in the students' family lives have remained (and some have intensified), the way in which the school has dealt with them has become '*proactive, not reactive*'. Attendance has increased among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, relationships with families have improved, staff morale is high and the school has seen a large increase in enrolments, with more (middle class) families from surrounding neighbourhoods choosing to attend. The principal attributes the change as follows:

I think it was just having staff who wanted to be here. Selecting them because of the skill set that we needed. We don't have any 'in your face' staff; their behaviour management, classroom management, is fantastic. They take care for every child, not just the ones in their classroom. Which is really nice to see. A staff member will be walking past a child and can see that they're upset about something, and they will take the time to find out why. And you'll have 5 or 6 different staff actually know about that 1 child within a very short time. And the children get that, I think. They know that they're going to be helped. So I think if you could have a top 5 that would be 1 of them. How do you get the children into school? Well, create that environment that they want to be in. We'll show you some of the visual stuff as well. Some of the hands-on stuff, because it's not all about us being nice people and smiling. There is another side to it as well.

Unlike most other government schools, school 2 was given the ability to select its own staff by the state Education department approximately 6 years ago. This factor, together with the skills and commitment of staff and the school leadership, has led to zero staff turnover in the past 5 years (with the addition of more staff as well).

The school identified that relationships between the school and the community had previously been adversarial in nature and were not productive for the students, families or staff. Hence, improving relationships with families and the community has been a key priority. The school has focused on being proactive, with ongoing one-to-one communication between staff and families: *The more they work with us, the more they got to realise that they were valued and their opinions were valued.* In addition, the school leadership emphasises the importance of treating the community with respect and displaying an attitude of helpfulness not blame. Part of this positive atmosphere is created in the front office, where the staff are friendly and well liked by the children and the families.

The school also employs 3 Aboriginal officers who are all well regarded in the community and by the school staff. It has used part of its Focus Schools/Next Steps funding to hire a community liaison officer who works with the vice-principal and his team. Some of her functions include going out to families in the community to discuss personalised learning plans in students' homes rather than requiring the parents to come into the school. The school is also using its funding for literacy and numeracy specific programs to address the needs of its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who require extra, individualised assistance.

Attendance is monitored regularly, and the school emphasises to both students and families that if a student's attendance drops below 90%, they are at risk. Staff phone the parents and

then the vice-principal and 1 of the Aboriginal officers will go out together to make home visits. Again, however, the school emphasised that these visits are done from the following perspective: *how can I help you get him back into school? And they might say 'we're embarrassed because we've got no food'. 'Oh right, I'll organise a food parcel through such and such a group, and we'll organise lunch, and we'll do this, we'll do this, we'll see your kid tomorrow, won't we?'*

The school uses a system of positive rewards for students and families for both attendance and behaviour. One point the school emphasised was that they reward children who are constantly doing the right things, not just the children who have been struggling and then do the right things. Some of the programs/incentives include:

- Passport system where families get 'paid' for their children attending school (they can then use the credits for uniforms, lunches, excursions, incursions, school resources such as books, pencils, pens). The feedback has been that this has been particularly empowering for parents who may be unemployed and thus are unable to contribute 'financially' to their child's education
- children getting 'paid' in sports equipment when they improve their attendance
- a 'prize wheel' that gets spun at assembly for the children with high attendance
- students who behave well or improve their attendance getting a pass to go to a special 'activities room' during the day
- a healthy pizza lunch with the principal once a term for students with 100% attendance (or less than that but with reasonable cause).

The 'reasonable cause' recognises that sometimes factors affecting children's attendance are beyond their control – that it is not their fault that they could not get to school on particular days. For example: *we've had situations where mum and dad have gone missing for 4 or 5 days, and it's the kids actually trying to get the siblings to school.*

The school also offers the Count Us In program. This program offers gym memberships to parents involved in the exercise program and conducts weekly workshops with parents. In addition, the school runs a playgroup for children aged 0–3, as well as a formal preschool/pre-kindergarten program.

One of the unique characteristics of this school is the extent to which it has developed relationships and partnerships with other community organisations/educational institutions to support the school's academic and welfare roles. For example:

- Half of the social worker's time is paid for by school funds, the other half through an outreach program.
- Half of the school nurse's time is paid for by school funds, the other half by the Health department.
- The school works closely with local universities to:
 - bring third-year speech pathologist students in to screen all children in the school. Another groups of students will then come into the school to do their pracs with the at risk students
 - present behaviour management workshops to students in the teaching program
 - hand pick teaching students to do their third-year and fourth-year pracs at the school; if a job becomes available they can offer it to that graduate
 - have nutrition students present classes and programs (including cooking) within the school with students and with parents at playgroup.

The school continues to deal with the litany of challenges faced by the students within their own families, but does so from a perspective of strength and optimism: *we know we're doing some really good programs, social, emotionally and academically – we know that. The results don't always show through immediately [in NAPLAN]. But if we had a child from K through to 7, for that 9 years, I tell you what: they'd leave this school well equipped. But I think, maybe, there's 2 children who have been here from pre-primary to Year 7, probably less now.*

School 3

School 3 is a large (>300 students), culturally diverse senior high school located in a regional centre. Approximately 15% of the students are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and another 20% are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Students can travel up to 60 kilometres to attend the school. According to staff, not all the Aboriginal families in the community get along, but this is not reflected in the relationships between the students at the school. Being away from school for 'sorry business' and for extended family reasons is an issue for the Aboriginal students.

The area itself is socioeconomically disadvantaged, and the local community experiences high rates of domestic violence and drug and alcohol misuse. To address these issues, the school has a strong student services team (seen as essential to the functioning of the school, as well as to the students' welfare), which includes year coordinators, a chaplain and a school psychologist. In addition, the school has extremely strong connections with local community and health services, and works closely with the local police.

The school's leadership worked to ensure that teachers understood the impacts these issues had on the students and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. For example:

I think one of the things is helping staff getting an understanding of generational poverty and the impact of generational poverty. We do have staff who demand 'hand over your mobile phone, because that's the policy'. Well...some kids from some backgrounds will tell them to shove it. They'd never see the phone again if they gave it to anybody at home. And it's understanding those sorts of impacts and generational poverty and a low SEI [Socio-economic Index] school obviously impacts on a whole range of kids in different ways, but impacts on Aboriginal kids as well because they know that what they have right now is what they have, and they're going to protect it...whereas we would use the strategy of 'you know the deal, I know you need your phone but I'll make sure, I'll personally make sure, you get it back at the end of the day and if you need to call somebody, then we can get you to a phone – or I'll let you use your mobile phone'. We obviously have policies in that area but it's also...as we say to staff, there's a lot of grey between black and white.

The school also pointed out that, in general, the strategies it used for its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are: *... more like low socioeconomic strategies, and I think if you spoke to schools where they had no Indigenous kids or very low percentages, but it was low socioeconomic, you would probably find very similar strategies serving the same function.*

The school also emphasised the importance of having a multifaceted approach:

I don't believe any one approach suits all the young people that you might have in your school. I think you have to look at the full spectrum. I do think also...you need to work on the progress of getting your teachers within the school with better understanding, particularly to the teaching and learning adjustments...and so the classroom is a welcoming environment and an environment where the young person can engage. And that's really not very profound. That's my practical experience.

Also underpinning the multifaceted approach was developing productive relationships with young people and with the parents and community. Staff found it essential that students have access to both trusted male and female staff members. The importance of front office staff in building relationships with both students and staff was acknowledged.

The school found that families want to be engaged, and that communication early and often can often not only head off confrontations but also lead to parents and the school working in partnership.

The parents seem to really want to be on board. They want to know that admin is involved in things, not just the teacher...when a student's been suspended or stormed off, I always try to get hold of the parent before the student gets home, to explain what's happened, what's in place, and what's going on before they get some sort of twisted one-sided view of what's happened, which can also cause big dramas. And 99% of the time that really gets the parents or grandparents or extended family, guardians, on side dealing with the actual problem. It doesn't actually usually solve the problem, because often that student won't have been used to the guardian or parent or whoever's been proactive in actually stepping in, and when they do the student can be very resistant to that, for example run away from home or that kind of thing, but it does sort of start to keep a gentle but firm pressure on from all directions to keep attending, keep behaving, keep following...

It's also giving staff the confidence, too, to make contact with Aboriginal parents. A lot of the time they'll come and say to me [the principal] 'so and so hasn't been coming to school' and they're their form teacher. I've said 'well, have you rung the parents?' 'Oh...I'm not doing that.' 'Why not? Why come and tell me? You'd ring someone else's parents.' We're trying to get staff to be confident enough in ringing up.

The school developed a school and community partnership document. It felt that the development of the document itself was a useful strategy for building relationships and breaking down barriers, but: ... *trying to make it a living document is an ongoing challenge. Staff don't seem to have huge ownership of this document. Making parents aware of what's actually in there [is difficult] – if you gave that to an Aboriginal parent they wouldn't sit there and read it.*

Specific attendance strategies used by the school include:

- weekly monitoring of attendance with follow-up, which includes home visits by a combination of the Aboriginal and Islander education officers, the head of student services and the principal
- engagement strategy for all at risk students
- aspirant program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- sports academy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boys
- behavioural contracts – termed A Plan for Success (which included setting individual targets and goals that could be as simple as being able to watch sporting team compete)
- requirement of 90% attendance for major school events (including the school ball as well as sporting activities).

One of the school's challenges has been how to reintegrate students who are chronically absent back into the academic setting. The student services team works closely with the teaching staff to ensure as smooth a transition as possible, using individual education plans (IEPs) as a tool.

Maybe their attendance is below 30% getting down to almost zero for some of them and even to get them here...if they did turn up on any one day I think, from my point of view, it's having something ready to roll for those kids. Whatever culture they come from, if their truancy is really,

really high, and they turn up to school one day, they have to walk into a welcoming environment and not some sort of confusion... 'oh, oh, what class have you got?', 'oh, so you haven't got a pen; so sit there and wait for half an hour while I sort it.' You have to have something like ready to go and have to encourage staff to do that, too. So, we've got all our IEPs done online on the server so staff can go in there and put their own bits in there. It's not only that they're in there, it's when I look at those IEPs I can tell if a staff member has missed a kid or what's in there is inadequate. I can tell straight away that that staff member is not going to be prepared for that kid to come in to their class, and I know that when I turn up with that kid to macramé or something and the teacher's not ready for them, then that's going to cause an issue. The kid will feel embarrassment. They won't want to do the word sleuth. They will want to do what the other kids are doing. And so I have to make sure that staff have got something in place. It's an identifying method of which staff, I think, are going to have issues when those kids turn up and I can go and see them and encourage them to have something ready to go. And the heads of department can use that as a tool, too, to make sure there's something ready to go. Like I said, it's not just for Aboriginal kids but it's across the board.

Key areas that the school has identified for additional work in areas related to attendance include constructing an onsite community services centre, working with primary school students to improve their transition into high school, developing programs specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, continued staff development and developing a resiliency program.

Summary

Table 3.1 aligns examples of the types of strategies used by the case study schools to improve the attendance of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the 8 types of strategies found to be effective in the literature review (the ninth, parental consequences, was not reflected in the consultations as it is a government, not a school-initiated, policy). The table shows that, between them, the 3 schools cover the strategies, and that there is some overlap between them.

Table 3.1: Examples of the types of strategies used by the case study schools

Strategy	School 1	School 2	School 3
Student engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalised learning plans • Link to post-school options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalised learning plans • Playgroup and preschool program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sporting program • Personalised learning plans
Literacy/numeracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one tutoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one or small group tutoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one or small group tutoring • Ensuring learning resources meet students' needs
Whole-of-school approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall philosophy • Teaching and behaviour management approaches • Staff development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall philosophy • Teaching and behaviour management approaches • Staff development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall philosophy • Teaching and behaviour management approaches • Staff development
Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide food when required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide food when required • Nutrition program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food program
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awards, rewards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awards, rewards, chocolate wheel • School passport program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awards, rewards • Level of attendance required for extracurricular activities
Transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School organises/coordinates bus transport for all students • Will pick up individual students from their homes when there are attendance issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School coordinates bus transport if necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School coordinates bus transport for all students
Attendance monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily monitoring, follow-up by Indigenous support officer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily monitoring, follow-up by vice-principal and Aboriginal education workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily monitoring, follow-up by principal, welfare team, teachers, and Aboriginal education workers
School/family/community partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inviting community into the school • Home visits • Respect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community partnership agreement • Home visits • Community liaison officer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aspirational program which involves the community • Community partnership agreement

4 Sharing the evidence—a web-based strategy

Participants in the consultations were enthusiastic about the development of a potential website dedicated to improving school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

You know what I'd like to see? Having a website as a resource. As a one-stop resource [for example] here's a list of scholarships that are going this year...this is the website to go to, this is the email address, because these things are hard to find...or health. These are the resources, these are the issues, so you might have a school that's new to Indigenous education – these are the issues that you will confront, these are the things that you need to look out for...

Case studies – for me as a school leader, those are what I'm looking at and reading, that's what's useful to me. So any common threads that are across schools, pulled into some kind of paper, that's something that I would read myself with the leadership team and then I'd share with the staff, and then get ideas...say okay, here's some broad principles – you know, respect, partnerships with the communities, with the families, you know, whatever it is – what do you think that could look like in our context? So to take whatever the broad principles are that is success, and then, here's some examples of how it's worked at other places – how do you think we could apply that to our context?

I would use that, definitely, as a principal. And I'm sure our attendance officer would if she knew that there was something out there. You know, it's about sharing and it's about 'oh geez, look at what they did there'.

I'd want success stories, research, attendance, breakfast, whatever it is, like the whole ramification of things that you're going to tackle if you have any issues with attendance, government initiatives, funding, programs, even PLPs [personalised learning plans] for schools. Like a toolbox that schools can say: here's a model one, and here's a case study of how this school does it, they do it through this process so I can take it and modify it...and there's many facets, and maybe schools might not have thought about 1 facet or 2 facets, you know what I mean, unless they actually see it they might not think about it...An ideas forum. Like the Department of Rec [Recreation] – I would never have thought of that but for the fact that I sat next to this guy and we got chatting about it and they ran a traditional Indigenous games session for us.

The key messages were as follows:

- Staff would like a 'one-stop-shop' website of issues/information/ strategies/ resources related to school attendance.
- Staff thought it could serve an important 'educational community' function; that is, the website could be a place where they could ask for help from other schools/experts if they had a problem and where they could also share their experiences and ideas.
- Staff would like the website to be a place that highlights success stories.

In short, staff thought that a searchable evidence base of strategies should be a key component of the website, but that including the other elements would make it more practical and useful for them.

They felt the primary users would be principals, Aboriginal education/liaison officers, teachers, school administrators, policy analysts and those from related community services who deal with students. To a lesser extent, they felt that some parents and students might find it useful as well.

However, participants also had questions about whether the website would/should be focused on issues and strategies for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students **only**, or whether it would be broader in its approach, while including content that was specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This issue will be addressed later in the chapter.

Guiding principles

The consultations provided clear guiding principles for the development of a website:

- It needs to be clear in its purpose.
- It needs to be easy to navigate and should be checked carefully for broken links.
- It should include information/links to the factors related to attendance issues (for example, health, housing, domestic violence, substance use).
- In order to be useful, it would need to be updated regularly.
- The assessment of the underlying evidence needs to be seen as reliable, valid and transparent.

Content

Feedback on the potential content and layout of the website was sought from participants using an iterative process. A clear set of elements emerged from the consultations regarding website content. Participants wanted:

- a case study highlighted on the front page
- links, particularly to attendance policies, resources, staff training/professional development opportunities, funding sources/opportunities, scholarships, and post-school options. Participants were particularly keen to have links to universities with strong transition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (for example, Charles Sturt). They also wanted links to Department of Recreation sites or other sporting organisations/opportunities
- information on the issues 'behind' non-attendance, with links to resources for dealing with them (for example, health-related issues such as eye and ear problems and how to organise screening, and so on)
- an opportunity for linking up or engaging directly with other schools. This could include an 'ideas forum' with specific topics (for example, ideas for NAIDOC week) as well as a moderated bulletin board where they could ask for help from other schools
- a separate section where Aboriginal education/liaison officers could connect directly with each other to share their experiences
- the searchable evidence base itself, which would include relevant articles, resources and practical tips
- summaries of key articles or issues that principals could use to foster discussion with their staff.

In addition, it was suggested that online professional development could be provided directly through the website.

Participants also wanted to be able to sign-up for notifications (either email or text) for when new content went up on the website.

High-level requirements for website development

If a website were to be developed, the AIHW recommends adopting the following good practice principles in relation to its establishment and management:

- clear identification of the website's functions and intended users
- establishment of ongoing processes to identify users' information needs
- quick and easy accessibility to information and materials for intended users, in formats and distribution modes that are appropriate for their individual and workplace contexts
- provision of information that is valid, reliable, current, comprehensive and useful for intended users
- establishment of robust quality assurance mechanisms, including quality standards and criteria for material acquisition, review, synthesis, research (where applicable), publication and dissemination
- engagement of a range of personnel (both internal and external, as needed) with an appropriate mix of qualifications, experience and expertise to undertake the website's identified functions for its target audiences
- implementation of stakeholder satisfaction surveys.

It is imperative that any website development occurs in accordance with the 2000 Government Online Strategy that requires all departments and agencies to comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 (World Wide Web Consortium), and with web policies and guidelines set out in the Australian Government Web Publishing standards <webpublishing.agimo.gov.au>.

Purpose/potential users of the website

Based on the feedback from the consultations, the purposes of an attendance strategies website would be to:

- house a collection of successful strategies for improving the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a manner that provides ease of access and practical support to users
- provide resources or links to resources that support these successful attendance strategies. This may include funding opportunities for schools, toolkits for particular strategies, professional development opportunities for staff, scholarship opportunities for students, and post-school training/education opportunities
- provide an opportunity for schools to support one another. This can be through facilitated topics or sharing of key issues and potential solutions
- provide an opportunity for Aboriginal workers/liaison officers to share ideas, support one another and to overcome issues of working in isolation.

One issue requiring further consultation with stakeholders is the extent to which an attendance strategies website should be branded as being specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. By definition, the evidence base would include strategies relevant to all students (and international as well as Australian evidence), as well as strategies that are specific to the needs/circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The preference of the participants in the consultations was that the website be branded as a general attendance strategy website, with highlighted content that was specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Functionality

The specific functions that would support the purposes/content desired by the participants in the consultation are described below.

Main navigation

A front screen should categorise content by both audience segment (principals/schools, Aboriginal education/liaison officers, communities, parents) and topic/concept-based information (links, policies/resources). This would give visitors a choice on how they want to find information between audience segment and kind of content.

Each of the navigation items could then be supported by a 'pop open' menu that would show the pages at the next level down. This would not only speed access to these pages, but also reinforce the visitor's mental map of the site's structure.

Each section should contain site content selected for that audience (written articles, 'pre-prepared' search results), but the search form present on every page would allow users to find their own way through the collection.

The next screens for principals/schools and for Aboriginal education/liaison officers could provide an option for joining a closed, moderated community. Only recognised education providers/employees would be permitted to join these groups.

The next screens for links and policies/resources would take visitors to the pages with relevant material.

Search for strategies

The searchable collection should include assessed articles and the key practical tips/things to think about for each of the strategies. For example, if a user clicked on 'engagement programs – sporting programs', it would bring up:

- a description of the theory/mechanisms behind them
- assessed articles related to it
- links to organisations that offer the program/resources for starting programs
- case studies of schools that have used this strategy successfully
- practical tips/hints/things to consider, for example:
 - If a program is only for boys, will you provide another opportunity for girls?
 - What will you do if the standards for attendance in the program are lower than the school's attendance?
 - Be aware that if a program is for Indigenous students only, this may generate some resentment within the school.

Issues related to developing the online evidence base

The online evidence base could have features such as:

- a publications page that houses the issues papers, resource sheets and annual papers as they are released
- an Assessed Collection page that houses summaries of key research and evaluations on what works, or does not work, to improve school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As in other clearinghouses, the material housed in the online collection could be catalogued, indexed and classified by subject, by the 6 priority domains from the ATSIEAP and by type of publication to enable effective searches. An Assessed Collection could be searched by a range of additional criteria. Links to the original sources of the material in the online collections could be provided where copyright restrictions enable this. Links to certain material may not be able to be directly provided because of copyright issues, however.

An Assessed Collection is likely to focus on evaluations of programs and activities, but it could also include a broader range of documents, such as key policy or research papers. Other recommendations include:

- using sources from Australian and international literature
- including intervention and evaluation research of a program or activity, including both process evaluations and outcome evaluations
- including cost-benefit and/or cost-effectiveness analyses of programs and activities
- including research about adapting and implementing non-Indigenous-specific (mainstream) policies and programs for Indigenous Australians
- including research about programs, strategies and practices that specifically address traumatised individuals and communities.

Items could be categorised across a number of variables, including type of methodology, whether Indigenous people are included, and the country and region of the study.

The question of what material to include in the underlying database and how to ensure that only reliable and valid information is included are key issues. The AIHW recommends the following criteria for selection:

- Articles that appear in peer-reviewed journals are automatically eligible for inclusion.
- Government-approved reports/publications are automatically eligible for inclusion.
- Material recommended by the scientific advisors is automatically eligible for inclusion.
- Other potential material, such as searchable case studies, practical hints and resources, would go through a review process developed by the Board/Reference Group.

Moderated collaboration

One of the key functions that participants wanted from the website was the ability to engage in an online community of education practitioners. There are 3 main options for school-to-school support:

- The site manager provides a topic for discussion and moderates it.
- The site manager provides a 'topics for discussion' section, whereby a school could post a question and others could respond.
- The website provides a section where a school could seek more one-to-one discussions with personnel from other schools. (For example, a school could post its name/contact details and ask for schools that have had similar experiences to contact them directly and privately to discuss the issue.)

All these options are valid and provide different functions.

An additional issue relates to whether the discussions should be 'open' or 'closed'. Open discussions would allow any interested user to post on the website. While this approach would most likely attract more users, it would be resource intensive to moderate. The recommended approach would be to have closed discussions, where users have to register

to be part of the community (for example, they would have to be a verified school staff member); users would be assigned a user name/password to participate. This approach would still require moderation, but participants would have to agree to a set of rules for participation, and the moderation could occur after postings.

Communication strategy

Developing a communication strategy that outlines the key communications activities and tools to engage with key stakeholders and that promotes access to and use of the website will be essential to the success of the online tool.

The AIHW recommends that some of the key elements for the communication strategy include tools such as:

- regular e-newsletters (at least 6 per year) to a subscriber list that provide information on issues related to school attendance and additions to the online collection and website. Hard copies could also be posted
- tailored website metadata that are highly visible and retrievable by major and subject-specific search engines
- links from the attendance strategies website to other websites and resources on relevant Indigenous issues (both education-specific and more general), and arranging for reciprocal links
- an events calendar on the website covering relevant events such as research, evaluation and policy conferences
- engaging with teaching programs at universities to ensure that students are aware of the website and its purposes.

Potential outreach activities could include:

- organising a public conference/seminar to coincide with the launch
- representing the online evidence base at conferences to do with education, attendance, policy specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, research, and evaluation through means such as information booths, conference satchel inserts and poster/oral presentations as appropriate
- promoting any publications/resources developed as part of the project
- presenting to and meeting with Australian and state and territory government departments with responsibilities most relevant to improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Ways of seeking user feedback include a satisfaction survey, which could be conducted every 2 years and be distributed through the website, along with a small number of interviews with key stakeholders. In addition, feedback from users of the website could be encouraged through the Helpdesk and from those participating in seminars/conferences or other outreach activities.

Appendix A Information sent to state Education Department contacts for nominations of schools

Email sent to contacts

Thank you all so much for speaking with me about the School Attendance Project. As discussed, based on the literature review, the AIHW has put together a list of the strategies/interventions that have evidence showing their effectiveness at raising school attendance. We would now ask your help in putting together the names of some schools that match up with those types of successful strategies in your state.

There are 2 documents attached. The first provides an overview and examples of the strategies. The second asks for names of schools that you would propose for consideration for inclusion in the consultation phase of this project. We'd appreciate it if you'd be able to return the completed form to us on 1 May.

Document 1: Schools profile for school attendance project

The types of strategies/interventions selected below for the schools profile are based on the findings from AIHW's review of the relevant literature (both Indigenous-specific and mainstream) in Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and Canada. They represent strategies which have shown a demonstrated level of effectiveness in raising school attendance rates. Because the literature review was reliant upon published reports/evaluations, states/territories may be aware of additional effective strategies without published evaluations.

The final list of schools/communities selected for consultation will ideally include a mix of:

- Metropolitan, regional, and remote schools
- Early childhood, primary, secondary schools
- Small, medium, and large schools
- Schools with high, medium and low proportions of Indigenous students
 - Definitions of high, medium and low would need to be determined. One option is for AIHW to determine cut-offs based on a bell curve, if jurisdictions are able to provide information on the % of students who are Indigenous for each school.
- Government and non-government schools (Including Catholic and Independent).

Table A1.1: Overview of types of strategies, examples, and applicable school years

Type of strategy/ intervention	Examples (note—a guide, not an exhaustive list)	Applicable school years		
		Early childhood	Primary	High school
Direct incentive programs (for parents and students)	Specific rewards for good attendance Passport program No School /No Pool policy Bicycles for students		X	X
Non-academic achievement/ engagement programs	Participation in performing arts or sports (contingent upon attendance or where the aim is to increase attendance through mentoring)—for example, Girls from Oz, Clontarf Foundation After-school clubs, cultural activities within schools DRUMBEAT		X	X
Improving attendance by improving literacy/ numeracy skills of the students	Scaffolded literacy program ABRACADABRA Bilingual education Cultural awareness/ understanding training for school staff	X	X	X
Parental consequences for poor attendance	NTER intervention, Cape York reforms		X	X
Nutrition programs	School-based breakfast/ lunch programs, particularly those that involve parents, community members, and teachers	X	X	X
Attendance monitoring programs	Where attendance is monitored regularly, early intervention strategies are applied, and where monitoring is regularly reported on Tri-border attendance strategy		X	X
Whole-of-school approach (where the focus is on the school/staff and ensuring that the school is a welcoming place for Indigenous students)	Specialised teachers, outreach/liaison officers Strategies adapted to meet needs of the individual school Middle Years Reform program Indigenous education support structures	X	X	X
School/family/ community partnerships (broader than the whole-of-school approach listed above)	Transition programs that focus on both children and families Education programs that focus on the parents/carers School connectedness/engagement/outreach Moorditj Coolangars Community Hub FAST. Galiwin’Ku program	X	X	X
School liaison officers/ Aboriginal education officers/workers	Where increases in attendance can be directly attributed to these staff members and the particular ways in which they work (for example, community engagement, monitoring, and so on)	X	X	X
Transport to school	Community buses Walking School Bus program	X	X	X
Other effective strategies you may be aware of, but which may not have published evaluations		X	X	X
Individual schools that have been able to increase their attendance rates for Indigenous students but that do not necessarily fit one of the above categories.		X	X	X

Document 2 Template used to identify schools for the Project

Please provide the names of schools in your state/territory that have successfully employed the types of strategies/interventions listed below and which you think should be considered for consultation. The number of schools per strategy that you propose is at your discretion – for example, we are **not** expecting you to provide three schools for every strategy (for example, a metropolitan, regional, and remote/very remote school). We recognise that in some states there may be no schools that have used particular strategies, and that a single school may have used multiple strategies. In that case, please list the school under each applicable strategy. Please also tick the appropriate boxes for each school’s characteristics. Once each state/territory has returned its suggestions, there will be consultation about the final list of schools to be contacted for inclusion in the Project.

Table A1.2: Template given to jurisdictions to provide examples of schools that use strategies/interventions to encourage attendance

Type of strategy/ intervention	Name of school(s)/town	Type			Sector		Size/population		Location		
		Pre-school	Primary	High school	Govt	Non-govt	No. students	% Indig.	Metro.	Regional	Remote/very remote
Direct incentive programs (for parents and students)											
Non-academic achievement/ engagement programs											
Improving attendance by improving literacy/ numeracy skills of the students											
Parental consequences for poor attendance											
Nutrition programs											
Attendance monitoring programs											
Whole-of-school approach (where the focus is on the school/staff and ensuring that the school is a welcoming place for Indigenous students)											
School/family/ community partnerships (broader than the whole-of-school approach listed above)											

(continued)

Table A1.2 (continued): Template given to jurisdictions to provide examples of schools that use strategies/interventions to encourage attendance

Type of strategy/ intervention	Name of school(s)/town	Type			Sector		Size/pop'n		Location		
		Pre-school	Primary	High school	Govt	Non-govt	No. students	% Indig.	Metro.	Regional	Remote/very remote
School liaison officers/ Aboriginal education officers/workers											
Transport to school											
Other effective strategies you may be aware of, but which may not have published evaluations											
Individual schools that have been able to increase their attendance rates for Indigenous students but that do not necessarily fit one of the above categories.											

Appendix B Matrix of schools for the consultation

Table B1 provides an overview of the coverage of strategies and locations that the 12 schools initially nominated by the state contacts provided. Nine schools were then selected from this list.

Table B1: Twelve potential schools for consultation by location and identified strategies

Location	Strategies									
	Incentives	Non-academic achievement	Literacy/numeracy	Nutrition	Attendance monitoring	Whole of school	Partnerships	Liaison officers/Aboriginal education workers	Transport	Other schools not fitting categories
Metro. areas	School 1		School 1				School 1	School 2	School 2	
	School 3	School 3	School 3	School 3	School 3	School 3	School 3	School 3		
Regional areas					School 4	School 4				
	School 5	School 5			School 6		School 7			School 8
Remote areas	School 9	School 9	School 10	School 11	School 11	School 11	School 12			
						School 9				
						School 10	School 10			

Note: No schools were given for the following strategies: parental consequences and other effective strategies without evaluations.

Appendix C Community profiles

Table C1: Community profiles of the areas in which the schools included in the consultations were located

Census 2011 profile	K-12 school 1	K-12 school 2	High school 1	Primary 1 ^(a)	Primary 2	Primary 3	High School 2	Primary 4	K-12 School 3
Classification	Regional	Regional	Metropolitan	Remote	Metropolitan	Metropolitan	Regional	Regional	Remote
Total persons ^(b)	<16,000	<15,000	>300,000	<500	>35,000	<5,500	<4,500	>30,000	<6,000
Indigenous (%) ^(b)	<9.0	<17.0	<3.0	<92.0	>3.0	>2.0	<10.0	<2.0	<26.0
Indigenous (no.) ^(b)	<1,500	<2,500	<8,500	>300	>1,000	>100	<400	<500	<1,500
Family composition (persons in families)									
Couple families (%)	75.9	70.6	82.0	71.4	80.8	82.7	84.0	86.9	81.0
One parent families (%)	23.0	28.2	17.0	22.4	16.6	14.0	14.7	12.6	17.9
Other families (%)	1.1	1.2	1.0	6.1	2.6	3.3	1.4	0.5	1.1
Total families (persons) ^(b)	<12,000	<11,000	>260,000	>60	<25,000	<4,000	<3,500	<24,000	<4,000
Highest year of school completed (%)									
Year 12	25.5	22.2	50.7	23.7	49.2	56.1	31.9	41.6	41.2
Year 11	6.0	5.5	4.8	17.7	9.0	9.3	11.3	11.9	11.8
Year 10	34.0	33.8	23.2	36.4	19.1	15.3	26.0	28.8	22.5
Lower than Year 10	23.3	24.6	13.4	20.7	11.1	9.5	20.9	10.2	12.7
Not stated	11.2	13.9	7.8	1.5	11.6	9.8	9.9	7.5	11.8
Count of persons aged 15 and over who are no longer attending primary or secondary school ^(b)	<12,500	<11,000	<220,000	<200	<30,000	<4,500	>3,000	<23,000	<4,500
Labour force status^(c)									
Employed (%)	88.6	88.3	93.2	93.5	95.7	94.8	95.9	96.6	97.9
Unemployed (%)	11.5	11.7	6.8	6.5	4.3	5.2	4.1	3.4	2.1
Total in labour force (number) ^(b)	<6,000	>10,000	<130,000	<100	<15,000	<2,000	<2,000	>12,000	<2,500

(a) Labour force status data for Indigenous persons only. Additionally, the total number of families includes multiple family households. There were 49 one-family households.

(b) Approximate numbers have been provided to maintain confidentiality of schools.

(c) ABS Census 2006 data, as 2011 Census data for unemployment are not yet available.

References

- Adams I 1998. The educational plight of Indigenous Australian students in the early years of schooling. *Unicorn*, v.24 (1): 5-15.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011. *Schools, Australia 2010*. Cat. no. 4221.0. Canberra.
- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Unpublished data.
- Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) 2008. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health performance framework report 2008*. Canberra: AHMAC.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2011. *The health and welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 2011*. Cat. no. IHW 42. Canberra: AIHW.
- Barnes BK 2004. *Aboriginal student attendance: including the results of the review's survey of attendance*. Sydney: NSW Aboriginal Education Review.
- Boulden K 2006. *The school attendance of Indigenous students: A literature review*. Canberra: Report prepared for the Alliance of Aboriginal Community Schools by the Department of Education Science and Training.
- Bourke CJ, Rigby, K & Burden J 2000. *Better practice in school attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students*. Melbourne: Report prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs by Monash University.
- Burns J, Thomson N 2013. *Review of ear health and hearing among Indigenous Australians*. Retrieved 31 January 2014 from <http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/other-health-conditions/ear/reviews/our-review>.
- Dunn M 1999. *Tracking literacy development in the Aboriginal community: summary of a research project*. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 22:103-17.
- Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) 2010. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014*. Victoria: MCEECDYA.
- Musser, M 2011. *Taking attendance seriously: How school absences undermine student and school performance in New York City*. NY: The Campaign for Fiscal Equity.
- Purdie N & Buckley S 2010. *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*. Issues Paper No 1, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse.
- Ready, DD 2010. *Socioeconomic disadvantage, school attendance, and early cognitive development: The differential effects of school exposure*. *Sociology of Education*, vol. 83 no. 4: 271-286.
- Winicki J & Jemison K. 2003. *Food insecurity and hunger in the kindergarten classroom: its effect on learning and growth*. *Contemporary Economic Policy* 21:145-157.
- Zubrick SR, Silburn SR, DeMaio JA, Shepherd C, Griffin JA, Dalby RB et al. 2006. *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal children and young people*. Perth: Curtin University of Technology & Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

List of tables

Table 1.1: Characteristics of participating schools.....5

Table 1.2: Characteristics of participants7

Table 1.3: Initially identified strategies7

Table 1.4: Strategies being used by schools as identified through the consultations8

Table 2.1: Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools13

Table 3.1: Examples of the types of strategies used by the case study schools.....49

Table A1.1: Overview of types of strategies, examples, and applicable school years57

Table A1.2: Template given to jurisdictions to provide examples of schools that use strategies/interventions to encourage attendance.....58

Table B1: Twelve potential schools for consultation by location and identified strategies60

Table C1: Community profiles of the areas in which the schools included in the consultations were located61

List of figures

Figure 1.1: Relationships between components of the Project2

Figure 2.1: Hierarchy of levels of attendance and intensity of attendance issues10

Figure 2.2: Key elements for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.....38

List of boxes

- Box 2.1: Factors affecting non-attendance among Indigenous students by domain.....11
- Box 2.2: Effective strategies by domains targeted.....12
- Box 2.3: Summary of issues at the student level, and strategy options16
- Box 2.4: Summary of issues at the family level, and strategy options22
- Box 2.5: Summary of issues at the structural/community level, and strategy options.....26
- Box 2.6: Summary of issues at the school level, and strategy options31
- Box 2.7: Key lessons for developing and implementing effective attendance strategies for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students37

Attachment A: SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project: Literature review

Note this attachment is available as a separate report on the AIHW website
<<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129550211>>.

This report presents detailed findings from the SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project. Bringing together information from a literature review and a series of consultations with schools, it presents key lessons for developing and implementing effective strategies for improving school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.