Review of Aboriginal Education

Chapter 3

Barrwayaygam, Miindalaygam

“Growing and Learning”: The Life Course
The translation of *Growing and Learning* in the Gumbaynggir language is

*Growing (and) learning*
Introduction to “Growing and Learning”

A significant feature of the Review methodology was the extent of consultation undertaken with Aboriginal communities, schools, TAFE campuses and community organisations.

Members of the Review Secretariat facilitated 14 field trips during which Review panel members met with more than four thousand teachers, parents, students and community members. Field trip teams comprised members of the Review Reference Group, Review Secretariat, members of the AECG, employees of DET, both school and TAFE-based, and on several occasions, members of the NSW Teachers Federation.

In all field trips, the composition of the Review teams included both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The Secretariat member assigned to the field trip was responsible for the compilation of a field trip report.

The field trips provided an opportunity for the team to share the experiences and hopes of the many students, their parents and teachers who contributed to the Review.

As the field trips unfolded, the writing team was challenged by the wealth of data collected in the consultative process and considered a range of strategies to effectively analyse the findings.

The writers of this chapter have elected to capture the richness of the data by detailing the opportunities and challenges presented to Aboriginal learners throughout their journey of “life-long learning” as a narrative addressing the nature of the educational process of Aboriginal learners. The writers have described this journey as one of “Growing and Learning”.

Through its six sections, this chapter of the Report attempts to:

- describe the range of educational opportunities and programs relevant to learners of different ages and stages
- identify issues inhibiting improved student participation, retention and performance
- identify policies and programs that have resulted in improved learning outcomes for Aboriginal students
- suggest possible initiatives that will “narrow the gap” in the achievement of Aboriginal students when compared with other learners.

While the responsibility for writing each of the six sections was assigned to one or two members of the Secretariat, each of the sections was drafted as a series of group workshops reflecting the input from a wide range of field trips, submissions and broader consultation.

19 The itineraries of the major field trips are provided in Appendix F.
The Review Team members who assembled and contributed much of the material in this chapter were:

- Sharon Grose       Sections 1 and 2
- Louise Bye         Section 3
- Cindy Berwick      Section 4
- Peter Wilson       Section 4
- Rosemary Livingstone Section 5
- Sue Hanley         Sections 5 and 6
- Gillian Goozee     Section 6.

Many of the observations made in this chapter are further developed in Chapter 4 of the Report, which details recommendations.
Section 1: Prior to School

The Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing and youngest population in New South Wales, with over 50 percent of Aboriginal people under the age of 25 years. This presents a challenge for government agencies and Aboriginal communities to provide for the diverse needs of Aboriginal people, which may not be met through traditional mainstream models.

As at the 2001 Census, the proportion of the Indigenous population of New South Wales 15 years of age was 40.1%, compared to 20.8% of the total New South Wales population (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003b).

Figure 3.1.1: Aboriginal population and total population of New South Wales in 2001, by age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003)
In common with many other Western nations, the non-Aboriginal population of Australia is rapidly ageing, whereas the Aboriginal population is experiencing increased growth in young age groups.

The focus of governments in Australia, however, has begun to place greater emphasis on addressing the impact of an ageing population. Policies and programs will need to be focused on addressing the unique structure of the Indigenous population, and hence will need to be focussed on young Indigenous people and families if they are to make any headway in addressing the inequality experienced by Indigenous families and children (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2003)

Aboriginal life experiences

An Aboriginal child born in New South Wales in 2004 will be born into any one of a diverse range of communities across the state. These communities may differ in geographical location, population size and density, socioeconomic and social cohesion levels, though what these estimated 2465 Aboriginal babies will have in common is that they are more likely to:

- live in poverty

The unemployment rate for Aborigines is over three times the non-Aboriginal rate (23 percent compared to 7.2 percent).

- be of low birth weight

While births to Aboriginal women in New South Wales represent only 2.4 percent of all births, low birth weight occurs in 12.6 percent of Aboriginal babies as compared to the non-Aboriginal rate of 6.3 percent.

- have substantially worse health than other Australians

The death rate for Aboriginal people in New South Wales was over twice that for all Australians in 2000 (12 compared to 5.8 per 1000 respectively).

Aboriginal Australians had considerably lower life expectancies than non-Aboriginal Australians (ABS experimental estimates). Average life expectancy for Aboriginal males at birth was 56.3 years and for Aboriginal females at birth was 63.6 years in New South Wales in 2000.

- experience hearing problems (otitis media)

Approximately 80 percent of Aboriginal children tested under the ATSIECSAG NIELNS project had some form of hearing problem.

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20 Calculated from ABS Experimental Projections of the Indigenous Population, Australia, Cat. No. 3231.0.
21 Derived from NSW DET submission to the Review.
22 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Sector Advisory Group, National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
• experience domestic violence and neglect

Aboriginal children are four times more likely to be on a care and protection order than non-Aboriginal children (Stanley, 2003).

• not access prior-to-school services.

The 2001 Census shows that in New South Wales, of the 15,860 Aboriginal children aged 0 to 4 years, only 2,319 accessed prior-to-school services at that time. While the number of Aboriginal children aged 0 to 5 years is increasing, the number of preschool places is not growing in commensurate proportion.23

The majority of the above items are indicators of health and wellbeing. Aboriginal people are over-represented in all the significant health outcomes including an over-representation of Aboriginal babies with low birth weight. Low birth weight is one of the most important predictors of a baby’s life chances of health and wellbeing (Stanley, 2003).

The importance of Aboriginal children’s early life experiences on their future development and the short and long-term impact of health and wellbeing indicators on children’s life chances, including their ability to attend and engage in educational programs throughout their life, was identified by all stakeholders throughout the Review.

Parents, grandparents, Elders and community workers repeatedly commented about the need for Aboriginal communities to support Aboriginal parents and families as well as highlighting the urgent work that needs to be done in collaboration with government and non-government agencies to make strong and resilient families.

The first three years

The first three years of a child’s life are more critical to their lifelong development and chances than previously recognised. Nurturing and supportive relationships established from birth positively affect brain development and, equally, stress (as experienced in domestic violence situations) and lack of bonding and attachment to parents and caregivers can adversely affect babies’ brain development. These experiences can affect the neurons in the brain that are responsible for learning and emotional development and have a lifetime impact (Fish, 2002).

In New South Wales the Department of Health is responsible for health outcomes, the Department of Community Services is responsible for the care and protection of children and the majority of preschools across the state. So what is the role of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training in the lives of Aboriginal children prior to school?

Education is a lifelong process and knowledge is not learned at one particular time or in one particular place.

– Aboriginal Elder, interview

The Review teams attended many community meetings across the state where community members and Aboriginal staff from a range of agencies were present. At these meetings, there was strong acknowledgement that Aboriginal parents play a critical role in providing positive experiences for their children from birth and that the first educators for Aboriginal students are their immediate and extended family. The Aboriginal community, especially and most importantly the Elders, are perceived to play the next most important role.

There was an equally strong acknowledgement of the issues related to some Aboriginal parents’ difficulty in providing support and assistance to their children.

There is concern that many young Aboriginal parents need support in parenting. For many Aboriginal parents, their own negative experience of school resulted in low levels of attainment and negative attitudes towards formal education. Parents’ attitudes to education and the value of school are critical factors linked to successful student outcomes. For those Aboriginal parents with low levels of literacy and numeracy, school may be yet another confronting and overwhelming place, one to be avoided.

These issues and strategies to address the indicators of health and wellbeing are not the domain of a single agency but concern a number of government departments, including education, health and community services. All are important targets in reforming Aboriginal education.

What is the whole of government approach?

The Review team recognises and acknowledges that the values, circumstances, priorities and needs of Aboriginal families differ markedly across the state. The degree to which any or all of these factors will impact on the health, wellbeing and development of young Aboriginal children will also depend on the health, wellbeing and social cohesion of the broader community and the level, sustainability and coordination of government and non-government support to the broader community.

Community meetings were resoundingly critical in their approach to service provision by government and non-government agencies:

They [government departments] need to get their act together, start working as one, or at the very least start talking to one another.

– Aboriginal community member, community meeting

Community opinion stated that the Review presents an opportunity to work in partnership with Aboriginal communities to address the legacies of previous government policies, most notably colonisation, assimilation and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families.
It is imperative that the intervention and service provision for Aboriginal families is a planned and coordinated holistic approach.

This is also known as “joined up service delivery”; that is, instead of each department or agency working in isolation, a collaborative approach is what Aboriginal communities espouse and government has adopted in order to improve service delivery.

It is also the basis for *Two Ways Together*: the New South Wales Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012 which aims to develop committed partnerships between Aboriginal people and government and to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people across a range of indicators, including health, education, housing and infrastructure, families and young people, culture and heritage, and economic development.

*Two Ways Together* was mentioned in discussions and submissions as a positive way to implement long-awaited change for service delivery to Aboriginal communities.

The New South Wales Government has developed an integrated framework of programs and initiatives to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people and their families and communities including *Families First, Better Futures* and the *Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy*, which in its first year is focusing on developing partnerships between government agencies and Aboriginal people.

*Families First* supports families to raise healthy children and build their skills and confidence in parenting. *Better Futures* is designed to improve government and community supports and services for young people aged 9 to 18 years (New South Wales Government, Cabinet Office 2004).

**Schools as Community Centres**

An initiative that received enthusiastic support from a range of sources is the *Schools as Community Centres* program.

A number of the schools visited on field trips were sites for the *Schools as Community Centres* program. Principals, parents, teachers, school education directors, interagency workers and many submissions support and endorse the program because it promotes an interagency, collaborative approach to the issues parents face in the early years of their children's lives.

A facilitator, located at each site, works with local communities, families and service providers in developing and implementing initiatives for a clearly identified target group of families with children 0–8 years, with a particular focus on the years prior to school entry.

Enjoying widespread interest and support, the program is a working example of how NSW DET can work in cooperation with the Departments of Health, Housing
and Community Services to overcome the many difficulties parents across the state face when attempting to locate appropriate services and support.

Many people interviewed pointed out that it is not the role of schools to address these issues in isolation from other government agencies and support services. However, the alignment of agencies and services at the school site allowed schools to be an active partner in addressing issues of educational disadvantage and forging positive relationships with families, prior to their children attending Kindergarten.

On the field trips, many people commented that they saw schools and education as the lead agency. It was a source of pride and recognition for many schools that they were an integral part of the community. Principals at a state Dare to Lead workshop in Kings Cross (28–29 June 2004) commented that they would like to take a more active role in building interagency processes at the school site.

The program enhances the opportunities for engaging parents and family members in the life of the school, promoting the benefits of education to Aboriginal parents and re-engaging Aboriginal parents in learning. It also promotes interagency partners’ understanding of each other’s roles and responsibilities.

The Schools as Community Centres success is due to the centre being located within a school, using a community development model to work with families with children from birth to eight years, with a focus on the years prior to school entry, and developing appropriate activities in partnership with the community.

A number of the Schools as Community Centres visited highlighted successful programs for Aboriginal parents and children including:

- extensive transition from home to school activities including strong links with local childcare providers and supported through playgroups, parent groups and connections with Aboriginal Child Services
- mothers groups and sisters groups providing opportunities to learn new skills and providing opportunities for social interaction and parenting in a supportive environment
- Aboriginal trainee child carers participating in supported playgroups
- parent education opportunities including literacy and computer classes
- healthy mums, healthy babies groups promoting positive maternal and infant health
- Feed the Family initiative providing opportunities to develop skills in purchasing and preparing nutritious foods
- morning bus run contributing to increased school attendance and stronger links with the community
- support for Aboriginal participation in community networks
- Art in the Park supported playgroups offering participation of Aboriginal families in early childhood activities in a relaxed informal setting. Other services are involved in this initiative including the Early Childhood Nurse.
- school holiday activities in partnership with the local neighbourhood centre providing safe activities for families during school holidays
• otitis media project in partnership with the Health Service raising awareness of nutrition, hygiene, listening and nose blowing.

The Review team reported that, for many communities, Schools as Community Centres projects have contributed to the development of stronger interagency networks and improved coordination and implementation of services for young Aboriginal children and their families.

**Interagency collaboration**

One of the most prevalent health issues affecting Aboriginal children is otitis media. Otitis media is the general medical term for inflammation or infection of the middle ear. It may often be difficult to detect without examination.

Aboriginal babies as young as six to eight weeks of age can suffer from eardrum perforations and hearing loss as a result of otitis media and this can continue through developmental years.

Normal hearing relies on the middle ear being full of air. Otitis media stops air entering the middle ear and fluid builds up in the middle ear cavity, preventing effective vibration of the eardrum. There is reduction of the transmission of sound waves through the middle ear resulting in a conductive hearing loss. The hearing loss can fluctuate creating difficulties in identifying chronic otitis media.

Normal brain development in babies and children relies on stimulation and input from their senses. A hearing loss, even if only present for a short time and especially in the first three years of life, can affect learning development. This is the time children are most at risk of developing otitis media.

Children experiencing chronic otitis media in infancy can show up to two years’ delay in reading and communication skills development, and this delay can continue well into their educational years. The high numbers of Aboriginal children in need of specialised educational support reflects this fact.

As part of the Two Ways Together: the NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012, there is a program to extend cross-agency strategies on otitis media.

**Is the student ready for school?**

> It is important that Aboriginal children start school positively. Their early experience of success, or otherwise, affects future success at school and feelings of competence and self-esteem.

– ACLO (Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer)

As discussed previously, some Aboriginal parents have had negative experiences of schooling, limited exposure to school and limited success in literacy and numeracy. An essential part of preparing young Aboriginal children for school is providing “school ready” experiences for caregivers and parents.
Such programs provide parents with strategies for preparing and supporting their children for school by understanding the way things are done, before they reach the school gate. Such proactive strategies address parents’ negative experiences of schooling; strengthen communication between the school and community; and encourage Aboriginal parents’ engagement with the school.

**The HIPPY program**

The *Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters* (HIPPY) program is an early intervention initiative funded through the Australian Government’s *Stronger Families and Communities strategy*. HIPPY involves parents in their children’s education the year prior to starting school and concludes at the end of the first year of school, Kindergarten. Aboriginal home tutors are employed to work with their own children and assist other parents through weekly activities.

The tutors are role models for the other parents, simultaneously developing their skills and confidence as educators. There are group meetings for parents and caregivers and regular sessions for tutors, facilitated by the program coordinator. Initial reporting of the success of the program indicates that the first group of students to graduate from the program at one school is now well settled in their second year of school (School report, field trip).

**Parents as Teachers program**

The *Parents as Teachers* program, part of the New South Wales *Families First* strategy, is for families with children from birth to five. It is an early childhood parenting education family support program. Parents are supported through parent education programs, regular home visits, group meetings and printed information. The program aims to promote children’s cognitive, language, social and motor development as these are recognised as being critical to future positive learning and development (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003a).

Prior-to-school services encompass a range of activities and services including long day care, playgroups and occasional care, many of which are available to children aged from birth to six years.

**Preschools**

During the year prior to Kindergarten many children in New South Wales attend what is commonly known as preschool. It may in fact be long day care provision or preschool, which is generally a preparatory program for school.

Preschool attendance is generally believed to be beneficial for young children starting school, both in terms of attitudes to learning and development of social skills. Although it is difficult to isolate the effects of preschool education on subsequent literacy development, there is evidence that children who experience quality preschool programs find the transition to school a much easier process than children who do not (Gullo & Burton, 1993).
This impression was also reported to the Review Team by schools with preschools attached, although few schools formally tracked the learning outcomes of students who had been “preschoolers”. This is an area that requires further research.

Aboriginal children are poorly represented in the preschool sector at local, state and national levels. In 2003, of the Aboriginal children aged from 0 to 4 years in New South Wales, 348 Aboriginal children attended a government-funded preschool, representing approximately 10 percent of the 3784 children enrolled.

| Table 3.1.1: New South Wales preschool census (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004b) |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|     | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
| In govt preschools | Total | Total | Total | Urban | Rural | Remote | Total |
| In non-govt preschools | 2142 | 2176 | 2315 | 428 | 1596 | 337 | 2361 |
| Males | 1251 | 1292 | 1396 | 332 | 890 | 205 | 1427 |
| Females | 1135 | 1145 | 1278 | 311 | 794 | 172 | 1277 |
| Gender unknown | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 9 |
| Age ≤3 yrs | 804 | 878 | 888 | 165 | 623 | 132 | 920 |
| Age 4 yrs | 1271 | 1272 | 1441 | 386 | 817 | 203 | 1406 |
| Age ≥5 yrs | 274 | 287 | 345 | 90 | 235 | 42 | 367 |
| Age unknown | 37 | 2 | 2 | 9 | 5 | 9 | 16 |
| Participation age 3 yrs | 21.5% | 22.3% | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| Participation age 4 yrs | 33.6% | 32.5% | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| Participation age 5 yrs | 7.3% | 7.2% | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. |
| ≤5 sessions per week | 1524 | 1509 | 1812 | 377 | 1207 | 275 | 1859 |
| >5 sessions per week | 862 | 928 | 862 | 266 | 477 | 102 | 845 |
| Sessions unknown | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 9 |
| Percentage >5 sessions | 36.1% | 38.1% | 32.2% | 41.4% | 28.3% | 26.7% | 31.2% |
| Total Aboriginal Children | 2386 | 2437 | 2676 | 643 | 1684 | 382 | 2709 |

The 2003 National Indigenous Preschool Census: Summary report (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004b) indicates that 52 percent of Aboriginal children enrolled in preschool in New South Wales were four years of age, 87 percent were enrolled in non-government preschools and there was a slightly higher number of Aboriginal boys than girls enrolled.

In New South Wales the majority of preschools are the responsibility of the Department of Community Services. DET currently operates 79 preschools attached to government schools, which provide quality preschool education programs for children in the year before entry into Kindergarten. Approximately 4000 children attend departmental preschools each year (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003a).

The New South Wales Government is expanding the DET preschool provision with an additional 21 new preschools to be established within government schools.
by 2005. The new services will all be located in identified areas of greatest need and will provide programs for children who are unable to access preschool education. A majority of these new preschools will service Aboriginal communities (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003a).

**DET preschools in Aboriginal communities**

DET provides funds for 11 preschools in Aboriginal communities using *Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme* (IESIP) funding. The funding covers the employment of a full-time teacher and full-time Aboriginal Education Assistant. Each preschool has an advisory committee with school and Aboriginal community representation.

The preschools aim to increase access to formal early childhood education experiences for Aboriginal children and encourage a smooth transition from home to school. The preschools provide culturally appropriate programs in consultation with their local Aboriginal communities. Skills and understandings in literacy and numeracy are developed through a structured play environment which values home experiences and incorporates Aboriginal English (NSW Department of Education and Training Annual Report, 2003).

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) funds a number of preschools in New South Wales, which are managed by a preschool advisory committee. The majority of Aboriginal students attending these preschools go on to enrol in New South Wales Government schools.

Perhaps the most significant finding to emerge from 2002 reporting is that for IESIP-funded independent preschools, the literacy and numeracy levels for Indigenous and non-Indigenous children are similar, with around 90 percent of students displaying readiness for school (Australia, Parliament 2002).

During field trips, many primary and secondary principals commented that the key to better attendance and retention rates and improved academic performance for Aboriginal school students is improved access and participation in preschool for Aboriginal students.

> Support for Aboriginal students needs to start early, the earlier the better.
> – Principal, interview

The field trips included visits to a range of preschools across the state, and submissions and interviews with parents, teachers and principals reinforced the importance of quality preschool experiences for Aboriginal children, involvement of Aboriginal families and community, and providing opportunities for Aboriginal preschoolers to learn about Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal history.

The importance of strong links between preschool and primary school was a key feature of most consultations. In many cases where the preschool is on site with the primary school the collaboration is easier and the preschools are an integral part of the whole school. For example, a mid-North Coast primary school is a *Schools as*
Community Centre, has an Aboriginal preschool, and has developed an authentic collaborative interagency approach to supporting Aboriginal families and children from birth to eight years.

A number of submissions and interviewees recommended that preschools be attached to primary schools and managed by DET as a way of overcoming the difficulties of working across departments with different structures and providing a seamless progression for children from preschool to primary school.

Allied to this are strong recommendations about including preschools in educational planning and professional development as the preparatory year is vital for Aboriginal children’s literacy and numeracy development and needs to provide explicit opportunities for Aboriginal children to use their home language and be taught the concepts and conventions of Standard Australian English. It would offer an effective means of sharing information and tracking Aboriginal children from one setting to another, especially children with support needs.

The 2003 National Indigenous Preschool Census: Summary report (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004b) identifies the number of preschool sessions attended by Aboriginal children, by districts across the state as shown in Figure 3.1.2.

![Figure 3.1.2: The percentage of Aboriginal children participating in six to ten half-day preschool sessions per week by district across New South Wales.](image)
It is only in the Murray and Sydney districts that the majority of Aboriginal children participated in six to ten half-day sessions per week (59.8 percent and 51.3 percent respectively) in 2003. In all other districts most Aboriginal children participated in five or fewer half-day sessions per week. Only 31.2 percent of all Aboriginal children accessed preschool for more than five sessions per week. So within the small cohort of Aboriginal children who access preschool, there is an even smaller cohort who attend preschool for more than half the week.

The numbers of Aboriginal students accessing mainstream prior-to-school services is low, resulting in many Aboriginal children having difficulties in making the transition to formal schooling.

A great deal of work which has been done in studying children’s transitions to school, focuses on children being “ready for school” rather than on the school being made “ready for children” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001b).

The notion of “school ready” does not apply only to students. Teachers and school leaders are responsible for establishing positive prior-to-school relationships and supporting Aboriginal parents and students through the critical transition from home to school or from one world to another, by creating welcoming, family-oriented and parent friendly schools.

**Transition to school programs**

The Review found that one of the most effective ways to support Aboriginal children into the formal school setting is through transition programs which prepare children for Kindergarten.

Transition to school programs provide an opportunity for Aboriginal children to participate in early childhood activities and gain a more positive start to school. Successful transition programs are dependent on the integration of the following factors:

- involvement of Aboriginal families and key Aboriginal groups in decision-making
- positive relationships and genuine collaboration between families, schools, early childhood services, key community groups and local service providers
- a learning community that promotes the sharing of information, cultural insights and expertise by all parties concerned with children’s transition to school
- a holistic approach to addressing the specific health, development and wellbeing needs of Aboriginal children in the context of strengthening the capacity of families and communities to meet those needs
- a dual focus on providing information and support for parents as well as quality early learning experiences for children.

Parents and teachers were enthusiastically supportive of effective transition programs as they help children and parents feel comfortable, valued and successful.
in school and avoid negative outcomes. The advice from parents and teachers is that there is still a serious need to develop strategies to support transition to school for all Aboriginal children, including children attending Aboriginal preschools, DET preschools, other early childhood services and particularly children who do not access any prior-to-school services.

The Successful Transition from Home to School Program (funded under the NIELNS strategy) is designed to provide a smooth transition to school for Aboriginal students who do not have access to a preschool service. The program fosters effective partnerships between school staff and Aboriginal families, offering parents an increased understanding of the educational needs of their children.

A Central School in the far west has established positive links to the Commonwealth-funded preschool through the Kindy Go transition to school program. Aboriginal students at the end of their first year of formal schooling demonstrated overall improvement in the achievement of Early Stage 1 English and Mathematics syllabus outcomes. This success was attributed to the transition program in assisting Aboriginal students to make a confident start at school.

According to the discussion paper Education of Teachers of Indigenous Students in Early Childhood Services and Schools (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001b), enrolment and attendance rates of Aboriginal children in early childhood services are decreasing and the trend does not seem to be changing.

The Review identified a number of barriers that prevent Aboriginal children from accessing prior-to-school services including the following:

- A major disparity exists in the availability and quality of prior-to-school services in smaller, remote and isolated communities. In other communities, there are waiting lists with insufficient places for children.
- A lack of transport options hinders many Aboriginal families from accessing preschool and other services in metropolitan, regional and remote areas of the state. In the past, the Australian Government funded buses for independent Aboriginal preschools and this was frequently the only means of accessing services for Aboriginal families. Many preschool and primary teachers, parents and principals noted the importance and benefits of having a bus to service Aboriginal communities.
- High levels of unemployment, low-income and single-parent families and lack of education about entitlements and subsidies create affordability issues for Aboriginal families in their efforts to access prior-to-school services. The level of access to preschool education across Australia varies, where fees are charged in some states and not in others and where universal access is provided only in some jurisdictions. It is worth noting that in New South Wales preschool education is not universal and fees are charged.
- Aboriginal families are less comfortable in using services that are not inclusive of the language and cultural practices of their specific communities.
The review also found that the lack of qualified early childhood teachers and Aboriginal early childhood teachers impacts on the quality and number of prior-to-school programs, particularly preschool provision. The lack of cultural awareness and cultural knowledge among teachers affects the quality of preschool programs for Aboriginal children.

A recent independent inquiry into the provision of universal access to high quality preschool education across Australia, the National Preschool Education Inquiry (Walker, 2004b), identified similar issues and found that significant barriers currently exist across Australia, which prevent universal access to preschool education.

Other issues that are relevant to Aboriginal families who move between states include differences in terminology for preschool and the first year of school and differences in entry age to preschool and the first year of school, all serving to add to the confusion and lack of coordination of early childhood services (Australian Education Union, 2004). Steps are currently being taken to address these matters at a national level.

The development of community-controlled Aboriginal preschools through DEST and IESIP funding has resulted in a high number of successful preschool centres. These centres are characterised by:

- the high level of Aboriginal people involved: aunties, uncles, Elders, parents, childcare workers
- an advisory committee that recommends on the educational programs, operational processes and administrative functions
- a curriculum that is child-centred and culturally inclusive
- an understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal English and early identification, detection and strategies to address otitis media
- strong links to interagency support and Aboriginal community knowledge.

There is anecdotal evidence that some of the Aboriginal children who thrive in this environment meet a totally unfamiliar environment when they arrive at school and the benefits of their preschool experiences are not recognised by their teachers and so are negated.

The years before school play a vital role in preparing Aboriginal students, Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal communities for schooling.

For Aboriginal children to experience a successful engagement with lifelong learning then early childhood education and care is where that begins.

– Gary Moore, Director, Council of Social Service of NSW (NCOSS)
submission to Aboriginal Education Review, March 2004, WM092

Better coordination and integration of prior-to-school service delivery to Aboriginal communities by government, non-government and Aboriginal community organisations will have little impact unless there is an equal and parallel effort by schools to ensure Aboriginal students establish themselves as learners within the context of school.
There is a need for sustained effort and commitment by all the key players to listen and respond to the voices of Aboriginal parents, caregivers, Elders and Aboriginal community members and to bring to the table expertise, funding and a concerted effort to develop a strong interagency framework and support for Aboriginal children, their parents and their communities.

As stated by Perry and Dockett in their submission to the Review:

*Effective [transition] programs don’t just occur: they are the product of much collaboration, planning, evaluation and revision.*

– Bob Perry and Sue Dockett, Starting School Research Project, University of Western Sydney, submission to Aboriginal Education Review, March 2004, EM035
Section 2: The Early Years of Primary Education

Schools are an integral part of mainstream Australian society. When children enter school, they are progressively provided with the skills, knowledge and understandings to participate in the wider society through a body of knowledge that aligns closely to the mainstream.

Aboriginal communities hold a body of skills, knowledge and understandings that define and represent them as Aboriginal or First Peoples. Aboriginal people seek an education that leads to self-determination and equal participation in society.

The role of the primary school is to build upon Aboriginal children’s cultural, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical potential to allow them to engage fully in learning and to make positive choices about their future direction and their further education.

For centuries, education has been used as a tool of assimilation, and this has been the Indigenous experience of western education (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004).

In interviews conducted on the field trips, Aboriginal parents and community members strongly stated that they want their children to be successful in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds and contribute positively to both.

We fail our Aboriginal students if we do not ensure that they develop the necessary skills for success in non-Aboriginal contexts … Classrooms and learning environments need to provide the conditions in which students learn the skills necessary to operate in different contexts (Nakata, 2003).

Primary schools and most importantly teachers have an integral role in partnership with Aboriginal parents and community members in accepting and valuing this difference rather than devaluing and reinforcing this difference.

In New South Wales, children may begin formal schooling at 4½ years of age and it is compulsory to enrol them by their sixth birthday. The first year of formal schooling in the primary years is Kindergarten.

The curriculum in the primary years consists of six key learning areas (KLAs):

- Creative and Practical Arts
- English
- Human Society and Its Environment
- Mathematics
- Personal Development, Health, Physical Education
- Science and Technology.

Teaching and learning in primary years, as well as assessing and reporting student achievement, are based on the learning outcomes and curriculum content specified for each KLA.
Teachers design learning experiences to help students achieve syllabus outcomes, which are described in stages that relate to years of primary schooling:

- Early Stage 1: Kindergarten
- Stage 1: Years 1 and 2
- Stage 2: Years 3 and 4
- Stage 3: Years 5 and 6.

**Aboriginal students in the early primary years**

There is great diversity among Aboriginal students in terms of academic achievement, socioeconomic status, geographical location, cultural knowledge and family structures.

The number of Aboriginal students in the years of early primary, Kindergarten to Year 2, is increasing. In 2003 there were 9393 Aboriginal students, an increase of 2271 students since 1996.

These students are enrolled in 1094 primary schools and 51 central schools, and 14.8 percent of these Aboriginal students are enrolled in a school with an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA).

In 2003 the majority of Aboriginal primary school students, 59.8 percent, were in non-metropolitan districts, and 40.2 percent were in metropolitan districts.

**The role of education in overcoming social and economic disadvantage**

A strong theme present in research material, submissions and data from field trips is that education plays a vital role in understanding and addressing a student’s or community’s level of social disadvantage or poverty.

Aboriginal communities, a number of school leaders and school staff indicated that the impact of educational disadvantage on Aboriginal students is made more complex by dispossession, disempowerment and racism experienced by Aboriginal communities.

Beresford and Partington (2003) point out that a “deficit” view relating to Aboriginal students (although discredited by informed educationalists) persists and that while this may remove blame, it does not provide educators with the knowledge and understanding to “remedy the situation”.


> Research must be more holistic, broader-based, forward looking and proactive, aiming to resolve issues, to achieve and support educational equality for Indigenous people (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 45)
The importance of the first year at school

Anecdotal evidence from primary school staff indicates that a high proportion of Aboriginal students begin school before they turn five, many without the benefits of prior-to-school educational experiences.

The importance of a positive relationship between staff and Aboriginal parents and caregivers from the first day of school is critical.

A principal in the Riverina area spoke about his approach to welcoming Aboriginal parents into the school. He meets each child’s parents to spend time talking and getting to know each other. He takes the parents around the school and into their child’s classroom. It is his policy that he is available to talk to parents whenever there is a need or a complaint. In his experience the time he takes to make the connections benefits not only parents and caregivers but also the children, the school and his relationships with Aboriginal parents.

Aboriginal English

It became evident in discussions with teachers, principals and parents that Aboriginal English is the home language of many Aboriginal children starting school. Many parents and Aboriginal community members believe that Aboriginal English is not well understood by teachers. Discussions with teachers showed that this is often the case.

Aboriginal English is a dialect of Australian English. It varies between different Aboriginal communities throughout Australia and is an important feature of Aboriginal culture. It is not incorrect or poorly spoken English.

Aboriginal English is the starting point for learning for our students; it is a legitimate form of communication. Aboriginal English is their home language and it needs to be accepted and respected by us at school, for the kids, especially the little ones, to feel comfortable in our school environment.

So at this school there is an acceptance and valuing of Aboriginal English, using it as the basis for language and literacy development.

— Primary Principal, interview

While it was heartening to visit this school and record the principal’s comments, these views were not often repeated throughout the Review.

Many teachers reported limited understanding of Aboriginal English. They had not had access to training and support for developing an awareness of Aboriginal English, its importance in the classroom, or how to incorporate it into classroom practice.

A strong theme throughout the Review, from parents, teachers and community workers and members, is that a positive start to school is important for all Aboriginal students. The first year of school represents a major indicator to future success and every Aboriginal child needs the opportunities and encouragement to
develop to the full extent of their ability. Their early experience of success, or otherwise, affects their future success at school and their feelings of competence and self-esteem.

**The Bidialectal Pilot Project**

The Bidialectal approach provides opportunities for Aboriginal parents and community members to work in classrooms with teachers to help them understand Aboriginal English.

The initiative recognises that Aboriginal students in New South Wales come to school speaking Aboriginal English which, although not a second language, is a second dialect of English and as such has its own structure.

The pilot is developing approaches to teaching that ensure all Aboriginal students maintain the use of Aboriginal English while at the same time learn how to use Standard Australian English in appropriate contexts.

The progress of Aboriginal students relies on Aboriginal parents, the community and teachers working together to understand the different language patterns.

Teachers work with Aboriginal Research Assistants (ARAs) to develop and trial effective teaching strategies which cultivate Aboriginal ways of making meaning as well as explicitly teaching Standard Australian English.

Working together develops understanding and understanding makes a difference.

A teacher involved in the Bidialectal pilot project summarised his learning as:

*We [teachers] make too many assumptions about Aboriginal students ... and the assumptions we make are wrong.*

The ARA working with this teacher stated:

*Since the Cultural Understanding training his [the teacher’s] approach to teaching is different, everything is different ... It’s great. The kids love it and they are responding.*

Another teacher reflected:

*I always thought that it was the kids who didn’t get it, I now know that it was me who just didn’t get it ... now I’m searching for a way [of teaching] that works.*

Aboriginal children during the early primary years have a need to be understood as individuals and should be provided with flexible and innovative responses to meet their needs. Valuing Aboriginal cultural knowledge and protocols will support the development and delivery of innovative programs.

*Most important for Aboriginal students is the need for case-management rather than a one-size fits all model.*

– Regional Director, DET
Hearing loss

In submissions and field trips parents, principals and teachers discussed the difficulty of addressing health, parenting and social issues while maintaining an equal focus on providing quality education experiences.

A significant health issue raised throughout the Review that impacts on Aboriginal children in the classroom is otitis media. The impact of this condition in the preschool years has been described and it is also a significant issue in the years of primary education.

Aboriginal children can be disadvantaged in the classroom either through a current hearing loss, or through the impact of an earlier hearing loss on the development of their language and listening skills. Most classroom learning relies on the ability to listen effectively and to use Standard Australian English, particularly when learning to read and write.

However, hearing loss can affect speech and language development, and listening skills through the inability to distinguish the soft sounds of speech. The development of literacy and numeracy skills depends on the ability to follow instructions, vocabulary development and hearing contextual clues for meaning. Because of communication difficulties, frustration and anger can lead to inappropriate behaviour.

As this list of problems attests, hearing loss can profoundly affect Aboriginal students’ classroom ability and school performance. Successful strategies include initial screening and regular follow-up visits; training for teachers in how to give explicit instructions and feedback, how to check for understanding, and how to talk with clear visual cues; and training for parents and students. (New South Wales Health Department, 2000).

“School ready” applies to interagency partners too

“School ready” relates to children’s preparedness to start school and covers health, physical, social and emotional wellbeing, language and literacy development, and general knowledge about their world.

The Review teams heard numerous examples of the frustration and difficulty of parents, teachers and principals trying to locate appropriate screening, referral or support services for children and families. Many highlighted the long waiting lists for assistance, the cut-backs in or closure of services or the infrequent visits of teams to rural and remote areas of New South Wales.

It is unrealistic and often inappropriate for schools to address these issues in isolation from other government agencies and support services.

*Education does not exist in a vacuum.*

– Gary Moore, NCOSS submission
Whether students are “school ready” is also dependent on the alignment of government agencies, Aboriginal community organisations, community and parents with schools.

Across the state there is widespread interest and support for the alignment of agencies and services to occur at the school, as detailed in the *Schools as Community Centres* model outlined in Section 1: Prior to School.

**Achieving equitable outcomes at Year 3**

The discussions held and the information gathered during the Review outlined the challenges facing parents, teachers, principals, educational support staff and community members in redressing the inequalities faced by Aboriginal students and their families in order to meet the educational needs of the students.

Many schools visited through the field trips had developed innovative programs to meet these challenges and these had benefited the whole school and the whole community.

The major points of discussion identified in field trips, submissions and consultations for the early years of primary education, Kindergarten to Year 2, in addition to prior-to-school programs and transition to school programs (discussed in Section 1: Prior to School), were:

- classroom teaching practice
- teachers’ knowledge and understanding of their Aboriginal students
- the importance of working with Aboriginal people
- the nature of the relationship between school and home.

**Classroom teaching practice**

During many field trips, the question “What makes a difference in classrooms?” initiated thoughtful and insightful discussion. These responses are characteristic of comments made across the state and evident in submissions:

*Effective pedagogical practice means that teachers have a deep knowledge of curriculum and syllabus and a focus on achieving syllabus outcomes through quality teaching – that’s what makes the difference.*  
– School Education Director

*Success is about what happens in classrooms. It is systematic and explicit teaching, knowing what the kids can do and working from there.*  
– Classroom teacher

*Quality teaching in classrooms happens when teachers are supported. For example, [with] the new maths syllabus, a teacher was released to work as a mentor with other staff.*  
– Principal
Working in the classrooms, with the teachers, you see how much is involved in teaching and how much it has changed since I was at school. I’ve learned so much about helping kids with their work.

– Aboriginal tutor

One of the main issues raised in submissions and field trips by teachers and parents is Aboriginal students’ level of basic skills attainment.

Throughout the Review process, improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal students was a major discussion point for teachers, parents and community members. In many discussions, it was seen as the single most important and urgent issue to be resolved. Associated themes were the need for early assessment and intervention and parent involvement in supporting Aboriginal students.

The message from teachers and parents is that the answer is not in applying more of the same interventions for Aboriginal students who are not reaching the required levels of literacy and numeracy proficiency.

Many early-years teachers raised the concern that they are keen to cater for the individual needs of their Aboriginal students in the classroom but unsure of how to do so and are looking to the Review to provide a systemic response to this issue.

Data and evidence-based research must drive the development and implementation of explicit literacy and numeracy programs for Aboriginal students. Integral to the development of these programs is the identification of what we know already works in the classroom.

The field trips, case studies and submissions provide overwhelming evidence of the positive difference schools and classrooms can make to Aboriginal students’ learning outcomes.

The Review teams across the state heard numerous positive stories about how principals, teachers and Aboriginal parents and communities are focusing on what it is that makes a difference. Many of the discussions centre on identifying and understanding what happens in classrooms that best meets the needs of Aboriginal learners before embarking on an intervention program.

Literacy programs designed to assist lower primary students in need of additional support, Reading Recovery and the Early Literacy Initiative (ELI), featured strongly throughout the Review.

The Early Literacy and Numeracy Initiative focuses on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for students attending schools in low socioeconomic areas of the state. The literacy component, the Early Literacy Initiative, provides intensive professional development and support to teachers from Kindergarten to Year 3.

The ELI implements the Starting with Assessment program to collect outcomes data which enables teachers to make informed judgements about their students’ literacy achievements. They are able to identify students in need of further support.
The consistency of data collection also assists school-wide monitoring and tracking of students.

Some School Education Areas visited are making wide use of *Starting with Assessment* to screen Kindergarten students. One school education director commented:

> The last thing we want or need is a “baby BST [Basic Skills Test]”, however we do want to know where our students are and what they can do when they first come to school and start from there.

*Reading Recovery* is a literacy intervention strategy for students identified as most in need of support in their second year of school. *Reading Recovery* teachers provide students with 30 minutes of intensive daily instruction, which can improve students’ literacy to average classroom levels within 12 to 20 weeks.

In 2003, 719 Aboriginal students participated in the program (9.18 percent of total student numbers in the program). Where available, Aboriginal support personnel (Aboriginal Education Resource Teachers – AERTs – or Aboriginal Education Aides – AEAs) support Aboriginal students on the program (Perkins, 2004).

While the benefits of these programs have been widely recognised, the success has not translated into significantly improved learning outcomes for Aboriginal students, as evidenced by BST results and reiterated in the *State Literacy Strategy* evaluation, which identifies that:

Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) students have improved but not at a comparable rate or to the level achieved by other sub-groups as reflected in statewide averages.

Another program established to support primary schools with a significant Aboriginal student enrolment to develop the literacy skills of Aboriginal students and to reduce the numbers of Aboriginal students in support classes for children with a mild disability is the *Aboriginal Early Language Development Program* (AELDP).

The program provides an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher to 24 schools across NSW, with two schools sharing a position. In addition, there are five Resource Teacher – Aboriginal positions with a similar role to AERTs.

The role of the AERT is to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal students (K–2) through team teaching, working with particular groups of students and through the development of appropriate resources in consultation with the local Aboriginal community.

An unpublished DET review undertaken in 1998 identified that the AELDP had been successful in reducing the number of Aboriginal students in IM classes (support classes) but a study of the schools’ BST results from 1996 to 1999 did not indicate any significant improvement.
The following strategies were identified by schools as having potential to improve the skills of Aboriginal students:

- talking and listening activities, especially in Kindergarten to build on Aboriginal students’ home language
- literacy and numeracy workshops for parents, supported by the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and involving Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers (ACLOs), Consultants Aboriginal Education and Literacy consultants, ensuring that parents and Aboriginal communities are provided with the knowledge, resources and skills to enable all Aboriginal students to achieve quality outcomes in literacy and numeracy
- training and support to develop teachers’ understanding of how Aboriginal English, language development and otitis media impact on learning for Aboriginal students
- programs and strategies to enable Aboriginal students to hear, understand and engage in classrooms and to be able to code switch between Aboriginal English (home language) and Standard Australian English (school language)
- specific support in developing literacy and numeracy skills, in both Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English, to accomplish a range of learning outcomes for students who speak Aboriginal English
- culturally inclusive texts written in Aboriginal English, for emergent readers to make meaning from print by matching it to their own experience and knowledge of language
- mainstream programs incorporating an understanding of the needs of Aboriginal students and how this translates into effective classroom practice
- Quality Teaching professional development for teachers and accompanying research by academic mentors
- accessing and using a range of measures to assess student progress and inform teaching practice.

Throughout the field trips, consultancy staff, teachers and parents enthusiastically discussed their involvement in the Scaffolding Literacy program.

The Scaffolding Literacy teaching program was designed to accelerate literacy skills. While the program is suitable for all learners, it is especially appropriate for those who have failed to make the appropriate literacy gains and those in danger of falling behind. The program has been evaluated as an effective means for improving Aboriginal students’ literacy skills (Creswell, Underwood & Withers, 2002).

Teachers involved with the program believe that the major elements of its success are the age-appropriate texts used in the classroom, the professional development provided by the program personnel and the applicability of the program across stages and key learning areas.
Teachers reported that the systematic and explicit pedagogy, which involves teachers interacting with students in such a way that students become literate, is a major component of the program’s success.

The ACER Research Monograph No. 57 (Frigo et al, 2003), *Supporting English Literacy and Numeracy Learning for Indigenous Students in the Early Years*, found a correlation between students’ achievement in literacy and achievement in numeracy.

Nakata (2003) believes the link is the use of language, both in literacy and numeracy. In discussing Aboriginal students’ apparent lack of certain mathematical concepts he identifies the following difficulty:

> The difficulty lies not in the concept but the language that expresses it. This is the difficulty of teaching mathematics to any child. The issue is how to teach them a standardised language through which to express certain relations which are evident in their world and the world beyond them. The problem in teaching these concepts is more a literacy issue.

This view found support in the field visits. Many teachers are of the opinion that numeracy problems are often more about literacy and language than mathematical concepts.

In one School Education Area where all Kindergarten students are screened and assessed on entry to school there was found to be an over-representation of Aboriginal students with numeracy difficulties. Further investigation revealed that the Aboriginal students’ results were related to problems with auditory discrimination not numeracy concepts.

Throughout the Review, *Count Me in Too (CMIT)* was identified as an excellent example of a program that provides primary teachers with professional development focused on students’ thinking in mathematics. It operated in over 1400 schools last year and was supported by the 40 district mathematics consultants. More than 70 000 students took part in individual interviews to determine their most efficient methods of solving mathematical problems. This was followed by a detailed analysis of the results by teachers, carried out with the assistance of the district mathematics consultant. The results of the analysis were used as the basis for designing teaching activities.

An evaluation of the program, carried out by Sydney University in 2003 and reported in the *NSW Department of Education and Training Annual Report 2003*, found that:

… the majority of teachers indicated that:

- their understanding of how children learn mathematics (71.6 percent) and
- the way they taught mathematics (77.9 percent)

had changed the most as a result of their involvement in CMIT.
This view was echoed on field trips and in submissions. An analysis of Year 3 BST Numeracy results shows that that the percentage of Aboriginal students in Band 2 or above has increased from 75 percent in 1999 to 79 percent in 2003.

*Count Me in Too Indigenous (CMITI)* is a numeracy research project that aims to investigate teaching features that support effective numeracy learning for Aboriginal students from Preschool to Year 2. The project focuses on the professional development of teachers in their teaching of numeracy to Aboriginal students.

The CMIT program was identified as a very good example of how Aboriginal community knowledge can add value to a mainstream program.

**Teachers’ knowledge and understanding of their Aboriginal students**

Over and over again, in submissions, consultations and field trips, the issue of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and identity was raised.

*A teacher’s relationship with their Aboriginal students is really important and it must be built on the foundation that the teacher understands and acknowledges the Aboriginal student, their life experience and their language.*

– Aboriginal parent, community meeting

Effective curriculum and pedagogy for Aboriginal students is dependent on teachers having a deep knowledge and understanding of the syllabus outcomes and syllabus requirements as well as:

- knowing who their Aboriginal students are and knowing their families
- having deep knowledge and understanding of their Aboriginal students
- knowing their local Aboriginal community’s relationships
- making links with Aboriginal community people and working with Aboriginal education workers
- forming authentic partnerships with Aboriginal workers and parents.

**The importance of working with Aboriginal people**

Throughout all facets of this Review, in research, submissions, field trip meetings and interviews, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have spoken consistently about the importance of having Aboriginal people in schools actively involved in the education of Aboriginal students, most importantly in the early years, and especially in Kindergarten classrooms.

*Aboriginal students need the people involved in their education to understand the importance of the Aboriginal family and community as their first educators.*

– Community member

*Aboriginal education is about having Aboriginal role models in the school, working with the Aboriginal community and providing opportunities for the*
An overwhelming number of submissions, field trips and consultations identified the positive benefits of Aboriginal people in classrooms. Aboriginal students benefit, as do non-Aboriginal students and staff. The benefits do not stop there: the involvement of Aboriginal people in the planning, development, implementation and monitoring of programs, predominantly literacy and numeracy programs, was a constant theme throughout the Review.

Schools making a difference, showing improvements in literacy and numeracy, which were visited on field trips, highlighted in submissions and identified in research, indicated the importance of Consultants Aboriginal Education, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and literacy and numeracy tutors in the success of their programs.

Successful strategies identified through the field trips and submissions involving Aboriginal people in schools included:

- parents as tutors in classrooms
- parents, community members and Elders as mentors
- “community solutions”, that is, parents helping to determine how to best meet student needs
- parent workshops on a range of issues, for example, attendance – how important it is and how parents can be involved in supporting students to attend school
- Aboriginal teachers teaching all students in the school
- Aboriginal teachers aides and teachers aides (special)
- programs that involve the community in a positive way: visits to local sites, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEPs) in the community and cultural centres
- community panel involvement in addressing problems with student behaviour, as an alternative to suspension.

**The nature of the relationship between school and home**

A number of issues and concerns identified by parents and teachers during the field trips and in submissions relate to home and classroom links, including:

- the importance of quality literacy programs in the early years of schooling
- the important role of parents in literacy development both at home and at school
- the role of the school and the local AECG in supporting parents’ role in their children’s literacy development
- the significance of teachers establishing a relationship and communicating regularly with parents and caregivers
- the importance Aboriginal parents place on having access to and fully understanding reporting about student outcomes and student progress
• tracking students within and across schools to ensure there is consistency in data gathering and common understandings and expectations about information shared
• the need to ensure that students at greatest risk are assessed, identified and given support as early as possible
• the need for parents to be kept informed and involved in intervention programs for their children

A key message from Aboriginal parents is that they want to be involved in all aspects of their children’s education, not just when something is wrong at school.

The important role that parents play in their children’s development both at home and at school and the need to more fully support parents’ participation in their children’s education are keys to improving the home–classroom link and achieving equitable outcomes for Aboriginal students throughout the early years.

**Attendance patterns and absenteeism**

As indicated in Section 1, Aboriginal students in Kindergarten to Year 2 are absent from school nearly twice as much as non-Aboriginal students. This is particularly noticeable in Kindergarten.

The finding that absenteeism begins in Kindergarten and sets the pattern for future years suggests that tackling this problem must begin very early in the child’s school life to be successful (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004).

Teachers and school leaders reported that many high school Aboriginal students, particularly boys, with poor attendance and high suspension rates had commenced school before they turned five and were young for their cohort.

One of the many benefits attributed to quality transition to school programs is their role in establishing regular attendance patterns. Many schools visited during the field trips reported that Aboriginal students engaged in transition programs attended school more regularly and arrived at school on time. Many of the programs included parent information sessions where the importance and benefits of regular attendance and arriving at school on time were discussion topics. Teachers reported similar patterns for students who had attended preschools.

Schools were also keen to talk about their approaches to addressing the issue of on time arrival and student attendance.

Examples of encouraging attendance and on time arrival at school were breakfast programs available before the formal part of the school day, or the *fitness and fruit* program which starts the school day. Teachers report improved student attendance since the introduction of the programs.

The themes that emerged throughout the field trips when discussing student attendance were the importance of monitoring student attendance and intervening early. Also important is personal contact with families to address any absenteeism
issues. Many schools use a collaborative approach with school personnel, including the AEA following up with parents and explaining the importance of regular attendance and explanations for student absences.

Many schools visited on the field trips examined their attendance data and reported that the attendance patterns for the majority of Aboriginal students were consistent with, or similar to, the school average.

In a number of schools, the significant absences of a minority of Aboriginal students were due to extenuating circumstances of which the school was aware and did not reflect the Aboriginal student population as a whole.

**Suspensions**

The NSW AECG Inc has raised the issue of the number of Aboriginal students being suspended in New South Wales government schools and is particularly concerned about the number of Kindergarten students being suspended (2004, p 32).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Sector Advisory Group, which provides policy advice to Aboriginal preschools in NSW, knows of no preschool with a suspension policy or cases where Aboriginal students are suspended from Aboriginal preschools. Yet Aboriginal students in Kindergarten were suspended in 2003.

Suspension rates for Aboriginal students in Kindergarten to Year 2 show that:

- The suspension rate for Aboriginal boys for short suspensions (from one to four days) is 106 suspensions per 1000 students, compared with 25 suspensions per 1000 students for non-Aboriginal boys.
- For short suspensions Aboriginal boys are being suspended at a rate that is four times greater than that for non-Aboriginal boys.
- The suspension rate for Aboriginal girls for short suspensions is 18 suspensions per 1000 students, compared with 2 suspensions per 1000 students for non-Aboriginal girls.
- For short suspensions Aboriginal girls are being suspended at a rate that is eight times greater than that for non-Aboriginal girls.

**The final word … supporting classroom teachers**

Of all the themes identified throughout the Review of Aboriginal education, one factor with particular relevance to the early years of schooling that directly affects the ability of Aboriginal students to achieve equitable outcomes is the classroom teacher.

Parents, community members and executive staff in schools were strong in their recognition, respect and praise for classroom teachers, the substantial amount of work undertaken by them on a daily basis and their efforts beyond the classroom in meeting the learning needs of their students.
John Hattie’s research findings (2003) indicate that focus on improving student learning outcomes should be aimed at the greatest source of variance that can make a difference – the teacher.

There is widespread acknowledgement that schools can and do make a difference, and effective teachers adapt and adjust their teaching to better meet the needs of their Aboriginal students. However, a strong message from the field is that teachers cannot undertake their role in the classroom without good organisational management and leadership at both the school and regional level. Strategic and innovative approaches to teaching and learning and accompanying support and expertise, including regional and state office support, need to be provided in a coherent, strategic and ongoing fashion.

The findings from field trips and submissions and research evidence are additional justification for a coordinated approach to investigating and researching what it is that effective teachers do and providing answers to the questions they still have about quality teaching, especially effective literacy teaching in the early years of primary education.
The number of Aboriginal students in Year 3 to Year 6, as in junior primary grades, is growing. In 2003 there was a total of 11,585 Aboriginal students enrolled in those Years, an increase of 3,496 students from 1996.

The number of Aboriginal students in Years 3 to 6 increased between 4 and 7 percent for each year from 1996 to 2003. In 2003 Aboriginal students represented 4.6 percent of all students enrolled in Years 3 to 6.

Grade progression rates show that Aboriginal students are being retained from Kindergarten to Year 6. The apparent increase in Aboriginal student enrolment figures from Year 3 to Year 6 may be partly due to increased levels of identification by Aboriginal students or due to the high mobility of a number of Aboriginal students, who are either entering or moving between state schools.

Attendance rates for Aboriginal students in the middle and upper primary years show that they are twice as likely to be absent as non-Aboriginal students. A study of Aboriginal K–12 student absences in March 2004 indicated that on average they are not attending for up to three days every month (20 school days).

Suspension rates for Aboriginal students in the middle and upper primary years show that:

- the suspension rate for Aboriginal boys for short suspensions (from one to four days) is 378 suspensions per 1000 students, compared with 67 suspensions per 1000 students for non-Aboriginal boys
- for short suspensions, Aboriginal boys are being suspended at a rate that is over four times greater than that for non-Aboriginal boys
- the suspension rate for Aboriginal girls for short suspensions is 60 suspensions per 1000 students, compared with 8 suspensions per 1000 students for non-Aboriginal girls
- for short suspensions, Aboriginal girls are being suspended at a rate that is over eight times greater than that for non-Aboriginal girls.

Approximately 58 percent of Aboriginal students in Years 3 to 6 are attending schools in a non-metropolitan area. A total of 42 percent of Aboriginal students in Years 3 to 6 attend a school where there are 30 or fewer Aboriginal students (2003 enrolment data).

**How are Aboriginal students performing in the upper primary years?**

One of the Review’s terms of reference was to identify factors contributing to the low levels of achievement for many Aboriginal students.
The Review acknowledges that many Aboriginal students are engaged and achieving at school, that they are highly involved in their local Aboriginal community and are participating in opportunities within the wider community.

Field trips and consultations identified that many average performing or “invisible” Aboriginal students are not being extended or provided with opportunities to achieve at a higher level. Several schools identified Aboriginal students as successful students or their “success stories”, but a deeper examination of outcomes for these students showed that many of them are performing well in relation to the state average for Aboriginal students but they are still below the state average for all students.

Data would suggest that it is during the middle and primary years of education, from Year 3 to Year 6, that many Aboriginal students are locked out of future success in education. It is also during these years that Aboriginal students need to be supported to make important decisions about themselves, their family, their community and their future learning.

**Year 3 Basic Skills Test**

The Basic Skills Test (BST) reports a student's achievement and progress in comparison to other students. Students sit the BST in Year 3 and Year 5 when their literacy and numeracy skills are assessed.

For the Year 3 BST, students are ranked into five skill bands, with Band 1 representing lowest-achieving students and Band 5 representing highest-achieving students.

Year 3 BST results since 1998 indicate that the gap between the mean scores for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy is approximately 5 points lower for Aboriginal students and for numeracy is approximately 6 points lower.

At Year 3, the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is substantial and has not been reduced despite a multitude of mainstream and targeted Aboriginal literacy and numeracy programs. BST results show that the education system is meeting the needs of a large number of students but is clearly not meeting the specific educational needs of many Aboriginal students.

As was indicated in Chapter 1, the size of the gap in literacy performance in Year 3 in 2003 was equivalent to 19 months of literacy learning (compared with all students) while the gap in numeracy performance was 17 months.

Not only are Year 3 Aboriginal students achieving at a level significantly lower than all other students, but they also are particularly over-represented in the lowest skill bands.

In 2003, 32 percent of Aboriginal students were unable to demonstrate minimal competency in literacy compared to 11 percent of non-Aboriginal students. For numeracy, 22 percent of Aboriginal students were unable to demonstrate minimal competency compared to 7 percent of non-Aboriginal students.
One of the most important messages from the field trips, submissions and consultants was that the reasons for the unacceptable performance of Aboriginal students in Year 3 and Year 5 BST results need to be addressed before these students enter the primary years of schooling. Aboriginal students entering Year 3 without essential skills, knowledge and understandings have little opportunity in the upper primary years to “catch up” and gain required skills or to access higher-level courses in English, mathematics and science in high school.

Many Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal community people, when interviewed on Review field trips, made strong statements that schools were pushing our kids through with little or no support and that low expectations by teachers resulted in low achievements for their children.

**Year 5 Basic Skills Test**

In the Year 5 BST, students are ranked into six skill bands with Band 1 representing the lowest-achieving students and Band 6 representing the highest-achieving students.

At Year 5, the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy are about the same as in Year 3, suggesting that Aboriginal students are learning at the same rate as non-Aboriginal students from Year 3 to Year 5, but given that they were so far behind to begin with, they remain behind by approximately the same amount. To catch up, the Aboriginal students would have to learn consistently at a much faster rate than the non-Aboriginal students.

In 2003, 81 percent of Aboriginal students in Year 5 were able to demonstrate minimal competencies in both reading and numeracy. This compared with 94 percent of non-Aboriginal students in both reading and numeracy.

Principals and teachers spoke about low levels of achievement by some Aboriginal students as having a major impact in classrooms. Some teachers cater better for the wide range of student achievement in their class. Teachers with limited teaching experience are particularly challenged when meeting the needs of students who are disengaged and/or disruptive due to their inability to participate in classroom teaching and learning tasks.

Many teachers commented on the demands of covering all areas of the K–6 curriculum and talked about an “overcrowded curriculum”. In some schools Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and tutors working in primary classrooms commented that teachers were rushing students though each lesson and there didn’t seem to be enough time for teachers, particularly in the upper primary, to spend quality time with all students.

**What do the BST results mean for parents and teachers?**

The results of the BST provide valuable information about what students know and what they can do with language and numbers.
BST parent reports provide parents/caregivers with information about their child’s results. The field trips identified that many Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal caregivers felt they did not receive adequate information to allow them to be knowledgeable about their child’s progress at school. Many parents commented that they did not have a good understanding of what their child’s BST report meant and did not feel comfortable or confident enough to approach the school or their child’s teacher to gain further information.

BST school reports provide teachers with information on identifying groups of students who need additional support. It became evident through the field trip visits to schools that the diagnostic aspect of the BST is not fully understood by some teachers and that a number of schools are not effectively using BST data to plan and implement programs to meet the learning needs of their Aboriginal students.

Students who are identified in Band 1 in Year 3 BST results and Band 1 and Band 2 in Year 5 BST results are provided with additional support. Effective schools analyse BST results to identify trends. These trends provide useful information in determining strategies to support student learning and in determining priorities for professional development. The Support Teacher Learner Assistance (STLA) works with teachers through focused individual assessments for students who are identified as needing follow-up from the BST.

**School Education Area BST results**

In 2004 the Department organised schools into 43 School Education Areas (SEAs). SEAs range from 11 (0.09 percent) Aboriginal students to 950 (8.2 percent) Aboriginal students in Years 3 to 6.

It is important that Aboriginal student performance be measured in relation to the performance of all students. Comparing Aboriginal students to the state or SEA average for Aboriginal students can encourage the setting of targets for Aboriginal students that will remain below the benchmark for all students. Unless the current gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is identified and understood, low expectations for Aboriginal student achievement will continue unchallenged.

The 2003 BST results at SEA level indicate that the mean score for Aboriginal students was below the state mean score for all students in a large majority of SEAs.

Statewide supplementary programs to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and Regional and SEA consultancy support for Aboriginal students will be discussed at a later stage in this section.

**School BST results**

It should be acknowledged that a number of schools have been successful in improving outcomes for Aboriginal students from Kindergarten to Year 6.
Educational research has endeavoured to identify characteristics thought to be important for successful schools. Masters (2004), among others, has identified the following features:

- strong, effective school leaders whose primary focus is on establishing a culture of learning throughout the school
- learning being seen as the central purpose of school and taking precedence over everything else
- teachers with a thorough and up-to-date knowledge of their subjects and a deep understanding of how students learn particular subjects
- students with a sense of belonging and pride
- well-developed systems for evaluating and monitoring student performance
- high levels of parent and community involvement.

Schools identified through the field trips as having made progress in improving Aboriginal student achievement had high levels of the features mentioned above.

In addition, these schools demonstrated many of the following characteristics:

- a high priority for and whole school approach to Aboriginal education
- a principal and executive team committed to meeting the needs of students, teachers and parents
- Aboriginal community involvement in the planning and implementation of programs
- Aboriginal people employed as part of whole school literacy, numeracy, attendance or retention programs
- high expectations for Aboriginal student achievement
- teaching and learning programs and support programs that were well structured, highly organised and properly resourced
- teachers who knew their Aboriginal students and could make connections between school knowledge and the lived experiences of all their students
- explicit and rigorous teaching and learning programs that ensure engaged learning time for all Aboriginal students
- focused teaching that included a range of classroom practices and strategies in response to the needs of Aboriginal students
- positive whole school/whole community student welfare programs.

Schools that are making a difference for Aboriginal students identified their priority as student achievement by focusing on effective teaching and learning rather than student welfare programs and program funding. These schools typically demonstrated real partnerships with their local Aboriginal community based on shared responsibilities and positive relationships.
School leadership

Submissions and field trips identified that principals and school executive staff play a vital role in ensuring Aboriginal students are provided with equitably resourced and quality teaching and learning programs; providing professional development for all staff in Aboriginal education; developing and maintaining positive relationships with the local Aboriginal community; and ensuring all Aboriginal students have the opportunity to achieve.

*Lack of community consultation in schools at an executive level is systemic racism.*

− Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA), submission WM059

Chris Sarra, the principal of Cherbourg State School, Queensland, outlined the changes he made between 1999 and 2002 as the first Aboriginal principal appointed to the school as:

- believing it could be done
- consolidating a school vision
- changing the culture of the school
- expecting improved attendance
- expecting improved student behaviour
- expecting improved academic performance
- focusing on role models
- valuing and utilising Indigenous staff within the school
- developing a whole-of-school Aboriginal studies program
- generating a sense of solidarity (school song, school uniform and school tidy zones)

(Sarra, 2003).

Heitmeyer and Craven in their 2004 paper *Re-visioning Schooling* identify the need to re-vision schools through the goals of mutual respect and understanding to enhance Aboriginal student identity, academic self-concept, knowledge and skills. The paper calls for schools to provide “accelerated learning” to ensure no Aboriginal student is left behind. The paper also identifies the need for special fitness appointment of executive staff to high Aboriginal enrolment schools.

Field trips and submissions (ATSIC and Primary Principals Association [PPA]) identified the *Dare to Lead* and *What Works* programs as exemplary programs and called for their continued support.

**Cultural programs and a culturally inclusive curriculum**

There was an identified need expressed through submissions and field trips for Aboriginal students to participate in Aboriginal cultural programs that allowed them to make connections with their local Aboriginal culture and to other Indigenous cultures. This included the need for schools to provide Aboriginal cultural programs as well as providing all students with a curriculum that
understands and takes account of local, national and international Indigenous culture, heritage and history.

### Case study: Maths in Context for Aboriginal students

*Maths in Context* for Aboriginal students (MiC) is a strategic response to the identified need for teachers to use appropriate teaching strategies for Aboriginal students in Mathematics. The MiC program provides a framework for schools to develop Stage 2 and Stage 3 Mathematics units in consultation with their local Aboriginal community.

MiC recognises that Aboriginal students need to be immersed in an Aboriginal view of mathematics to strengthen and maintain their identity and culture. The initiative relies on schools and teachers valuing and drawing on the knowledge and understandings within the local Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal parents and community members work with the school to identify a context of cultural significance that provides an opportunity for the skills, knowledge and understandings of the *Mathematics K–6 Syllabus* to be taught.

One Aboriginal Education Assistant commented that as a result of the MiC program:

> Parents just come through the gates now. They know they can help. They want their kids to do well at school and this program gives them a way of working with the teachers.

Submissions and field trips identified strong support for primary school programs such as Aboriginal Language Programs and culturally relevant curricula such as *Count Me In Too Indigenous, Maths in Context* for Aboriginal students (MiC), *Mathematics in Indigenous Contexts*, the *Bidialectal approach to teaching Standard Australian English* pilot program and the Australian Government *Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) Literacy in Aboriginal Languages Program*.

Recent research and literature (Bourke et al, 2000; McRae et al, 2000) highlight recognition of culture as being fundamental to achieving Aboriginal student engagement. Cultural recognition and understanding will be encouraged through the formation of partnerships and strong personal relationships between school educators and Aboriginal Elders, families and community members.

Effective schools visited as part of the field trips spoke about developing a strong dialogue with Elders and the Aboriginal community, in providing opportunities for school staff to listen and reflect upon the experiences of the Aboriginal community and in recognising and valuing the knowledge, skills and experiences that are held by Elders and Aboriginal people. The resources and knowledge within the Aboriginal community, when used in the classroom and throughout the school, became a sustainable way of forming meaningful partnerships and developing a curriculum that is engaging and culturally appropriate.
The field trips and submissions also identified that Aboriginal cultural education programs need to be provided in an ongoing and focused manner to school leaders and staff in schools, SEAs, regions and the state office.

**Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal languages**

Field trip visits acknowledged that many primary schools are incorporating Aboriginal perspectives across the Key Learning Areas, most often in Human Society and its Environment (HSIE).

Embedded within the mandatory *Human Society and its Environment K–6 Syllabus* is Aboriginal Studies content. All students learn about Aboriginal society and history including the impact of the stolen generation, Aboriginal democratic practices before colonisation, Aboriginal resilience and perspectives on British invasion.

Feedback from Aboriginal workers, Aboriginal community members and Aboriginal students highlights the need for schools to develop a continuum of learning for Aboriginal Studies in consultation with Elders and Aboriginal community members so that all students are presented with new information and concepts as they move from Kindergarten to Year 10. Many students commented that they learnt the same things each time they did work in Aboriginal Studies.

There is also a need to embed Aboriginal perspectives across all KLAs from Kindergarten to Year 6 to engage Aboriginal students and to validate Aboriginal cultural knowledge in syllabus content.

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**Australian Government Quality Teaching Program Literacy in Aboriginal Languages**

The AGQTP *Literacy in Aboriginal Languages* project is a strategic response to the identified need to support teachers of Aboriginal languages in planning and teaching the new Board of Studies NSW 2003 *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus*. It recognises that students need to engage in the learning of Aboriginal languages to strengthen and maintain Aboriginal identity and culture. The AGQTP *Literacy in Aboriginal Languages* project is incumbent on schools valuing and drawing upon the knowledge and understandings within their local Aboriginal community.

Nine schools were selected to participate in this project. These schools covered four different language groups across NSW including Bundjalung, Gamilaraay, Gumbaygirr and Thunghutti/Dunghutti.

Each of the schools formed school-based action learning teams to assess and evaluate their learning needs in relation to the teaching of the *Aboriginal Languages K–10 Syllabus*. Teachers of Aboriginal languages discussed and collaborated with Elders and Aboriginal community members to design and trial units that reflect local Aboriginal cultural perspectives with specific reference to the syllabus. Units of work were developed for each stage of the K–10 spectrum.
Chris Sarra, the Aboriginal principal of Cherbourg State School, implemented a whole-of-school Aboriginal Studies P–7 program where each student participates in an Aboriginal Studies lesson for two hours each week as part of the school’s curriculum framework. The program was developed in consultation with Cherbourg Elders and community members and Sarra believes that the program is a key factor in the school’s improved attendance and, in turn, achievement levels.

Any school that is serious about delivering an Aboriginal Studies program must present it in a credible format and not just as an add-on activity, or something to do during NAIDOC [National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee] week.

– Chris Sarra

The teaching of Aboriginal languages in the primary school was viewed as positive by school staff and Aboriginal community people. A number of primary schools have been successfully teaching Aboriginal languages for a number of years and there is an increasing number of primary schools and Aboriginal communities interested in establishing an Aboriginal Language program.

Conditions for learning

In order to achieve academic success, Aboriginal students must be taught well.

Research has consistently shown that, of all the things that schools can control, it is the quality of the pedagogy that most directly and most powerfully affects the quality of learning outcomes that students demonstrate (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003c).

Field trips, research, submissions and the Curriculum and Pedagogy Working Party report that effective teaching and learning for Aboriginal students is considered to be dependent on:

- pre-service teacher training in Aboriginal history, Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal students
- on-going professional development in Aboriginal education
- teachers’ understanding of Aboriginal students, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal history and culture
- teachers’ deep knowledge of curriculum and syllabuses
- a whole school focus on the achievement of syllabus outcomes
- quality teaching in all classrooms
- professional conversations that identify and critique strategic and innovative approaches
- authentic partnerships with Aboriginal communities.

A number of submissions called for an investigation into the area of “Aboriginal learning styles”. All students learn differently. Aboriginal students may approach learning through different methods from non-Aboriginal students or have a preferred way for acquiring new knowledge.
Many teachers interviewed as part of the Review expressed a belief that Aboriginal students learn differently from other students. Teachers’ lack of awareness and understanding of Aboriginal students’ Aboriginality, culture and language may impact on their relationships and interactions with Aboriginal students, which may in turn impact on the way Aboriginal students respond or behave.

Throughout the Review field trips and workshops, Aboriginal educators, Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal community members did not identify an “Aboriginal learning style” that is applicable to all Aboriginal students in New South Wales.

A much more useful discussion needs to focus on what conditions for learning engage and connect Aboriginal students to the curriculum. The Academic Reference Group has called for more research around teacher understandings of difference to challenge current assumptions, knowledge and justifications.

As highlighted by the Indigenous Education Taskforce in its paper Effective Learning Issues for Indigenous Children Aged 0–8 Years:

> The emphasis is not on how individual children learn, but on why and how people learn through their culture and how participation in culture shapes identity … Rather than aim for a curriculum that avoids discussions of cultural identity, the goal should be to facilitate the process by which students are permitted to discover and explore their cultural connections … Every child has their own learning style and the Taskforce is of the view that these learning styles are not dependent on whether a child is Indigenous or non-Indigenous (MCEETYA, 2001, p. 31).

Teachers need to be provided with professional development, information and resources that acknowledge, respect and affirm both Aboriginal and school cultures to identify conditions for learning for Aboriginal students and to draw on Aboriginal cultural knowledge to develop school-based learning experiences.

**Case management**

The field trips and consultations identified a need to better support Aboriginal students during the middle and upper primary years. Many Aboriginal students, particularly boys, have disengaged from schooling by Year 5. The number of short suspensions for Aboriginal students in Years 3 to Year 6, particularly for boys, indicates the need for alternative approaches to re-engaging students who are not connected to school. Many primary school principals and executive staff commented on the need for more male teachers on staff.

A recurring theme present in field trips and submissions was the need for early intervention: to provide support when a student needed it, rather than after the issue has escalated.

There was a consistent message from Aboriginal community people that Aboriginal students are not all the same and that Aboriginal parents wanted to
be informed about and involved in decisions relating to their children. This included issues that ranged from suspension, through to representing the school and attendance on excursions. Many parents commented that schools made decisions without appropriately informing parents.

School principals and school staff including Aboriginal education workers identified the need for better access to a range of coordinated programs that drew together the expertise within government, non-government, Aboriginal community organisations and Aboriginal community knowledge. Elements of successful programs included the identification of needs of Aboriginal families, access to culturally appropriate services, and continued support and sustainability.

The need for the alignment of government and non-government programs to address social, economic and educational disadvantage was identified through the 2004 Legislative Council Inquiry into issues relating to Redfern/Waterloo.

However, there is poor or non-existent coordination, inadequate accountability across the service system, duplication of services, under-resourced, under-trained and non-viable services. This, combined with the policies of past governments, provides further challenges. Services and agencies need to change if the issues are to be resolved … To conclude, there is no quick fix to the long term issues being faced by the Redfern/Waterloo communities. The problems are entrenched, complex and multi-faceted. Whilst many well-intentioned people have put forward solutions … experience has shown that adhoc and poorly designed solutions only exacerbate the situation (Gellatly, 2004).

School staff and community people identified the positive aspects of Aboriginal people acting as mentors for Aboriginal students, especially for those Aboriginal students who did not have a positive view of school.

School staff repeatedly commented on the value of an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) who has had a deep knowledge of the student and a close relationship with the student’s family and extended family when case managing Aboriginal students. However, the presence of AEAs in schools should not be seen as a substitute for or a reason not to have meaningful conversations with members of the Aboriginal community.

Counselling programs and school counsellors

Aboriginal students are entitled to counselling support that provides them with culturally appropriate knowledge and expertise to deal with the complex issues they face on a daily basis.

Students consulted during field trip visits to schools stated that they would like more Aboriginal teachers to become counsellors and they would feel more comfortable talking to an Aboriginal counsellor.
The NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) State Council submission (18 May 2004) recommended that every Aboriginal student have free and easy access to an Aboriginal counsellor.

A submission from school counsellors identified their lack of knowledge about Aboriginal contemporary culture and the need for more counsellors with a deep knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal students. The group calls for more work to be done to develop culturally appropriate assessment tools.

Drug education

The instance of drug, alcohol and/or substance abuse is high in some families. Children from families where the parents or caregivers are living with violence, drugs and alcohol need to be provided with care and protection to ensure that they are safe from neglect and abuse. Schools play a role in providing support for these students and ensuring that the effects of their family life do not affect their participation and engagement in school and classroom activities.

Case study: Healing Time

The Healing Time resources (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2002) support the drug education needs of Aboriginal students with low literacy levels by using good practices in drug education within an Aboriginal framework. The resources include activities to engage students, teachers, parents and the local community in the Healing Time program.

Stages 2 and 3 of Healing Time support drug education for students in Years 3 to 6. Using narratives, students explore the effects of smoking, decision-making, rules and consequences through the eyes of Aboriginal children and their families.

Where Healing Time has been implemented:

- Aboriginal students have better rapport with teachers
- Aboriginal students are engaged in lessons
- Aboriginal students are effective class leaders
- Aboriginal students express pride in their culture
- Aboriginal students discuss issues that are often not discussed at home
- non-Aboriginal students have greater exposure to Aboriginal culture
- non-Aboriginal students have recognised shared experiences, e.g. family break-up, bullying
- non-Aboriginal students have benefited from learning from Aboriginal peers.

Cultural programs

The provision of cultural programs such as boys’ and girls’ Aboriginal dance groups, the involvement of Elders groups in school activities, cultural excursions, and linking students with Aboriginal artists, musicians, dancers, sportsmen, sportswomen and role models were identified as having a positive effect on Aboriginal students’ cultural identity and sense of belonging at school.

Many schools commented that school assemblies and official gatherings commenced with a Welcome to Country and Acknowledgment of Country.
Aboriginal community people commented on the importance of Elders being acknowledged and invited to significant school functions.

The value of Aboriginal Language programs for Aboriginal students was also highlighted as well as the importance of a curriculum that educated all students about Aboriginal history, culture and communities.

School staff raised a number of issues involved in providing cultural programs for Aboriginal students. These included difficulties in accessing expertise within their local Aboriginal communities, in becoming familiar with local protocols and making contact with the wider Aboriginal community, in becoming aware of factions within communities and the reluctance of Aboriginal community people to become involved in school programs.

It must be acknowledged that a number of non-Aboriginal people working in education and training are apprehensive of working with Aboriginal people. This “fear factor” is related to not wanting to say or do something that is inappropriate or culturally offensive, a lack of knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal people and lack of opportunities to have meaningful conversations and interact socially with Aboriginal people.

Cultural knowledge will differ greatly among schools and their Aboriginal communities. The differences in Aboriginal cultures from a state and national perspective are vast. There is no one answer to what defines “culturally appropriate” or how programs can reflect cultural knowledge.

This is a challenge to be negotiated at a local level, with Elders and local Aboriginal communities. School staff commented that their local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and SEA Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer were important points of contact for schools when accessing the skills, knowledge and experiences of Aboriginal communities.

Factions are formed along kinship lines and have kept Aboriginal communities strong since time immemorial. Schools that have developed strong partnerships with their local Aboriginal communities are able to identify Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who are able to work within and across factions.

Submissions highlighted the Board of Studies NSW document Working with Aboriginal Communities (2001) for providing advice to schools on protocols when working with Aboriginal communities.

**Student engagement**

A high number of submissions and comments from the field trips raised the critical issue of Aboriginal students being engaged in education. Comments included:

> Failure to engage and connect with Aboriginal students is more critical than attendance.

– Submission WM128
There is a tendency to respond to student disengagement with special programs rather than addressing the core problem of mainstream schooling.

– Submission WM096

The Review has found that the majority of Aboriginal students are attending school but it is their level of engagement in schooling that is the critical issue.

Disengagement as discussed throughout field trip interviews, community meetings and submissions was attributed to:

- poor teacher–student relationships
- curriculum content not being relevant or stimulating
- inappropriate teaching styles
- low literacy and numeracy skills of some Aboriginal students
- high suspension rates
- lack of parental support or encouragement.

AEAs, AEWs, Aboriginal tutors, Aboriginal parents, Aboriginal students and Aboriginal community members identified that many Aboriginal students were bored at school.

The issues of student engagement and case management for Aboriginal students are fundamental to the Review recommendations. The number of Aboriginal students of all ages in behaviour classes, suspension centers and Juvenile Justice Centres is increasing. The percentage of Aboriginal students of all ages in Behaviour Disorder (BD) and Emotional Disturbance (ED) classes rose from 18.4 percent (71) in 1996 to 30.7 percent (201) in 2003.

School principals, school staff and Aboriginal education workers identified the need to access expertise to provide support for Aboriginal students at risk of disengaging with schooling during the middle and upper primary years.

School staff also expressed the view that many Aboriginal students were engaged at school but lacked the essential follow-up at home such as limited or non-existent access to resources and computers, community and family responsibilities, difficulties in completing homework due to not having one-to-one parent support, and living or staying at different homes.

The Heitmeyer and Craven paper (2004) and the NSW ATSIC State Council submission (2004) called for access to after-school academic coaching community centres where Aboriginal students are provided with tutorial support and access to technology such as computer programs, web-based learning programs and the Internet.

Positive self-identity has been suggested as one of the most important factors related to attachment to school and positive school outcomes for Aboriginal students. For this to be achieved, students need to feel valued as Aboriginal people. Aboriginal students who stay on at school have strong Aboriginal and
personal identities, self-reliance and confidence. Their goals include a
determination and desire to succeed at school and to access mainstream school
knowledge.

A study (McInerney, 2003) that compared “Aboriginal, Navajo and Anglo”
responses to motivation, engagement and further study found that:

- 40 percent of Aboriginal students’ responses cited negative peer
  influences (bullies, drugs, fights, distractions, disruptions) as the major
  thing that made it difficult for them to do well at school. Anglo
  responses were 34 percent and Navajo were 29 percent
- 43 percent of Aboriginal student responses cited school alienation (want
  to get out, don’t like school, school is boring and/or irrelevant) as the
  reason why Aboriginal students leave school before Year 10 (38 percent
  for Anglo and 36 percent for Navajo)
- 16 percent of Aboriginal student responses were related to future
  orientation (money, career, further education). Anglo responses were 31
  percent and 23 percent for Navajo.

Mobility and tracking student achievement

The Tracking Mobility Rates (TMR) project was funded by the Australian
Government to develop and implement a student tracking system and
information exchange about transferring Aboriginal students in New South
Wales. An intensive reading support program was developed for the targeted
mobile students. The program included the use of multimedia software to
develop student portfolios.

The electronic student portfolios held a collection of student work that indicated
student achievement in literacy against syllabus outcomes. Portfolios were
electronically transferred to the new school or the disk was taken by the student
or mailed to the new school.

The TMR project for the 1999 school year identified that:

- 164 schools participated in the program (across five districts)
- 123 schools returned data
- 1430 Aboriginal students were tracked
- 961 Aboriginal students enrolled in the 123 schools that provided data
- 866 Aboriginal students exited the 123 schools that provided data.

In the TMR pilot schools, there were more enrolments than exits.

The report notes that of particular concern is the number of mobile students in
classes for students with mild intellectual disability (IM classes). The TMR
database indicated that at least 1 out of every 50 Aboriginal students involved in
the TMR project was placed in an IM class.

School staff identified that there was need for schools to better meet the needs of
mobile Aboriginal students and for planning and programs to take into account
issues such as year cohorts changing by up to 30 percent each year due to the high mobility of some Aboriginal students.

The NSW Primary Principals’ Association Equity Programs Reference Group submission stated that tracking procedures should be strengthened to monitor and respond to the movement of Aboriginal families.

The Review has identified that there is a need to improve the tracking of Aboriginal student achievement, particularly in relation to matching enrolment data and BST data. The number of students identified as Aboriginal in the BST datasets can differ from the number of Aboriginal students in Years 3 and 5 as identified in the respective mid-year census collections (eg for Year 5 in 2003, total numbers of government school students taking the literacy tests were 4.3 percent less than the mid-year census numbers, while the number of Aboriginal students was over 14 percent more).

**Student leadership**

A positive theme that developed from field visits, community consultations and submissions was identified as the development of student leadership programs for Aboriginal students and the belief that leadership programs (both within the school and community) can support the increased retention of Aboriginal students.

It was found that leadership programs develop Aboriginal school leaders who act as role models for other Aboriginal students. These leaders have strong cultural and personal identities; self-reliance and confidence; and a determination to succeed at school to achieve long-term career goals.

Consultations identified that many Aboriginal students in the upper years of primary have an identified leadership role in their family and their community that needs to be acknowledged and developed through opportunities in primary school. Successful programs for secondary students such as Aboriginal Student Councils or junior AECGs may be useful models for middle and upper primary students.

**Transition to Year 7 and career and work education**

The Review has identified the need for additional support for Aboriginal students at transition points (transition to school; Year 2 to Year 3; Year 6 to Year 7; and Year 10 to Year 11).

The major transition point is from home to school but the move from primary school to high school is an area where many Aboriginal students with positive experiences at primary school lose their sense of identity and belonging and feel isolated.

Successful transition to high school programs for Aboriginal students need to be more structured and meaningful than one or two visits to the high school and an exchange of information between the primary school AEA and the high school.
AEA to ensure that Aboriginal students are not “lost” in their first year of high school.

A South Australian program that provides up to five weeks case management and mentoring support for Aboriginal students returning to school after the December/January vacation has been successful in improving the transition from year to year and improving Aboriginal students’ preparedness and readiness for school.

Aboriginal community consultations raised the need for career education to be made more meaningful for Aboriginal students and for future goals to be explored and supported in primary school.

Schools identified the success of the Aboriginal Careers Aspiration Program (ACAP) as a model for preparing Aboriginal students for high school and for the world of work but were concerned that the program was no longer being funded.

Providing support for the gifted and talented

There is little literature or evidence from the field trips and submissions about the identification of or programs developed to meet the learning needs of gifted and talented Aboriginal students.

Between 1997 and 2003 there were between three and five Aboriginal students in primary Opportunity Class (OC) classes as compared to 3240 non-Aboriginal students in 2003 (Source: National Schools Statistics Collection).

Community consultations raised the issue of increasing the number of Aboriginal students in primary OC classes by targeting places for Aboriginal students and through the development of culturally appropriate assessment.

The major work around gifted and talented Aboriginal students in New South Wales is represented by Dr Graham Chaffey, who undertook a number of case studies of Aboriginal students from Year 3 to Year 6 as part of his thesis. Dr Chaffey developed a testing method called the Coolabah Dynamic Testing Method (2003) to identify high academic potential in “invisible underachievers”. Dr Chaffey claims that the test is relatively culturally fair as it is based on pattern-recognition rather than linguistic skills. The Coolabah Dynamic assessment has been successful in identifying previously unrecognised high academic potential in young Aboriginal children.

In 2003 the theory behind the Chaffey model was used to fill places reserved for Aboriginal students in an opportunity class at a metropolitan New South Wales Government school. Schools were not asked to provide information about the student’s achievement or comments on the student’s suitability. Chaffey found that consistently teachers had lower expectations of their students’ ability than evidenced by his tests.

A total of four Aboriginal students applied and were tested using a modified version of Chaffey’s program. None of these students had applied through the
original statewide selection process. After testing, places in the Opportunity Class were offered to three of the students.

**Implementation of the Aboriginal Education Policy**

Numerous community visits, field trips and submissions strongly highlighted the need for the Department to be accountable for the full implementation of the *Aboriginal Education Policy* (AEP) across all New South Wales Government schools and that the current unacceptable achievement levels for Aboriginal students could be directly related to the AEP not being implemented in schools in a holistic or significant way.

The implementation of the *Aboriginal Education Policy* (AEP) 1996 is mandatory for all New South Wales Government schools. The successful implementation of this policy should ensure Aboriginal students are able to participate in learning environments unencumbered by the negative effects of racism.

Aboriginal community members commented that supportive schools identify and resolve issues of racism and welcome the process of reconciliation.

Submissions identified that incorporating Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum and teaching Aboriginal Studies will support the process of sharing cultural knowledge by Aboriginal people. This knowledge then becomes accessible to all students through the curriculum.

Aboriginal community members expressed the belief that incorporating the issues of racism, prejudice and reconciliation in school planning and policies was crucial to effective, ongoing social support for Aboriginal students and their families.

A number of submissions called for mandatory reporting of the AEP in every school’s Annual Report.

**Aboriginal education support programs to improve outcomes**

A number of programs operating in New South Wales Government schools aim at improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students by meeting their specific educational needs.

Programs developed to achieve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students must be:

- strategic and planned
- rigorous and explicit
- achievable and successful
- sustainable and accountable.

A substantial number of submissions highlighted the need for the Commonwealth and state funding cycle to be aligned, for program funding to be
allocated for at least a three-year period and for flexibility to allow schools to select programs that best meet the needs of their Aboriginal students.

Field trips also highlighted the need for support programs for Aboriginal students to start early in Term 1 rather than later in the year. As well, the competitive process of submissions does not always result in programs being offered to the most appropriate schools.

A submission from an Aboriginal health organisation suggested providing additional funding to schools that can demonstrate effective community engagement (Submission EM004).

**Priority Schools Funding Program**

The *Priority Schools Funding Program* (PSFP) provides schools with additional funding, resources and consultancy support to meet the educational needs of students from low socioeconomic families. PSFP schools include 81 secondary, 406 primary, 19 central and 35 Schools for Specific Purposes.

In 2002, 48.3 percent or 5593 Aboriginal students in Years 3 to 6 were in PSFP schools. As many Aboriginal students come from families with low incomes, the PSFP is one of the major equity programs seeking to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students from K–12.

Greenwood, Frigo and Hughes (2002), in examining the recent OECD *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA), found that Australian Aboriginal students (15 years) from a high socioeconomic status are not necessarily more likely to achieve better results. They believe there may be other factors operating in relation to the achievement of Aboriginal students.

Field trip visits to PSFP schools identified their focus areas as literacy, numeracy and participation. Schools worked with their PSFP consultant and Community Development Officer to identify, plan and implement school-based activities to improve educational outcomes for all students. The 2002 PSFP accountability report identified that 83 percent of PSFP students reached a stage-appropriate level.

The field trips found that schools working to address social and economic disadvantage for Aboriginal students were much more effective when planning, programs and staff recognised and valued the critical issue of cultural identity: the student’s Aboriginality and Aboriginal community knowledge.

A number of schools highlighted the need for a closer alignment of all support programs to ensure connectedness rather than duplication. Schools were concerned about the ability of short-term programs and short-term funding to address the high needs of a number of Aboriginal students.
Priority Action Schools Program

The *Priority Action Schools Program* (PAS) provides resources to 74 PSFP schools to maximise educational outcomes and improve student performance.

Funding under the *Priority Action Schools Program* supports schools to improve student engagement in learning and educational outcomes, and improve attendance and retention. The program fosters cooperation between schools, TAFE NSW and other agencies and community organisations.

Some features of PAS schools include high staff and student mobility, high concentrations of beginning teachers or end career teachers (depending on location) and inexperienced school executive staff in promotion positions.

A number of PAS schools were visited during the field trips. As participants in the PAS program, schools developed a plan that:

- provided local solutions to problems affecting schools
- focused on strengthening interagency collaborations
- developed community and school capacity building
- identified innovative early intervention and prevention strategies
- incorporated context-based solutions and partnerships
- identified an academic partner to support their action research and evaluation.

PAS schools reported that the ability to plan and think differently meant they were better placed to meet the identified needs of their Aboriginal students through effective teaching and learning. The availability of resources to support the employment of additional staff to implement strategies and flexible staffing arrangements for school communities to select and employ officers with specific skills, abilities and interests were identified as beneficial.

Additional support to enhance professional learning in schools such as mentoring of beginning teachers, in-built relief for classroom observations and post-class reflection time, executive release for shared school leadership and the implementation of an action enquiry model of program evaluation were seen as critical to the program’s success.

Targeted funding

In 2004 approximately 498 schools were provided with targeted funding to implement literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention programs for Aboriginal students K–12. The amount of funds allocated to schools for projects is determined by local Aboriginal Education Advisory Committees.

Schools are required to develop programs based on the educational needs of their Aboriginal students through focused and educationally rigorous programs that have direct links to syllabus documents. Programs need to be developed in close consultation with Aboriginal parents and the local Aboriginal community.
The Consultant (Aboriginal Education) provides consultancy support to these schools to ensure the effective implementation of the targeted project.

In the evaluations for 2003 projects, schools have indicated that targeted funding projects have been extremely successful and that they have had a direct and positive impact on the achievements of targeted Aboriginal students, but this is not reflected in Basic Skills Test results at an SEA or statewide level.

An analysis of targeted funding evaluations for 2003 by the Aboriginal Programs Unit found that in reporting on Aboriginal student achievement, schools are rarely reporting on the achievement of syllabus outcomes. A reliance on results that are not linked to syllabus content or syllabus outcomes may be providing some schools with a false sense of educational achievement and, as a result, Aboriginal students are still performing at levels lower than their non-Aboriginal peers according to Basic Skills Test results.

School performance of Aboriginal students in the Basic Skills Test is also commonly compared to state averages for Aboriginal students in the Basic Skills Test. This comparison leads schools to conclude that their Aboriginal students are performing in line with, or above, state averages. In these cases, schools may have developed an acceptance that the state average for Aboriginal students is well below the state average for all students.

The most common strategy employed by schools for providing additional support to targeted Aboriginal students is the employment of Aboriginal community members as tutors, usually supporting students within classrooms. This strategy appears to be sound as the IESIP performance indicators identify the employment of Aboriginal people at all levels of the Department as a priority. However, the use of Aboriginal community tutors working with students generally means the target students receive less time with the classroom teacher when, in fact, more access to classroom teacher time is probably required by these students.

**In-class Tuition**

In 2002 and 2003, approximately 75 primary and central schools were provided with *In-class Tuition* (ICT) funding to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for Years K–6 Aboriginal students in the lowest 20 percent of literacy and numeracy assessment.

Funding was provided to employ tutors to work with students in the classroom during literacy and numeracy lessons. A majority of schools employed Aboriginal community members as tutors and had a focus on literacy.

An analysis of the BST results for the participating schools in 2002 and 2003 indicated:

- In 22 of the 75 schools Aboriginal students improved their results in literacy by more than the average improvement for all students between Years 3 and 5.
• For Year 3, 46 schools showed a decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal students in Band 1 literacy results.
• For Year 5, 22 schools showed a decrease in the proportion of Aboriginal students in Bands 1 and 2 literacy results.

Schools, Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal education workers identified the In-class Tuition program as one of the most successful programs in primary schools.

As part of the 2003 In-class Tuition Evaluation survey, schools identified the benefits of the ICT program as:

• improved learning outcomes particularly in literacy achievements
• more consistent Aboriginal student attendance
• increased engagement and improved work habits for Aboriginal students
• reduced suspensions for Aboriginal students
• increased self-esteem and confidence for both Aboriginal students and Aboriginal tutors.

Schools identified that the positive impact of employing Aboriginal people who demonstrate that education is important by their involvement in the school could not be underestimated.

The program also built important links between the home and the school. Aboriginal parents employed as tutors developed an understanding of the complex nature of schools. This knowledge led them to act as advocates for the school and its students in the community.

**Attendance**

Current suspension, attendance and retention rates for Aboriginal students clearly demonstrate that students will reject mainstream education if it does not affirm, value and respect their identity as Aboriginal people.

Addressing the issues of attendance, retention and suspension is dependent on shifting the negative perceptions and attitudes about schooling held by some Aboriginal parents, caregivers and Aboriginal community members about schools. Many Aboriginal parents who were and still are excluded from schooling encourage their children to attend school. Primary students interviewed as part of the field trips identified parental support for their attendance and achievement at school as important.

Teachers and school leaders report that many high school Aboriginal students, particularly boys, with poor attendance and high suspension rates had commenced school before they turned five and were young for their cohort.

Schools identified that poor attendance patterns established in the early years of primary were difficult to address in the middle and upper years of primary. The ability to access an Aboriginal Student Liaison Officer to case manage Aboriginal students with poor attendance was identified as positive.
Aboriginal community people and Aboriginal education workers identified that kinship ties and extended family responsibilities impacted on Aboriginal student attendance and that it was a challenge for schools to respect these responsibilities when it meant that a student was missing vital classroom time or that Aboriginal students were spending time with older students who no longer attended school.

A number of schools reported the current OASIS system for monitoring attendance cannot identify Aboriginal students and that the system cannot access attendance data from previous years. A number of parents were supportive when schools contacted parents in regard to unexplained absences, particularly when the absences were high.

**Suspension**

A number of parents identified that suspension provides Aboriginal students with an avenue to ‘escape’ school by pushing the boundaries to get a few days off school. This is a no-win situation for students, families and the school. Many Aboriginal parents saw suspension as the school not caring for or valuing the student, which impacts on Aboriginal students’ self-esteem.

> I feel that Koori kids are behind the eight ball from the start due to social-economic status in some areas. Suspending kids will just lower the bar of expectations. Schools should adapt to the kids’ strengths, rather than the kids adapting to schools.

– Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Sanderson (2002), citing research by Cuneen, believes that the progression to criminal activity starts long before students leave school or hit the streets. It is of critical importance that Aboriginal students are not excluded or marginalised in the primary school.

A number of submissions addressed the need for schools to change the way they operate to bring about a cultural shift to address overt and covert racism and that a whole school and whole community focus to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students can reduce the number of suspensions.

The role of AEAs in the suspension of Aboriginal students was often raised at field trip visits to school and Aboriginal community meetings. Strong concerns were expressed that in some schools AEAs were not involved in the suspension process and had no knowledge of the suspension when contacted by parents. On another level the AEA was directed by principals or executive staff to look after the student until the suspension process was finalised or to undertake a home visit to inform parents of the suspension. There were also different understandings about the role of the AEA when the student returned to school from suspension.

An Aboriginal Principals’ workshop identified the need for providing professional development for teachers in behaviour management and the need to
identify behaviour patterns and provide additional support before there is a need to suspend. The principals identified the need for schools to work closely with Aboriginal parents, Elders and the Aboriginal community to develop a code of conduct, that schools need additional support for students with severe emotional or behavioural problems and that short suspensions should be negotiated and school-based.

Principals interviewed during field trips commented that the involvement of Aboriginal community people in educational decision-making, the employment of Aboriginal people in educational programs and the implementing of cultural and mentoring programs are critical to forming strong partnerships between students, teachers and parents.

Community people commented that, as school leader, principals have a role in involving the local Aboriginal community and that an empowered community results in engaged Aboriginal students. The return from suspension was a vital time to put in place strategies to ensure that there was not a “next time”.

The principal of a large primary school in a coastal regional town believes there are two main reasons for the over-representation of Aboriginal students in suspension data: the majority of teachers and principals are not aware of the cultural needs of Aboriginal students; and that a lot of Aboriginal students have challenging behaviours.

Field trip participants and submission writers commented on the need to look at options other than suspension, when there is recognition that suspension doesn’t always work as a behaviour modification strategy. School communities need to look for more effective ways of working with students to change behaviour.

One principal commented:

*If I get family support for a suspension, then I move towards it; if not, the student stays at school.*

Principals also suggested a range of programs to address the underlying causes of student misbehaviour.

One strategy is to ensure that teachers and staff know the Aboriginal families in their school and that Aboriginal students and parents are familiar with who is at the school. Another strategy is to buddy a new Aboriginal student to the school with a teacher, not necessarily the classroom teacher, who is a mentor and advocate for the student and family as they settle in and become more relaxed and confident with the school. One principal stressed the importance of supporting the work of the AEA in working with Aboriginal students and families, knowing students and their families and sharing relevant information with staff.

*Strategies are not the issue; it is the enthusiasm, dedication, commitment and genuine belief that we are in a partnership. It is back to the AEP being properly implemented.*

– Principal interview
This initiative was successfully trialled in a South Coast primary school. The purpose of the Circle of Friends program is to involve students, parents, Elders and Aboriginal community people in a cultural approach as an alternative to suspension in determining the consequences of inappropriate behaviour.

The trial was based on the successful restorative justice process known as Circle Sentencing, which allows for the offender, after pleading guilty or being found guilty, to apply to the court for a circle sentence. If the offender can show community support and the application is granted, the offender sits in a circle with the judge, police, prosecutor, family members, the victim and Elders to discuss the offence, any extenuating circumstances, the consequences of the offence and an appropriate sentence. The program incorporates the principles of self-determination and empowerment for Aboriginal communities.

The Circle of Friends is based on a level of trust that encourages and welcomes Aboriginal families into the school. The principal and the school staff must have a culturally sensitive approach to Aboriginal issues and believe in the appropriateness of Aboriginal kinship in supporting student identity, student behaviour and student choices.

Given that the school has demonstrated this belief, then Aboriginal people will trust the management of the school and have faith in the Circle of Friends process.

– Principal’s statement

There is a need to “re-vision” primary schools, to make a strong claim for the future of Aboriginal students and the future of Aboriginal communities; where all primary schools will know and succeed with their Aboriginal students, where schools will make strong connections with Aboriginal communities and where schools will make a difference to the lives of young Aboriginal people.

Inflexibility of school structures at present does not meet the diverse circumstances of Aboriginal communities.

– Secondary Principals’ Council, submission EM033

This future will need to be characterised by strong Aboriginal parent and community engagement in their children’s education and genuine partnerships that describe what teachers can and will do and how Aboriginal parents and community members can provide their support.

Schools will continue to fail Aboriginal people if they view knowledge and skills as the possession of individuals, to be developed in individual minds when Aboriginal communities frequently appear to view knowledge as a collective capacity of the community, to be developed (and distributed through) the community as a shared capacity ... a teacher might therefore consider their work in terms of teaching communities in Aboriginal settings rather than teaching individual students who happen to come from or be in a community.

– Professor S Kemmis, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, submission EM015
Section 4: Junior Secondary Schooling

This section of the report deals with the junior secondary school Years 7 to 10 and matters related to education for Aboriginal students in this age range.

In New South Wales, junior secondary schooling caters for students between the ages of 12 and 16 years. New South Wales students must attend school until the age of 14 years and 9 months. Secondary schooling in New South Wales commences with Year 7 and students work towards gaining a School Certificate at the end of Year 10, after which they leave school or continue to the Higher School Certificate in Year 12.

The Board of Studies in New South Wales determines the junior secondary curriculum requirements and develops syllabus documents for each subject in the key learning areas of English, Mathematics, Science, Human Society and its Environment, Personal Development/Health/Physical Education, Technological and Applied Studies, Creative Arts and Languages.

In 2003 there were 9523 (4.4 percent of a total of 216,206) junior secondary Aboriginal students enrolled in mainstream courses in 370 of the 393 government high schools and in 62 of the 66 central schools. In addition, there were 838 Aboriginal students enrolled in specialist classes and units.

| Year 7 | Aboriginal | 216 | 2,474 | 0 |
| Year 8 | Aboriginal | 203 | 2,392 | 0 |
| Year 9 | Aboriginal | 209 | 2,165 | 0 |
| Year 10 | Aboriginal | 160 | 1,704 | 0 |
| Support classes | Aboriginal | 58 | 532 | 248 |
| | Non- Aboriginal | 144 | 6,814 | 2,297 |

Schools that educate students from the lowest socioeconomic communities are given additional support under the Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP). In 2003, 30 percent of Aboriginal students (2550 students) were enrolled in a PSFP high school and 54 percent of the Aboriginal students (429 students) enrolled in a central school were supported by PSFP. Therefore, 2979 Aboriginal students out of a total of 9523 Aboriginal students were given the opportunity for additional support under PSFP. This indicates that two-thirds of Aboriginal students enrolled in secondary education do not attend the schools that are provided with additional assistance through PSFP.

Aboriginal enrolments within each school range from 1 to 198 so that any intervention to bring about equal outcomes for Aboriginal students in junior
secondary education will require strategic support across the majority of secondary and central schools.

Figure 3.4.1 graphs the number of students in Years 8, 9 and 10 as a proportion of the number of students enrolled in Year 7.

For Aboriginal girls, numbers appeared to increase in Years 8 and 9 relative to when those students were in Year 7, but then decrease substantially in Year 10. Numbers of Aboriginal boys consistently decrease, at a substantially greater rate than for all other students, with their departures starting much earlier than for all other students.

For some Aboriginal students, the transition from Year 6 to Year 7 is a greater change than faced by the majority of students. This change may also involve a transition from non-government, mainly Catholic systemic schooling, to public schooling, affecting students in rural areas where Catholic systemic schools cater to mostly primary students.

That shift explains the increase in numbers of Aboriginal students in Year 7 over their numbers in Year 6 in the public education system.

**Attendance, retention and academic performance**

Data collected by the Review process confirms that strategies, policies and funding need to be directed towards increasing the levels of attendance and retention and bringing about improvement in the educational performance of Aboriginal students. These are directed at each of the following areas as each is interdependent on the others in achieving the required level of success.
Student identity, self-esteem and self-concept

A recurring theme from the field trips indicated that the success of Aboriginal students in junior secondary school, as in other phases of schooling, will only improve if schools can support and strengthen the self-esteem of their students through further developing understanding of and respect for Aboriginal culture in the school’s local community. This community must also feel welcome in, and part of, the school. Therefore, teachers who are expected to work in Aboriginal communities should acquire an in-depth knowledge of that community.

Children undergoing the transition through puberty to adolescence may experience more problems involving their identity and may need ongoing positive support to bolster their self-esteem. Cultural programs with extensive Aboriginal involvement are crucial to this process.

Critically, if students in secondary education are to succeed, their parents/caregivers need a high level of support. If children’s domestic and family situations are negative, then it is much more difficult for schools to perform their educative function.

Positive role models and peer group pressure

The peer group and out-of-school communities of Aboriginal students exert an extremely significant social influence on their lives. People repeatedly asserted during the field trips and in submissions that peer groups exerted a huge influence on Aboriginal students from as young as 10 years to 16 and over.

These peer groups are almost always across-age groups and may involve brothers, sisters, cousins and friends in significant support networks. In fact, these extended kinship and friendship networks are the strengths of Aboriginal culture. However, in increasing numbers of communities, parents and caregivers expressed concern that the role models of younger children and adolescents were admired because of their experience with the police and the Juvenile Justice System rather than because they succeeded at school.

Mentorship programs run by schools that trained students to be leaders and mentors to other students were seen as effective. Programs that cooperated with TAFE NSW and other government agencies (Department of Sport and Recreation, NSW Health) to enable older group leaders who were positive role models to gain access to educational programs were also considered effective.

Schools and communities complained that many successful programs providing “positive role models” and attempting to link them with secondary Aboriginal students were implemented sporadically and then stopped because of short-term funding, staff turnover and lack of support by the system. These communities felt that long-term funded and resourced programs that systematically created links between Aboriginal students and positive role models were essential.

Feedback at both community meetings and from teachers suggested that positive role models for Aboriginal students are reinforced by a number of means such as
the work of Aboriginal workers and teachers, student mentoring and leadership programs, and building active community links. Most Aboriginal workers spoken to in schools felt they were currently undervalued and were often treated in a tokenistic way. They felt that they received little or no recognition for their work and did not have a positive work experience.

**Racism**

All Aboriginal people experience racism at some points in their lives. Young Aboriginal adolescents need to be given strategies for coping and dealing with racism so that negative experiences do not lead to non-attendance and ultimately the non-completion of secondary schooling. This also means that school staff must possess a significant level of cultural awareness of and sensitivity to racial discrimination. Inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives and Aboriginal studies has a positive effect on identity and reduces racism in the classroom.

Secondary schools must deal with acts of racism as a serious breach of discipline and establish properly developed and supported anti-racist programs that assist students in anger management. Parents should also be informed of their rights so that they may ensure that acts of racism are dealt with in a just manner. While schools are expected to identify an Anti Racism Contact Officer (ARCO), often students and parents/caregivers were not aware of the existence and responsibilities of the position. For the ARCO position to be effective, strong leadership from the principal and/or executive staff is critical in dealing with racism and supporting the ARCO’s role and responsibilities.

During field visits a number of students complained that their school did not discipline other students for racist behaviour. Some schools advised Aboriginal students not to react to racist taunts but to report them to a teacher, but no disciplinary action was taken. It was reported that in some schools teachers disciplined Aboriginal students for reacting to other students who persistently made racist comments rather than disciplining the other students.

In discussions with Aboriginal students, most acknowledged that it was not acceptable for them to respond to racism with violence but strongly argued that they felt the school did not deal with racism seriously.

**Schools and curriculum**

Life during puberty and adolescence is a crucial time for the determination of personal identity. The identity and self-esteem of Aboriginal adolescents is undermined if the secondary school environment gives minimal or no recognition to Aboriginal culture.

- **Literacy and numeracy**

Many Aboriginal adolescent students have very low levels of literacy as they enter high school. This means that their learning experience in most secondary subjects can be one of incomprehension, lack of achievement and failure. This further
undermines their self-esteem and reinforces their attitude that secondary education is irrelevant to their needs and interests.

Many Aboriginal adolescent students who enter high school are not functionally literate in Standard Australian English, nor are they numerate. Consequent frustration leads to their disengagement from most classroom activities, absenteeism and eventually dropping out in significant numbers as early as Year 9, a full academic year before non-Aboriginal students begin to leave in significant numbers.

The difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student results in literacy and numeracy assessment in Year 7 can be broadly interpreted in terms of months learning progress, which is similar to that described earlier with the Basic Skills Test results. In Years 3 and 5, Aboriginal students are roughly 19 months behind non-Aboriginal students in their literacy learning.

By Year 7, for many Aboriginal students that gap increased to somewhere between 30 and 36 months of learning. There is a huge and unacceptable gap between the literacy and numeracy levels of Aboriginal students in comparison to non-Aboriginal students. Field trips suggested a two-pronged strategy to eliminate this gap and to enable the system to support secondary schools in assisting these students to succeed in the secondary curriculum.

One proposal is that these students should be withdrawn from mainstream classes and be given intensive instruction to improve their literacy. Possible shortcomings to this “withdrawal” strategy is that it denies the student the opportunity to study the course material for their particular year and allows them to fall behind the other students in their class, and that the withdrawal may be embarrassing for the students.

Another proposal that was strongly supported by teachers and parents on the field trips was the provision of additional teachers to team-teach with the subject teacher to assist Aboriginal and other students who needed help to complete the tasks required in the lesson at the same time as helping them to acquire a higher level of literacy and numeracy.

Community members felt that singling out Aboriginal students for such assistance might create a sense of shame so that they resisted this support. While parents believed that the provision of additional teachers could also facilitate a smoother transition from the primary to the high school environment particularly with the Year 7 students, schools might need to assess the use of their Support Teacher Learning Assistance in further assisting with this transition.

Aboriginal communities strongly rejected any proposal to create alternative courses leading to alternative credentials for Aboriginal students and insisted that their children have the right to participate in the same courses as all secondary students.

24 This should be taken as only roughly indicative of the size of the gap.
Some secondary teachers also recommended one-on-one and small group instruction (similar to in-class tuition) within the classroom environment for Aboriginal students because such intervention significantly improved their performance and engagement.

- **Aboriginal languages**

Students’ knowledge and use of their Aboriginal languages are fundamental to the development of their identity and enhance their self-esteem. Since the teaching and learning of languages provide an important gateway to Aboriginal culture, this process also ensures that the school staff and community understand and respect their students’ heritage. It is important that students are increasingly given access to the study of Aboriginal languages as an option to satisfy the mandatory language requirements for the School Certificate.

- **Aboriginal English**

As in primary school, the language differences between Aboriginal students and teachers can create difficulties in communication for both. When this cannot be overcome, Aboriginal students may lose interest in class activities, disengage from learning, possibly misbehave and eventually begin to truant. The legitimacy of Aboriginal English and the need to assist teachers to understand its use is important to many communities.

- **Inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives/Aboriginal Studies**

On the field trips teachers suggested that it is rare for Aboriginal perspectives to be included in programs and lessons in most secondary curriculum areas and that they have limited awareness of teaching resources to support the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives.

Secondary Aboriginal students who elected to take Aboriginal Studies were sometimes given no explanation as to why they had to study another course or were often told that the numbers were not sufficient to allow the course to run.

The majority of Aboriginal students interviewed saw decisions by schools not to run Aboriginal Studies as an elective in Years 9 and 10 as a rejection of them and the importance of Aboriginal culture and history.

**Involvement of parents/caregivers in secondary education**

The field trips suggest that students have a stronger will to succeed and stay at school if the significant adults in their lives are supportive of their goals and are able to assist with their schoolwork.

Many parents expressed frustration at their lack of knowledge of their children’s secondary schools and their inability to assist their children. Parents were very receptive to attempts by schools to provide courses or seminars to enable them to understand the requirements of the secondary school. However, such activities were mostly ad hoc, often initiated by particular committed staff members without
additional time or resources, and lacked support from the system. As a consequence, such positive activities often ceased.

Communities were very keen for secondary school parents/caregivers to attend TAFE NSW courses and for the content of these courses to reflect the needs of the parents/caregivers and the local community.

Level of awareness of Aboriginal culture and history among staff

Aboriginal students and communities expressed frustration that teachers and non-teaching staff in many high schools displayed little awareness of Aboriginal culture and history in general, and of local Aboriginal history and culture in particular. They considered this to be a lack of respect for Aboriginal people, which increased their feelings of alienation from the secondary school environment.

It is important to note that many teachers also expressed a desire to gain more knowledge of both local and broader Aboriginal culture and history as well as resources to support Aboriginal education programs. Schools felt that the system needed to ensure its support as the Consultant Aboriginal Education covered too many schools and in some regions too large a geographical area to effectively deliver quality consultancy support.

Provision of significant space to reinforce culture

Some secondary schools found it beneficial to provide a specially designated space in the school to recognise Aboriginal culture and for Aboriginal students to gather, such as a classroom or a smaller space or section of the playground.

Such rooms were also used by Aboriginal parents and community members for meetings in the school and as a place where they could “drop in for a cup of tea”. These kinds of initiatives were effective in building trust and links between schools and communities.

Strategies suggested during field trips by some individuals and groups, or proposed in submissions as enhancing student identity, self-esteem and self-concept were:

- including Aboriginal perspectives/Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum
- supporting such Aboriginal Studies electives in Years 9 and 10 by the provision of additional teacher staffing, especially where the number of Aboriginal students is low
- clarifying school/DET policies regarding the acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture, for example, flying the Aboriginal flag and providing flagpoles
- providing culturally appropriate counselling for students by relevant agencies
- providing one-on-one tuition for students with learning difficulties and their parents
• providing full service programs (two years) such as youth programs, grooming, life skills
• establishing properly developed and supported anti-racism programs in schools that assist students in anger management and educate staff, students and communities about them
• providing case management of students by identified teachers
• providing cultural awareness training on the diversity of Aboriginal communities for all teachers and staff of DET
• providing compulsory local school and community cultural awareness training for all school staff prior to commencing duty
• employment of more Aboriginal workers and teachers at schools
• providing leadership programs for Aboriginal students
• creating a student mentoring program/student representative council
• constructing strategies for building ongoing and proactive community links
• initiating programs that systematically link Aboriginal students and positive role models from a broad range of occupations (rather than just elite sportspeople) and from inside and outside students’ local community
• training new teachers coming to a community in the differences in language and how to adjust their classroom practice, preferably through in-service.

Health and wellbeing

Communities asserted that government and non-government agencies must work together to improve Aboriginal health and wellbeing. The Two Ways Together: the NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003-2012, which combines intervention in health and education to raise the educational levels and retention of students, provides a strategy through which this can be achieved.

Community feedback suggested that all DET staff should be made aware of the effects of health, community and family factors such as hearing problems, poor nutrition and lack of sleep, and the experience of violence, addiction and grief on students in the secondary school environment. Programs to address these problems should be implemented with the involvement of school staff, other agencies and community people.

Factors that inhibit the success of Aboriginal children in secondary school often stem from the social disadvantage of most Aboriginal communities. Schools need to take this into account when Aboriginal students underperform or have behavioural problems. For example, violence and sleep deprivation may lead to continuing lateness and attendance problems. These factors may also influence the behaviour of students in school, with students acting out their frustrations and distress. Usually, such behaviour leads to the suspension of students and the school continues to remain ignorant of their problems. Schools need to take a whole-of-family approach to help students deal with such situations so that they feel able to remain in school.

Interviewees expressed the belief that the presence of Aboriginal workers and/or Aboriginal counsellors at the school would enable distressed students to articulate
their feelings and would help to provide them with strategies for coping with violence and grief. These strategies could run in tandem with the teaching of conflict management skills.

Staff knowledge of these barriers to students’ ability to perform is crucial to their wellbeing. Schools need to form strong local community partnerships with parents, community members and Elders because their involvement is critical in understanding the factors that inhibit students from attending and staying on at school.

In meetings with non-government agencies in the areas of health and welfare, greater involvement and access to secondary schools was called for so that programs running in the community could be better developed for the benefit of students inside the school.

Some teachers and principals argued that government and non-government services that worked with the same communities as the school would be better located within the school’s facilities as the centre of service provision to these communities. Schools expressed frustration that interagency meetings were often called at times and locations that made it impossible for staff to attend.

Strategies suggested during field trips by some individuals and groups or proposed in submissions as enhancing the health and wellbeing of students included:

- referring students to appropriate agencies with Aboriginal workers and/or Aboriginal counsellors for families in crisis
- referring students to programs that teach strategies for dealing with violence, grief and conflict management
- providing nutrition programs
- providing programs to address other health problems such as hearing impairment, lack of sleep, experience of violence, addiction (eg drug and alcohol education) and grief
- setting up microphone rooms staffed by trained teachers for Aboriginal children with hearing problems (otitis media)
- running parenting courses
- strengthening the skills of parents dealing with adolescents (eg via TAFE NSW)
- providing inter-agency case management for individual students where appropriate
- employing more Aboriginal Education Workers and Aboriginal counsellors with links to medical centres in schools
- providing transport to and from school where required
- providing access to childcare where appropriate
- offering financial support to parents/caregivers including equipment and textbooks for disadvantaged students
- facilitating coordinated interagency support for families
- providing additional staffing for schools that would allow a greater non-teaching component so that staff would have more flexibility and time to
engage in agency and community meetings during school hours without disruption to teaching programs.

Community capacity building

It is important to build the confidence and skills within Aboriginal communities for them to assist and enhance the success of their children at high school. At the same time Aboriginal communities need to be supported in their responsibilities towards helping their children secure a meaningful education.

Ensuring success for Aboriginal students in schools involves supporting ongoing programs that assist Aboriginal communities as a whole to enhance their knowledge and skill levels so that Aboriginal children are inspired by the achievements and participation of the older members of their communities. It is crucial for Aboriginal adolescents to have positive role models who reinforce the value of education. This means that Aboriginal communities have to be supported in building their capacity and self-respect.

Field trips and submissions demonstrated repeatedly that Aboriginal communities were hungry for strategies to educate community members about their responsibilities, and to encourage adolescents to attend and succeed at school.

Identification of role models in the community

A recurring theme of the Review was that many Aboriginal adolescents had no older role models in their community who appeared to value and enjoy education, who have succeeded in school and, consequently, have secure paid employment. Without such successful role models, students fail to see any value in attending school. Rather, many Aboriginal families have no members in full-time employment or in occupations that require perseverance at school.

Level of education of parents/caregivers

It was overwhelmingly clear from the responses of the Aboriginal community that Aboriginal parents want their children to succeed at school. One of the issues raised was the fact that young people were now more educated than some parents who felt increasingly unable to assist their children with their high school education. The Access Division of TAFE NSW has developed Part 1 of an Empowering Parents program, which helps parents to support children with their homework. This program has been successful through partnership between the Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council and Tahmoor Public School. However, such programs, which enable Aboriginal parents to visit schools and observe teachers in class, are only effective if principals offer strong support and involvement.

Throughout the field trips many parents called for increased knowledge of school procedures and greater involvement in school practices. They felt communication between the school and parents could be improved.
Strategies suggested during field trips by some individuals and groups or proposed in submissions included:

- offering to all schools the *Empowering Parents* program run through TAFE NSW. This program actively builds partnerships between schools and Aboriginal communities
- familiarising parents with organisational and school procedures.

**Transition to high school**

If retention rates are to improve, transition to high school has to be managed so that students are supported and encouraged. This is especially true when this might involve moving from a one-teacher school environment to a different, more challenging and independent learning environment in a larger high school, sometimes in another town or community.

Society expects schools to have prime responsibility for addressing the issues of literacy and numeracy since they are essential for educational success and meaningful participation in the wider society. Success in the secondary school curriculum requires building on a level of proficiency in literacy and numeracy achieved at primary school. Unfortunately, this is not the case for significant numbers of Aboriginal adolescents.

**Improving levels of literacy and numeracy on entry to high school**

A greater proportion of Aboriginal students are placed in the lowest two literacy and achievement levels when they are assessed by the English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) and Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program (SNAP) test results at the commencement of Year 7 than non-Aboriginal students.

While 17.6 percent of non-Aboriginal students were placed in the two lowest levels in ELLA (Reading), 45.3 percent of Aboriginal students were similarly placed. In the SNAP Numeracy Test, the comparison was 33.3 percent (non-Aboriginal students) with 68.3 percent (Aboriginal students).

On average, in 2003 many Year 7 Aboriginal students were in the order of 30 to 36 months behind non-Aboriginal students in their reading ability. In addition, 45 percent of the Aboriginal students assessed failed to exceed an elementary level of proficiency in reading compared with 17 percent of non-Aboriginal students. This significantly lowers the capacity for Aboriginal students to engage meaningfully with the requirements of the secondary curriculum.
Table 3.4.2: Percentage distribution of results across bands, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, Year 7 ELLA and SNAP results: 1999–2003.25

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Aboriginal students</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal students</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>2951</td>
<td>3039</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The training of subject-based secondary teachers does not always include literacy training for adolescents and, in fact, there appears to be an assumption at high school that students in Year 7 have already achieved a certain level of general literacy.

Better management of curriculum transition

Students entering high school encounter an unfamiliar secondary curriculum which is faculty and subject-based. The primary school approach offers a more integrated learning system with a strong literacy and numeracy focus across key learning areas. Students are generally taught by one teacher in Year 6 in primary school, and then have to adapt to the styles of possibly 10 different teachers teaching different subjects in Year 7. This means that teachers have to actively engage and support students in the new curriculum and adopt innovative teaching practices. Teachers need to be supported in developing teaching programs that engage and motivate students.

Some secondary schools have restructured their approach to ease transition into the secondary school by reducing the number of teachers who teach each class and by attempting to timetable the majority of Year 7 classes into the same “home room”. This is done to try and reduce the extent of change from primary school and to phase in the experience of being taught by different specialist teachers.

Improvement of access to schools

In field trips, concern was expressed by parents and Aboriginal communities that Aboriginal students who attended a secondary or central school at a distance from

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25 Neither ELLA nor SNAP was administered in 2000.
their immediate community were expected to travel for long periods of time on buses. Some of the reported issues associated with bus travel were:26

- A bus company had one bus doing a number of different routes before school and this created the problem that the first pick-up was very early.
- Bus drivers would refuse to travel down some roads in wet conditions which meant that students waiting for the bus were not picked up.
- Bus drivers would drop off students many kilometres from the normal bus stop forcing the students to walk and creating extreme worry for their parents who expected their children to arrive home on the bus.
- Bus drivers often disciplined students by removing them from the bus, sometimes in inaccessible locations.
- Aboriginal students who lived on a mission were often not picked up due to perceived or real safety concerns.

Field trip teams were advised that where schools and communities, (either the local Aboriginal Land Council or other community organisation), provided transport to school, attendance of the students improved and families established a routine of getting their children ready for school.

Where schools had been funded to establish a homework centre, a lack of transport for students to get home often meant students who lived out of town or not within walking distance could not attend.

Distance to the secondary school and the problems related to transport make the transition to high school harder for Aboriginal students who live in more remote communities. At the time of transition to high school these students are faced with having to adapt to a new and larger community, a new and very differently structured high school environment as well as distance and transport difficulties and a longer day.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips or proposed in submissions as facilitating the transition of students to high school included:

- educating teachers on their expectations of Aboriginal students entering high school
- establishing strategies to make performance information from primary schools available to Year 7 teachers
- reviewing the role played by Aboriginal teachers and workers to facilitate easier transition to secondary school, while some communities favoured increasing their numbers
- building ongoing and continuing links with the community
- supporting strategies in primary schools that increase the number of teachers who teach the Year 6 curriculum, and strategies in high schools that reduce the number of teachers who teach the Year 7 students

26 In remote areas of the state, complaints about contracted bus services can be directed to the Ministry of Transport or to the Regional Director (DET). There is a “Code of Conduct” which contractors are obliged to honour.
• providing smaller group and individual attention and teaching for Year 7 Aboriginal students. This could occur via the extension of in-class tuition by trained Aboriginal community workers, and by the provision of tutors who would work in class with all students who require additional assistance
• providing Year 7 classes with a “home room” to reduce the requirements for the students to change classrooms after each period
• developing strategies to ensure that Aboriginal parents/caregivers are informed of their rights in regard to the transporting of their children to and from school, and where problems persist, to provide alternative transport.

Low literacy/numeracy and course relevance and practicality

Increasing the engagement of Aboriginal students in the junior secondary curriculum must acknowledge the significant gap between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy achievement. An extremely low level of literacy and numeracy for the majority of Aboriginal secondary students undermines their ability to achieve in the secondary course requirements.

It is in the context of this low literacy/numeracy performance that assertions that the curriculum is not relevant and that the curriculum should be “more practical and hands on” need to be evaluated. A student’s attitude and approach to study would be very different if their basic skills in literacy and numeracy were at a high enough level to allow them to succeed in the tasks set in the subject area.

Alternative courses and credentials

During the field trips Aboriginal parents/caregivers insisted that they wanted their children to succeed in the courses that all students were undertaking in high school. Suggestions that Aboriginal students be offered different courses or that they pursue different credentials were rejected by Aboriginal communities.

The only exception was the proposal that some courses should be developed for students who were at greater risk of dropping out of high school and were likely to enter the Juvenile Justice System. The view expressed by many Aboriginal communities was that providing an alternative education path for these students would reduce the likelihood that they would get into trouble with the law. The proviso in regard to these alternative pathways for at-risk students was that the courses must give students credentials that would be recognised as contributing to further study and/or skills that would enable them to take their place in and contribute to society.

Aboriginal perspectives in the secondary curriculum

Teachers consistently asked for guidance and support by DET to increase the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives into the programs implemented in secondary classrooms. It was frequently stated that Consultants (Aboriginal Education) were spread too thinly to assist teachers to incorporate an Aboriginal perspective across the curriculum. Teachers also needed help to find the appropriate resources in order to include Aboriginal perspectives into teaching programs.
Communities called for a greater involvement in the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives in schools. Local Aboriginal community members must be shown respect by being paid to share their knowledge and expertise with the school so they can be incorporated into teaching programs.

**Aboriginal languages**

Community meetings showed strong support for the suggestion that schools teach Aboriginal languages as part of the mandatory Languages component. The teaching of an Aboriginal language in Years 7 and/or 8 was seen to offer benefits in a number of areas. Teaching of language is a vehicle for the teaching of the culture of that language group.

Aboriginal students and communities see the teaching of an Aboriginal language as a school demonstrating an acknowledgement of and respect for Aboriginal people and their culture by the school system and by the school.

**Aboriginal Studies elective in junior secondary schools**

Aboriginal Studies can be offered as an elective for students in Years 9 and 10. It was common in meetings with secondary Aboriginal students on the field trips that if they were attending a school that did not offer or timetable Aboriginal Studies they felt it was a rejection of them, and a rejection of their culture.

The absence of this course reinforced a view that the school did not recognise them and increased their feeling that the school did not care about them or about their culture and history. Many Aboriginal students wanted to take Aboriginal Studies to learn more about their culture and history, as previous government policies did not allow their parents to attain this knowledge and so they were unable to pass it on. Community meetings wanted their local schools to teach the Aboriginal Studies elective. Some principals advised that Aboriginal Studies was offered as an elective, but it was not able to be timetabled because not enough students chose it and the school did not have enough staff to timetable it for so few students.

According to DET 2003 data, there are 370 high schools and 62 central schools that have Aboriginal students enrolled. However, in 2003 only 6 central schools and 28 high schools ran Aboriginal Studies as an elective in Year 9.

Not all Aboriginal students will elect to study Aboriginal Studies. How the elective is placed on the timetable, how it is promoted in the school and the commitment of the school’s executive will all influence the number of students who choose to do it.
Vocational Education and Training

During the field trips there was much debate about Vocational Education and Training (VET) being provided in Stage 5 and perhaps as early as Stage 4. Many Aboriginal parents/caregivers, while seeing a need for VET for some students, expressed their concern that Aboriginal students may be channelled into VET courses because it was seen to be an easier option.

As stated previously, Aboriginal parents/caregivers did not want their children to do different courses and had the same aspirations for their children as other parents had, but they saw that some Aboriginal students may benefit from a different pathway to keep them engaged in secondary school.

Effects of mobility on students’ learning

Some Aboriginal families relocate to new communities, with their children consequently having to change high schools during their secondary education. For some this occurs a number of times within one school year. From the field trips the Review found that secondary-age students who relocate communities are often unable to continue their elective courses on enrolling in a new high school.

Strategies suggested by individuals and groups during field trips and proposed in submissions as enhancing curriculum options and participation included:

Curriculum

- further research the introduction of VET courses in Stage 5 as an alternative pathway for students at risk
- promote the new Work Education Syllabus and encourage work experience for students
- make Aboriginal Studies compulsory in Years 9 and 10
- support the decision to make Aboriginal Studies compulsory by providing additional staffing to schools
- provide teachers with professional development and resources that support the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum
- develop a culturally appropriate form of “quality teaching” so that productive pedagogies for Aboriginal students may be constructed.

Students

- involve Aboriginal Education Consultants and TAFE NSW Aboriginal Coordinators in careers advice (eg TAFE NSW options/traineeships)
- provide additional literacy support to secondary schools
- extend in-class tuition for literacy and numeracy to secondary schools
- introduce a tracking system to monitor Aboriginal students’ progress through secondary school
- increase the staff-to-student ratio for students who are more at risk of dropping out or failing
- provide homework assistance and other resources through school library or homework centres. Provide additional resources to allow school libraries to open for longer hours and provide transport home
• provide bus transport as required.

**Staff**

• provide extra remuneration for teachers who are willing to undertake appropriate postgraduate courses that will enhance the quality of their teaching.

This means that some students pick up an elective mid-year or halfway through the course. This causes great disruption to the continuity of the students’ learning. The mobility of some Aboriginal students also has an effect on their learning in the core curriculum areas where a student may repeat topics or miss out topics altogether within the faculty programs.

Teachers considered an identification number to help track all students would be beneficial. This would allow the new school to better access information regarding the students’ subject choices, abilities and/or learning difficulties without having to spend the time retesting the student to find out where the student was up to.

Teachers felt there needs to be more flexibility to enable students to access distance education to allow them to study their original electives.

The Review was told that Aboriginal students need to be supported by a teacher and the school needs to be given additional staffing to support students accessing distance education as often mobile students need greater assistance given the disruption to their schooling.

**Teaching and professional development**

Repeatedly, teacher and community consultations and submissions expressed the urgent need for all school staff to be provided with an Aboriginal cultural education component in their pre-service training.

There was also a call for new staff members appointed to a school with Aboriginal enrolments, to be engaged in an intensive orientation program that incorporates local Aboriginal community members, providing information about the local Aboriginal community culture prior to their entry on duty at the school. These orientation programs would also incorporate materials that deal with stereotyping and expectations that new staff may have about Aboriginal secondary students and communities.

In schools with a high staff turnover, it was strongly argued that orientation programs should also include information specific to the programs and approaches already being undertaken by the school to maximise continuity of programs. Too often, frustration was evident that the high staff turnover in some schools meant that the education of students was disrupted because the programs that had been initiated by the previous staff members were not known about or continued by the new staff.

One proposal was that new executive and teaching staff to schools experiencing significant staff turnover should be appointed to the school in mid-Term 4 of the
previous school year, so that they can properly engage in an orientation program and work with the teachers already at the school. This was suggested particularly for executive staff.

Concern was expressed that the current Merit Selection Process for the selection of executive staff often did not ensure the appointment of a principal who was appropriate to a school with Aboriginal secondary students. It was asserted by communities that there needs to be a Special Fitness Appointment System brought in that is more able to select principals who have true understanding and can work with and include Aboriginal parents and communities in a genuine way.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips and proposed in submissions as enhancing teaching and professional development were:

- that DET actively support and resource the implementation of the *Dare To Lead* Project\(^27\) at the school level
- employing additional consultants and ensuring the effectiveness of consultants in supporting and enabling quality teaching
- that DET create an up-to-date bank of resources to support Aboriginal education and develop effective systems to ensure these resources are known about and easily accessed by secondary teachers for use in schools
- providing and staffing active mentoring programs for teachers
- that DET provide funds for induction and cultural awareness courses and mentoring programs
- providing courses for secondary teachers on how to teach literacy
- employing additional Aboriginal adults in secondary and central schools
- introducing in-class tuition into Years 7 and 8 and also providing resources to allow the employment of tutors to work with teachers to provide more individual attention to students in the classroom
- providing scholarships to Aboriginal workers to enable them to undertake teacher training.

**School policies and practices**

Most consultations expressed the need to improve the quality and consistency of the implementation of the *Discipline and Welfare Policy* and the need for greater communication and consultation about school policies and practices with Aboriginal parents/caregivers and the wider Aboriginal community.

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\(^27\) *Dare To Lead* is a Commonwealth-funded, national project with a focus on improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. It is an initiative of the Australian Principals Association’s Professional Development Council (APAPDC) acting on behalf of its members and their associations. More information can be obtained from [www.apapdc.edu.au/daretolead](http://www.apapdc.edu.au/daretolead)
Suspension

The suspension of students is a very important issue for Aboriginal communities. Parents were critical of how the policy was actually implemented and the lack of community knowledge about suspension procedures.

The short suspension rate for Aboriginal females was four times that of non-Aboriginal females, while the short suspension rate for Aboriginal males was over three times that of non-Aboriginal males.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Short Suspensions</th>
<th>Long Suspensions</th>
<th>Expulsions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Female</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Male</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal Male</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During field trips and through submissions, communities argued that many students regarded suspension as a reward rather than a punishment because they did not have to come to school. Families also felt that some high schools treated suspension as the easy way to get rid of a difficult or disruptive student rather than trying to understand why the student was behaving unacceptably and help them to improve. There was concern that suspended students were at increased risk of conflict with the police and the legal system. Communities pointed out the anomaly between expecting compulsory attendance and the use of suspension for unruly students as the young people most frequently suspended were the ones in most need of help. There was a sense that students were reinforced in the feeling that their school did not want or care about them.

Communities argued strongly in favour of in-school suspension, demanding that the system supervise students suspended from school. This involved the provision of a structured program in a facility, in or out of school, resourced and staffed to work with students and their families, the school and other agencies as appropriate. This would enable suspended students to continue their education and manage their behaviour in a more acceptable manner.

Communities and families were insistent that such facilities should not be used by schools to abandon troublesome children. They envisaged a situation where schools worked closely with these facilities to case manage the students’ return to school.

Suggested alternatives to school suspension included the establishment of centres with resources for the management of the children and liaison with other government and community agencies. It was suggested that such funds could be sourced from other government departments as well as DET.

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28 Refer to data collected during field trips, p. 28
Absenteism and lateness

Communities perceived a lack of consistency across secondary schools’ processes in handling and following up absences and lateness and monitoring attendance at school.

Parents and caregivers claimed a lack of communication about their children’s frequent absences, whereas teachers and Aboriginal Education Workers felt that, when contacted, parents or caregivers often advised that these absences had their approval, thus reinforcing the view of some education workers that Aboriginal parents and caregivers did not support schools.

Other education workers believed that parents did not understand that schooling was compulsory between certain ages and that it was their responsibility at law to ensure their child attended school. There was a perception that some parents and caregivers did not value attendance and success at school in the light of their own negative experiences of schooling or did not realise that poor attendance had a negative impact on academic outcomes.

Communities emphasised that schools should not expect Aboriginal Education Workers to be the sole contact between the school and the family. In fact, contacts with families or communities will only be successful if there is already an established relationship between the principals/teachers and the parents/caregivers/communities.

The different responses that schools have to a student’s lateness can indicate the degree of awareness that the school has or does not have of the cultural and community background of the student. Secondary schools need to have roll marking and “late policies” that demonstrate an awareness of their own students. Furthermore, these schools need to be assisted to work with the community and with other agencies to attempt to overcome the causes of lateness where possible. A school’s roll marking policy should not be allowed to cause absenteeism, and potentially increase the likelihood that a student will leave school.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips and proposed in submissions as enhancing school policies and practices included:

- schools to formulate with the assistance of DET a uniform policy on attendance and lateness
- schools to formulate a process for monitoring of students’ attendance
- schools to establish a process that acknowledges their accountability to the community
- school principals or teachers to contact parents/caregivers by telephone on the first day of absence with the support of the Aboriginal Education Assistant
- establishment of programs to enable Aboriginal parents to understand how important it is for their children to attend school (For example, one school developed a pro-forma sheet where the days of student absence were highlighted over the four terms. When the AEAs showed the parents/caregivers this form and discussed with them the effects of such
absences on the educational success of their children, most of the parents/caregivers agreed that this was undesirable and that their children should attend school. AEAs at a particular school advised that a significant majority of the school absences were because parents had gone to visit relatives in other communities and had taken their children with them and had not realised the effect the absences were having on their children’s education

- establishment of an Aboriginal Council, where called for by the Aboriginal community, similar to a School Council, which would articulate the needs and views of the community
- use of attendance/retention money by the local Aboriginal Land Council to employ a bus driver to drive children to school
- schools not to commence their roll marking at the beginning of the day. This has led to less conflict between the school and the late students, a more positive relationship between teachers and students, and also a reduction in absenteeism.

**Preparation for school leaving**

Schools are responsible for providing Aboriginal students with practical and useful advice about career options and pathways in education. Career counselling is seen to be essential for Aboriginal students to make informed choices concerning their future pathways into continuing education, further education or employment.

Many parents on the field trips wanted greater access and communication between the school, careers adviser and the family to enable Aboriginal students and their families to make informed subject and pathway choices. Some parents also expressed concern that when children were choosing their subjects for the senior high school, many Aboriginal students were advised to take up Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses in Stage 6, which they felt limited their options at the end of Year 12.

**Participation in the School Certificate**

In 2003, of the 554 Year 10 students identified by the NSW Board of Studies as Aboriginal, 77 percent were graded at Band 2 and above in English-literacy (This means that students achieved a mark of 50 or more and were able to undertake a range of tasks.) This result compares with 95 percent for all non-Aboriginal students.

In addition, 85 percent of Aboriginal students were graded at Band 2 and above in Mathematics in the 2003 School Certificate. This compares with 97 percent for non-Aboriginal students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aboriginal students</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English – literacy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Total number</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>1136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DET data derived from Board of Studies data.

While there is some variation in the relative performance as measured by the percentage of students placed in each band, the comparative trends can be seen to have been consistent in the period 1998–2003.

**TAFE NSW**

TAFE NSW is perceived by many students to offer a totally different kind of learning environment and is perceived by some to be more effective than the school system in valuing difference. Carefully constructed TAFE NSW courses can instil a sense of pride and a good sense of self among Aboriginal students. For some Aboriginal students, TAFE NSW offers a successful educational pathway as an alternative to school.

Parents and caregivers were critical of schools that appeared to encourage students to leave school to attend TAFE NSW. They wanted schools to be more responsible for the education of students over the age of 14 years instead of seeing TAFE NSW as an easier or convenient option.

Strategies suggested during field trips and in submissions as facilitating preparation for school leaving included:

- providing a scholarship program for students to go to university
- encouraging a flexible learning environment that enables some students to choose TAFE NSW as part of their educational options
- encouraging contextual learning (first the practice then the theory) as this is often more suited to Aboriginal students
• making more effective use of Aboriginal workers to enable better targeting of employment outcomes
• establishing programs such as those offered by South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE NSW where under 14-year-olds, including some Juvenile Justice clients (29), enrol in programs such as Maximus, HYPAR (Helping Young People at Risk) and Youth at Risk.

Students with diverse support needs

The proportion of Aboriginal students placed in specialist classes and units is greater than the proportion of Aboriginal students in the student population as a whole. This proportion is statistically significant for the Aboriginal placements in classes supporting students with Behaviour Disorder, Mild Intellectual Disability, Moderate Intellectual Disability, Language Disorder and Juvenile Justice classes. Juvenile Justice is discussed further below.

![Figure 3.4.2: The proportion of Aboriginal students enrolled in specialist classes or units (DET, 2004)](image)

In 2003, 4.4 percent of the Aboriginal student population (K – 12) was enrolled in specialist classes or units compared with 2.1 percent of the total student population.
In 2003 there was a higher proportion of Aboriginal children enrolled in Juvenile Justice Classes, Behaviour Disorder and Mild Intellectual Disability programs than the student population as a whole. This phenomenon requires further research.

During meetings conducted as part of the field trips, some parents expressed concern that the behaviour of some Aboriginal students derived from the students’ cultural background was often responded to by the school as a breach of discipline. These breaches of discipline often led to referrals to behaviour programs within specialist class settings.

Parents stated that they expected schools to work with students to teach them appropriate behaviour in the school setting, rather than assuming the student was deliberately misbehaving. Parents stated that because of the limited knowledge some teachers and schools have about Aboriginal cultural education, often a student’s perceived disruptive behaviour is not seen by the school as a result of that child’s cultural difference and is dealt with under the school’s discipline policy.

This response to behaviour that is culturally based can set up ongoing conflict that escalates between Aboriginal students, their families and the school. Students become resentful that they are being disciplined for behaviour that is acceptable in their own community.

Parents felt that the school’s decision to use a “disciplinary” strategy is caused by the school’s mishandling or misunderstanding of the student. Parents argued that too many Aboriginal students are disciplined, suspended and referred to behaviour programs because schools do not have the cultural knowledge to properly handle and respond to the Aboriginal students.
They believe that students attending specialist classes and units should only be referred to such programs if the programs are seen by the family to be meaningful, culturally appropriate and planned in consultation with the family and the local community. Schools that valued Aboriginal cultural diversity, worked with the whole family and had relationships with the home school of the student were considered to be much more likely to help young people succeed in achieving their goals. Strong case management and interagency support of the student and the family was also seen to be beneficial.

As is the case with all students referred to specialist facilities, the onus for ensuring attendance is on the student and carer, some of whom lack the capacity or will to ensure such attendance. The option of bussing was suggested, given the huge expenditure on Special Transport each year.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips and proposed in submissions as facilitating learning in specialist classes included:

- providing cultural education for teachers undertaking specialist class training
- providing cultural education for all teaching staff with an emphasis on cultural difference
- constructing a flexible curriculum that allows a focus on cultural education, with the main focus being on traditional art, music, stories and culture
- constructing practical and basic living skill courses: basic hygiene, cooking for survival, nutrition and healthy lifestyles, how to fill in forms, budgeting etc to be major components
- case management with interagency intervention to support students and their families
- community involvement in program/curriculum development and delivery
- facilitating effective transport for students either by DET-sponsored minibus, community transport or pick up by nominated teaching staff where appropriate
- providing Aboriginal classes in specialist classes and units with more than one class and where the numbers of Aboriginal students are significant.

**Students in Juvenile Justice facilities**

DET NSW has Education and Training Units (ETUs) attached to nine Juvenile Justice Centres. These units are responsible for conducting the educational assessment of detainees and conducting school-based programs for students, eg School Certificate, Higher School Certificate.

The ETU staff includes a Principal, Assistant Principals, full-time and part-time teachers, an Aboriginal Education Assistant as well as administrative staff. Attendance at a DET ETU is compulsory for young people under 15 years of age.

There is an over-representation (35 percent) of Aboriginal detainees in Juvenile Justice Centres. The majority of detainees (99 percent) are within the secondary school age range.
Table 3.4.5: Number and proportion of Aboriginal detainees in Juvenile Justice Centres: 2002–2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>556 (34%)</td>
<td>1114 (67%)</td>
<td>1670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>113 (40%)</td>
<td>171 (61%)</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>669 (35%)</td>
<td>1285 (66%)</td>
<td>1954</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.4.6: Age break-up of detainees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 to less than 12 years</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 to less than 14 years</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 to less than 16 years</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to less than 18 years</td>
<td>1058</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 years and over</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1956</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Juvenile Justice, Strategic Policy and Planning Section, CIDS database, December 2003.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Department of Juvenile Justice and DET was signed in 2002. This outlines both Departments’ responsibilities to ensure the provision of school and vocational education and training delivered in Juvenile Justice Centres. TAFE NSW provides vocational educational programs and courses in Juvenile Justice Centres via the 100 TAFE Places funding provision.

The Equity and Outreach Programs Unit of DET is involved in the statewide negotiation and administration of the 100 TAFE Places provision. This unit is responsible for the provision and monitoring of 100 TAFE Places funds.

During the field trips ETU staff expressed concern that for some students there was an inability to complete full courses due to the length of sentences and because some young people are awaiting sentencing and then being moved to another ETU.

It was suggested that classification levels of detainees also hindered access to particular programs, although detainee risk levels were reviewed monthly. It was suggested that programs of shorter duration and a mixed mode of delivery would help detainees feel some level of success in completing a course and that a mixed mode of delivery may be of assistance for those detainees who move across ETUs. Providing program pathways between centres could also help those detainees.

The Review was advised that the literacy and numeracy levels of detainees were of concern. This often led to a lack of interest and motivation. Joint professional development for TAFE NSW and school staff around the integration of literacy/numeracy and VET provision was seen to be beneficial through offering detainees culturally and artistically diverse modules as part of a larger program with literacy and numeracy outcomes incorporated into each student’s interest area.

Education and Training Unit staff found that mentoring and positive role models were essential to detainees. Many of the students come from dysfunctional families and have had bad experiences within the school system before entering the Juvenile Justice System, so their access to positive role modelling has been limited.
A view presented to the review suggested that ETUs within Juvenile Justice Centres had limited funding opportunities to enable the unit to provide such opportunities as cultural programs to re-engage young detainees.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips to further enhance the programs presented by Juvenile Justice Centres:

- Each centre has an LEATAC (Local Education and Training Advisory Committee). Membership includes the Juvenile Justice Centre Manager, the School Principal (Juvenile Justice School), the ICCLO (Institute Correctional Centre Liaison Officer) and the Aboriginal Development Manager. The committee determines what courses will be provided.
- An enhancement of the present 100 TAFE Places is needed.
- An increased integration within Juvenile Justice Centres of TAFE NSW courses for Juvenile Justice detainees with the support of the schools staff is needed.
- The effectiveness of Aboriginal Cultural Education courses that are run at the Institute level for TAFE NSW teachers working in Juvenile Justice facilities needs to be evaluated.
- Additional funds need to be provided to target Aboriginal teachers in Juvenile Justice Centres and Correctional Centres to achieve Certificate IV. Further training needs to be provided to teach strategies for facilitating non-violence, dealing with people at risk, conflict resolution, dealing with disadvantaged learners etc.
- DET develops a system that details participation in education and training modules/courses for each detainee and allows DET to determine course commencement and completion and evaluate course outcomes.
- The New South Wales Government negotiates with the Australian Government to provide an Aboriginal Studies Grant to detainees in Juvenile Justice Centres.

Students in Aboriginal hostels

The provision of hostel accommodation for Aboriginal secondary students, and the level of support for those students, were other issues identified during the consultation. These facilities provide supervised, away from home accommodation assisting students to access a number of urban high schools. Advice to the Review was that the provision of hostel accommodation has increased the likelihood that these students will stay longer in the education system.

Students argued that the level of service provided by the hostels needs to be supported and expanded. They expressed concern about reduced services in these facilities.

29 Aboriginal Hostels Limited is a company that provides temporary accommodation for Aboriginal people. Incorporated on 6 June 1973 in the Australian Capital Territory, AHL is funded by the Australian Government. AHL has established a network of hostels across Australia and currently operates 48 of its own hostels while funding 83 community hostels. The Review Team spoke with students resident in Biala Hostel, Allambie Heights, and Kirinari Hostel, Sylvania Heights.

Hostel staff expressed a desire for more contact and communication with the executive and teaching staff of the high schools that their students attended. Teaching staff also indicated a desire for this communication to occur. Hostel staff made the point that their students came from a wide range of different Aboriginal communities and that the teachers at the high schools needed Aboriginal cultural education to recognise that all their Aboriginal students were not from the same cultural backgrounds.

Aboriginal students, particularly senior students, expressed the need for more specialised subject tutoring, both inside and out of school hours. Hostel staff stated that senior students needed more specialist assistance and that junior secondary students should have homework support. Hostel staff expressed great concern that new students are academically a long way behind when they enter the hostel. The lack of access to computers and the Internet outside of school hours was also raised.

A further major and sensitive issue that was raised was that because of reduced hostel staffing levels there is limited or no supervisory staff during school vacations so all students are expected to travel back to their communities. The view was put that some students come from extremely dysfunctional and violent backgrounds and that sending them back to this setting is not desirable, but there is no choice at present.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips for the provision of hostel accommodation for Aboriginal students:

- That a plan to improve the level of support to Aboriginal student hostels be developed.
- That a joint agreement be made detailing the additional resources that need to be provided by the respective organisations.
- That strategies be developed so that students are better supported both academically and in their social and personal lives when they are not attending school during the school week.
**Whole of government policy**

This approach recognises that a holistic approach, from both inside and outside government, will lead to success in Aboriginal education rather than the implementation of a range of individual disconnected programs.

For example, the creation of long-term jobs for Aboriginal people will only be possible if this objective is made a priority by all areas of government.

Throughout the Review field trips the view was expressed that there must be more cooperation, planning and joint implementation of programs by the different government departments and non-government organisations.

It was agreed by both communities and teachers that schools must be a part of this cooperation, planning and implementation. The proposal that schools should be the central community location of the services provided by other government departments and non-government organisations was supported for a number of reasons.

Schools exist in more communities and locations than any other service, and therefore the assets of the school should be made more widely accessible. If the location of other services including health, social services, TAFE NSW, Adult and Community Education, sport and recreation were centred at the school, more community adults would enter the school, which would lead to a lowering of the barriers that presently exist between many secondary schools and Aboriginal adults. The location of other services in the school would enable better sharing, communication and cooperation between the services.

There is evidence that success in Aboriginal education cannot be achieved by education alone. It is crucial that, at the same time that schools and TAFE NSW are focusing on improving the educational outcomes of students, all agencies are working together with Aboriginal communities to jointly enhance the capacity of the community and to bring about improvements in the broader concerns such as health, housing, adult education and employment.

This holistic approach, from inside and outside government, which works with Aboriginal communities as an equal partner, will help make Aboriginal education a success.

Strategies suggested by some individuals and groups during field trips for establishing a whole of government approach to work with Aboriginal communities through schools:

- Initially, differently configured pilot programs could be developed with the engagement of the local communities to ascertain the most appropriate models for the different communities that may wish to develop this across-agency provision.
- Over time, the offices of other government service providers could be physically located in the secondary and central school facilities.
- Protocols could be established that detail the working, industrial, service provision and funding arrangements that will apply in the joint facilities.
- Proposals could be developed and negotiated, as appropriate, to determine the nature of the staffing and resources required in DET to facilitate the genuine involvement of school and TAFE NSW education staff in each of the locations where these across-government facilities are to be created.
Section 5: Education for 15 to 19-year-olds

The compulsory years of schooling provide students with a common platform for approaching life, work or study. Between the ages of 15 and 19, students make important choices about their future directions in work and life. Young people in this age group who do not stay in study or get a full-time job are at risk of ongoing disadvantage economically and socially. In New South Wales, in May 2003, 15.1 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds were not in full-time education or full-time work. DET student census data reveals that an Aboriginal student has nearly twice the risk of not completing 13 years of school as a non-Aboriginal student.

Completing Years 10 or 11 increases an Aboriginal person’s chance of employment by 40 percent. Completing Year 12 increases employment prospects by a further 13 percent. According to the Dusseldorp Skills Forum Report (Curtain, 2003, p. 35), nationally, 45 percent of Aboriginal young people aged 15–25 years in 2001 were neither in full-time learning nor in work. The Dusseldorp Report says unless this trend is reversed, adult Aboriginal employment rates will remain at about 30 percent, compared with 50 percent for non-Aboriginal people. By age 30, this trend is well set.

Aboriginal students in Years 11 and 12 in schools: features and trends

In the 2003 mid-year census there were 1065 Aboriginal students in Year 11 and 609 in Year 12. They were enrolled in 308 public schools. The majority were in a school which had one to five Aboriginal students (193 schools). The dispersal of Aboriginal students in schools across New South Wales has implications for the support strategies for senior students.

Thirty-nine districts had one or more Aboriginal students enrolled each year in Year 11 or 12. Some were enrolled in central schools in remote and rural areas, but most were in high schools.

The retention rate of Aboriginal students is much lower compared to non-Aboriginal students. There is a high drop-out in Year 11, particularly among Aboriginal boys.

Overall, for the years 2002 to 2003, of those Aboriginal students in Year 10 only 59 percent went on to Year 11, and of those in Year 11 only 63 percent went on to Year 12.

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Figure 3.5.1: Number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Years 11 and 12 in 2003 as a proportion of their numbers in Year 7

![Bar chart showing the proportion of Year 7 in Year 11 and Year 12 for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.](image)

Figure 3.5.2: Comparative award of an HSC as a proportion of Year 7 commencements: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students: 2001–2003

![Bar chart showing the proportion of HSC award by year and student type.](image)

31 These figures represent enrolment in government high schools only. Those students who have left high school may be at a TAFE NSW College or working towards a useful training qualification.

Section 5: Education for 15 to 19-year-olds
Of similar concern is the fact that, of the number of Aboriginal students originally enrolled in Year 7, fewer are now being awarded a Higher School Certificate (HSC). The proportion of HSCs being awarded to Aboriginal students peaked in 2002, when 467 were successful, representing 1.32 percent of the total number of recipients (Board of Studies NSW data). In 2003 the percentage of Aboriginal students who gained the award had dropped to 1 percent of the total enrolment, or 364 students of a total school enrolment of 36 463.

Senior Aboriginal students tend to have lower attendance rates than senior non-Aboriginal students. The monitoring and management of attendance requirements are a school matter. As the senior years of school are tightly packed with respect to curriculum and ongoing assessment, any absences can have a serious impact on students’ learning outcomes.

There is a high rate of withdrawal from school among Aboriginal students in Year 11, and a high rate of absenteeism. Many teachers contended that the new HSC, in place since 2001, is too hard for some students. The Board of Studies NSW has analysed student retention related to the new HSC. It has found an upward trend of about 3 percent among all students since it was introduced (Submission, p. 17), but

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32 The attendance data collected in the representative sample of 200 schools in March 2004 showed that absenteeism is generally much higher among senior secondary students than among younger students. While Aboriginal students maintain the relative difference of being twice as likely to be absent as non-Aboriginal students, which was established in Kindergarten, the difference equalises by Year 12.

33 The Board of Studies manual (BOS 2002) states that “while the Board of Studies does not stipulate attendance requirements, principals may determine that, as a result of absence, the course completion criteria may not be met. Clearly, absences will be regarded seriously by principals who must give students early warning of the consequences of such absences. 11.4.1 … principals may determine an appropriate attendance pattern(s) that will allow each student to achieve the outcomes of each course being studied. 11.4.1”
there has been no clear movement in retention rates for Aboriginal students since 1995. Regular attendance is also critical with respect to assessment schedules. The cultural expectations of teenage Aboriginal students often mean there are greater family demands on them to fulfil an adult role in their communities, particularly in times of ill health and death. The advice of the NSW Board of Studies is to work flexibly to support students to do their assessments or examinations when their circumstances are difficult. Such a level of flexibility places high demands on school organisation and staff.

Similarly, student absences due to suspensions are an obvious impediment to learning, as well as being symptomatic of wider problems of behaviour and engagement. The patterns of suspension disproportionately affect Aboriginal students.

A survey of 2003 suspension data for students in the senior years of school revealed that:

- The suspension rate for Aboriginal boys for short suspensions (from one to four days) was 126 suspensions per 1000 students, compared with 61 suspensions per 1000 students for non-Aboriginal boys.
- For short suspensions, Aboriginal boys were being suspended at a rate that was twice as great as that for non-Aboriginal boys.
- The suspension rate for Aboriginal girls for short suspensions was 46 suspensions per 1000 students, compared with 17 per 1000 for non-Aboriginal girls.
- For short suspensions, Aboriginal girls were being suspended at a rate that was two and a half times greater than that for non-Aboriginal girls.

The survey data also suggested that expulsion tends to be used mostly in the years of senior secondary education, and although used infrequently, for the survey period:

- The expulsion rate for Aboriginal males was 4 per 1000 students, compared with 2 per 1000 for non-Aboriginal males.
- The expulsion rate for Aboriginal females was 16 per 1000 students, compared with 1 per 1000 for non-Aboriginal females.

**The Higher School Certificate in practice**

HSC studies can be undertaken in a number of different ways. Most students undertake Year 11 (Preliminary Year) and Year 12 (HSC Year) at school over two years. It is possible, however, to study for the HSC over a period of up to five years. This provides students with the opportunity to combine part-time work and study, or attend to family responsibilities, by reducing the number of subjects taken but extending the period of study. Students can also combine the study of general education (academic) courses and Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses. Some VET courses (Framework Courses) contribute both to an HSC and to the University Admissions Index (UAI). Other VET courses contribute to an HSC but not to university entrance. While in Years 11 and 12, students can
participate in a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship. Some students study for their HSC on TAFE NSW campuses, where the Preliminary and the HSC courses can be studied over two years or longer, or the Preliminary and HSC courses can be combined into one year of study.

The Board of Studies NSW is responsible for developing the HSC curriculum, managing the final examinations and awarding the credential. The UAI is a rank that provides a measure of overall academic achievement in the HSC and assists universities in ranking applications for university entry. Universities determine the requirements for the UAI.

The pattern of study required for the HSC is 12 units of Preliminary courses and 10 units of HSC courses and must include:

- at least 6 units of Board Developed Courses
- 2 units of English
- three courses of 2 unit value or greater
- four subjects.

There are approximately 150 Board Developed Courses available and a large range of Board Endorsed Courses. Board Developed and Board Endorsed Courses include general education subjects and nationally recognised VET courses. Extension courses are available in English, Mathematics, History, some languages and some VET courses. These build on the content of the 2 unit course and normally carry an additional value of 1 unit.

**Curriculum choices**

An analysis of the courses selected for the HSC in 2003 shows significant differences in course choices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. All students must take two units of English and then choose their other courses subject to Board of Studies NSW requirements relating to the number of units taken and coverage across key learning areas. Student choices will reflect what is being offered by the student’s school or is otherwise available to the student, student interests, and strategic thinking by students about what courses they need to achieve longer-term objectives.

A significantly higher proportion of Aboriginal students have chosen courses that included social studies of various kinds, or retailing and hospitality combined with social studies.\(^{34}\) Twice the proportion of Aboriginal students chose course profiles characterised by mechanical engineering, and building and construction. By contrast, a higher proportion of non-Aboriginal students took business or finance course profiles, “pure science” profiles (physics, chemistry) and information technology profiles.

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\(^{34}\) For this purpose, social studies has been taken to include courses such as Child Studies–Children’s Services; Child Studies–Centre Based Care; Personal Development, Health and PE Life Skills; Community and Family Studies; Community Care Services; Community Services–Aged Care Work (Traineeship); Exploring Early Childhood; Legal Studies; Psychology, General; Society and Culture; Work and Community Life Skills; Citizenship and Society Life Skills.
As well, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students varied in how they tended to combine mathematics with these other choices. For example, within the group of students choosing courses broadly described as having to do with business or finance, Aboriginal students were far less likely to take a maths course (only 59 percent compared to 90 percent of non-Aboriginal students). Instead, Aboriginal students combined their business or finance courses with social studies or courses in the life sciences (environmental science and courses to do with biology). This is also apparent where students chose courses in the general area of information technology.

Nearly 30 percent of those Aboriginal students did not study any mathematics, contrasted with only 9 percent of the non-Aboriginal students: instead, the Aboriginal students combined their choice with courses from social studies or the life sciences. Among those choosing courses that have more to do with the pure sciences, 7 percent of the Aboriginal students combined that choice with only Applied Mathematics and 47 percent with General Mathematics, compared with only 12 percent of the non-Aboriginal students, who otherwise took the more demanding 2 unit Mathematics or extension courses.

![Figure 3.5.4: Proportion of students taking particular types of course choice profiles: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, 2003](image)

Such choices may mean fewer Aboriginal students will be able to meet the requirements for university courses representing the natural extension of those interests. Data collected during field trips confirmed that career counselling is essential to help Aboriginal students in NSW make course selections that will result in jobs.

35 Review of Aboriginal Education based on Board of Studies NSW students’ course entry data, September, 2003.
**English courses in the HSC**

In both the 2002 and 2003 HSC, there was a smaller proportion of Aboriginal students taking higher level English courses than non-Aboriginal students. About 15 percent of Aboriginal HSC candidates studied English Advanced compared to 36 percent of non-Aboriginal candidates. In English Advanced in 2003, 9.9 percent of Aboriginal students were placed in the top two performance bands compared to 37 percent of non-Aboriginal students. In English Standard in 2003, 11.5 percent of Aboriginal students attained results in the top two bands compared to 27.1 percent of non-Aboriginal students.

The effects of lower literacy levels of Aboriginal students during Years 3 to 10 impact on their study in HSC English and all other subjects. During school visits, many people in the consultations perceived the English courses in the new HSC to be too difficult. Some said that this is a reason many students do not continue at school after Year 10. Many teachers said that the English Standard course is much more difficult than the Contemporary English course in the former HSC. Research by the Board of Studies NSW, however, has challenged this perception.36

Fundamentals of English is an extra unit of study designed to provide assistance for the English Standard course.37 Board of Studies research showed that students who undertook this course in 2001 achieved better results in English Standard than those who did not. It appears that very few Aboriginal students whose results in Year 10 indicated they would benefit from the Fundamentals course participated in the course. Several submissions call for appropriate Fundamentals of English support materials to be developed specifically for teaching Aboriginal students.

Formal English is the underpinning language of senior school and further study, and strong verbal skills are critical for success. Support Teachers for Learning Difficulties are not available to senior students, because their role is to support students in Years 7 to 10. It is critical that the teaching of formal English for senior study/further study be addressed to enhance the literacy skills of all Aboriginal students enrolled in the Preliminary and HSC years. The Board of Studies NSW proposes endorsement of a project to develop, trial and implement resources for teachers that build on current literacy strategies. Other people have suggested greater tutorial support in Years 11 and 12, and the development of literacy “coaches” who can work with teachers across all subject areas.

**Mathematics courses**

In 2003, 33 Aboriginal students sat for HSC Mathematics and 197 for General Mathematics. In General Mathematics, there were higher proportions in the lower skills bands (56.3 percent in Bands 1 and 2 compared with 33.2 percent of non-Aboriginal students), and relatively small proportions in the higher skills bands.

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36 *Board Bulletin*, May, 2002, Vol 11 No. 2: “… although there were initial concerns that the new Standard English course was too demanding for students who in the past would have undertaken Contemporary English, the results indicate that most students did not just meet the minimum standard in Standard English, but performed in the mark range 60–70.”

In Mathematics, one student achieved a score in Band 6, four were placed in Band 5, 45.4 percent of those who sat the examination were placed in Bands 3 and 4, and 39.4 percent scored in Band 1 and 2 compared with 16.4 percent of the non-Aboriginal students.

The Board of Studies NSW has several initiatives aimed at the compulsory years of schooling, which if successful will improve Aboriginal numeracy levels. This is not just of critical importance in opening up access to business and professional opportunities for Aboriginal students at university level. In consultations, low numeracy was also identified as an issue by TAFE NSW teachers, who said that Aboriginal students with low numeracy skills had major problems with apprenticeship courses such as automotive skills. This was often one reason for their leaving a TAFE course.

Consideration needs to be given to creating parallel strategies for literacy and numeracy and career counselling to support Aboriginal students to make appropriate choices in combining mathematics with other subjects.

**Aboriginal Studies**

Since 1991, 2 Unit Aboriginal Studies has been an HSC course. In 1992, 86 students sat for the exam, and in 1996 the number was approximately 600. This is a significant increase. However, the numbers of students taking Aboriginal Studies has decreased since the introduction of the new HSC. A paper prepared by the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (March, 2004) raises critical issues as set out in the following discussion.

![Figure 3.5.5: The numbers of students taking HSC Aboriginal Studies, 1992–2003 (NSW AECG Inc, 2004)](image-url)
The percentage of Aboriginal students undertaking the course is quite steady, averaging at 23% of all the candidates across a period of 12 years. This needs to be compared to the average 0.86% participation rate of Aboriginal students in all other subjects in the HSC. It demonstrates that the course can be a factor in Aboriginal students remaining at school (NSW AECG Inc, 2004, p. 3).

In 2003, 287 government high school students registered for the Aboriginal Studies Course: 72 were Aboriginal, and of these 48 attained a result. A concern often voiced by students and communities was that the course is not offered in some schools because only a few students have chosen it in Year 11. As well, because of the small Aboriginal Studies candidature there is no textbook and schools have to develop much of the material themselves. Materials need to be made more relevant by teachers through consultation with the local community. It is very demanding for each teacher to do the community consultations and develop resources at school level. Other feedback suggested that:

*The course is too academic and even though some students do excellent work with local cultural input, assessment is based on written assignments/exams. This perception needs to be balanced with the Aboriginal Studies syllabus writers’ wish to present a course of sufficient rigour for it to be accepted as a Category A course. The Aboriginal Studies Board Curriculum Committee has representation from Aboriginal community members and the NSW AECG Inc.*

Some schools think the course should only be offered if there is a large number of Aboriginal students.

A forum run by the Board of Studies Aboriginal Education Initiatives Advisory Committee in November 2003 noted that the syllabus needs to be reviewed for content overload. It recommended promotion of the course, training and development for parents and community members who assist in teaching programs, and that the UAC booklet advise that Aboriginal Studies is a recommended course for key university courses.

Because the Aboriginal Studies course is important to Aboriginal identity, it is suggested that DET regions examine ways to provide the Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies course to all small cohorts in schools, through flexibility in class sizes, and
mixed mode delivery (including face-to-face/distance education /e-learning/local network learning), with appropriate resources allocated.

Community consultation: perceptions about Years 11 and 12

In field trips and submissions, Aboriginal families clearly stated that they want their children to be successful at school. They want their children to have a better life with more opportunities than they had. They see education as the key.

Community members saw the following as barriers:

- Tutoring is available under the Aboriginal Tutoring Assistance Scheme (ATAS), but only for students who are performing poorly. Some teachers were very helpful and wrote letters to ask for tutoring, but they had to say the student was doing badly before the student [met] the guidelines. Tutoring is not available for students who are achieving.

- Racism and lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture was raised in numerous community meetings and submissions.

- Teachers with low expectations of Aboriginal students.

- Not having an AEA in schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal Education Workers and AEAs are valued highly and play important support roles for senior students.

Many communities consulted during the field trip reported that the teachers’ attitude in junior school was: Leave school at 15 – go to TAFE! This seems related to an attitude that is tied up with many issues such as underachievement, poor literacy and inappropriate behaviour.

For 40 years our kids have been told to leave school at 15. We’re sick of it.

– Aboriginal community meeting

Students want to succeed at their studies: We want to do something good, something constructive. Many Aboriginal students are the first in their families to study in Years 11 and 12, so they are taking a huge risk. The expectations on them are high; the perception is that by reaching Years 11 and 12, they “have made it”. They saw some of the barriers to their success as:

- There is a big difference between studying in Year 10 and then in Year 11. Year 11 work demands are much steeper; teachers expect that a lot more work be done outside of class.
- Students don’t always understand how to organise their folders, papers and their study time.
- Many Aboriginal students do not have access to a computer at home. Other students often use computers and the internet at home to do their assignments.
The way teachers talk is not always easy to understand. Students are not always sure of what the homework really means, or do not understand the instructions in the assignments.

Assignments have to be done outside class time.

Many Aboriginal students are in sports teams at regional and state levels. Others have family responsibilities and miss school. When they travel for their teams, or are absent for other reasons, teachers expect them to slot right back in although they have missed work.

There is a lack of information and advice about university courses and subjects and career advice on how to achieve their goals.

Some students cannot see the relevance of the curriculum.

The curriculum is too academic for some students.

Teachers of Years 11 and 12 stated that students are at school to learn, and they want them to succeed. The teachers saw as barriers:

- The syllabus expects that all students have met a high standard of literacy levels for senior study.
- Aboriginal students may understand the complex issues in HSC courses, but not necessarily have the skills to express them in written ways. However, assessment is driven in the HSC by written assessment, and there is not enough opportunity for oral and visual modes.
- Many students do not have access to adults who can assist and advise them on their homework and assessments in courses.

During the field trips, many Aboriginal parents and carers said they did not feel as comfortable or welcome in high schools as they did in primary schools. Asking questions about the HSC can be frightening. Only 16.1 percent of Aboriginal people over 15 years have achieved an HSC, compared with 38.33 percent of the general community (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001b).

However, teachers still need to know their students and where they come from. Many teachers lack Aboriginal cultural knowledge, which translates into different perceptions for them and their students.

All too frequently it seems that there is acceptance that educational inequality for Aboriginal students is normal. Work done over recent decades to achieve educational equality in outcomes has failed to eliminate this perception (MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education, 2000, p. 15).

School-based strategies for improving outcomes

According to the national report, The School to Work Transition of Indigenous Australians (Long et al, 1998), Aboriginal students are more likely to remain in school from Year 7 to Year 10 and move on to Years 11 and 12 if:

- the school or TAFE campus is welcoming and sensitive to the need of Aboriginal students, and
- there is the support of peers, role models, teachers, counsellors and parents.
The report found that the key motivational factors influencing young Aboriginal students to stay on at school are self-reliance, confidence and goal direction. Field trips and submissions support those findings.

There were calls for study skills programs to be run during the weeks before the start of Year 11 to prepare students for the big gap in study expectations between Years 10 and 11. Summer schools are another approach. After-school activity centres (or homework centres) may be more successful if they incorporate opportunities for exercise, games, relaxation and team development, as well as study.

Review teams visited schools whose successful approaches included:

- timetabling of elective subjects so that subjects that may support Aboriginal Studies are not included as competing timetable choices
- flexible timetabling and module-based assessment such as at Illawarra Senior College. Assessment strategies and alternatives need further attention to increase successful outcomes for Aboriginal students
- provision of homework centres
- provision of Aboriginal mentors is frequently raised as an important strategy to support Aboriginal students in senior years. An example is the Better Futures program on the South Coast
- celebration of student success through Aboriginal awards evenings and display of major projects to showcase the wonderful work done by Aboriginal students for their HSC, particularly in Aboriginal Studies
- effective partnerships with local Aboriginal consultative committees, businesses, agencies, universities and industry that emphasise the link between the formal school curriculum and vocational skills development; for example, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Police Service partnership on the South Coast, and the Armidale-based Pathways for Indigenous people in vocational education, training, employment and business.
- fostering Enterprise Education through the Priority Action Schools Program and Priority Schools Funding Program, with school to work planning and support structures
- implementation of a peer tutoring program, where peer tutors have completed a TAFE NSW accredited course on tutoring.

**Career counselling**

Career counselling was also suggested as being an important factor in both retention and engagement of senior school students. The quality of career counselling emerged as a major issue in field trips, submissions and research. Young people need support to set goals and reach their dreams. Many submissions call for focused quality career counselling rather than careers advice, accessible to every student. In comparison to careers advisers, counsellors focus on the individual, linking their skills and interests to a career path. They match Aboriginal students’ potential with their aspirations, and are able to guide them in subject
selection, goal-setting, work experience/work placement and career pathway planning.

Craven (2003, p.11) found that family and friends are the most frequently consulted sources for career advice for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students:

Many Indigenous families historically have not had broad enough educational or employment opportunities themselves to provide advice on varied career options. This is a particularly significant feature of Aboriginal experience in rural and remote areas.

Craven suggests that many students are not receiving adequate quality career education advice. This view is supported in the report from the Standing Committee on VET in Schools (March, 2004, p. xviii). It recommends more structured career education and advice, especially for Aboriginal students.

This Review was advised that in some cases the Aboriginal Education Assistants have become a major source of careers advice.

Links between Aboriginal careers advisors, Aboriginal TAFE NSW coordinators and student counsellors need to be strengthened. There needs to be an integrated approach to providing Aboriginal students with the opportunity to visit TAFE NSW colleges, universities and workplaces to broaden their horizons.

ATSIC called for regular trips by students to local universities and training providers from Year 8. Aboriginal career workshops such as the residential Indigenous Health Careers workshop conducted by Charles Sturt University, careers expos and a program run by University of New England in Armidale have been recommended.

It is recommended that specialist career counsellors (not just career advisors) be available in each region and TAFE NSW Institute for Aboriginal students. These career counsellors need to be professionally trained and familiar with Aboriginal culture.

**Higher level strategic options**

The NSW Secondary Principals’ Council submission says that the Years 11 and 12 curriculum options do not sufficiently acknowledge Aboriginal culture and the often unique circumstances facing many Aboriginal students and that the Board of Studies NSW should work with TAFE NSW and universities to investigate a different qualification to the HSC.

Victoria has introduced the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), an alternate course to its Year 12 certificate, which is available to all students. In 2004, VCAL is available in 317 secondary schools, TAFEs and Adult Community Centres. Unlike the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCG), which is widely used as a pathway to university, students who do VCAL are more likely to be interested in going on to training at TAFE, doing an apprenticeship or going straight into the workplace. Dr John Henry from Deacon University is reviewing the pilot introduced in 2002. The Aboriginal Centre at Sunraysia TAFE in Mildura
offers the VCAL in Performing and Visual Arts and reported to this Review Team that outcomes were positive.

When the issue of the HSC curriculum being too difficult was discussed in community meetings, Aboriginal people were very clear that they do not want a course just for Aboriginal students. They do not want a course that is seen as having less value. They want Aboriginal students to meet the same standards as everyone else.

The Board of Studies NSW submission opposes attempts to impose a differentiated curriculum based on lower expectations of Aboriginal students. It stresses that curriculum must be considered with the way teaching and learning happens.

Yet we are confronted by a 30 percent retention rate to Year 12. While the solution might not be a differentiated curriculum leading to a different credential, there remains the need for a deeper debate about other courses available to all students – courses that are designed to engage students and to be offered through the current HSC structures.

**Vocational Education and Training courses**

Teaching VET is very different from teaching modern history, which is my background, where you go in and talk to the kids. You love your subject. When you teach VET, you love the kids (Mrs Christine Klee in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2004, p. 104).

During the consultations, many people perceived VET in Schools to be the answer to increasing the engagement of Aboriginal students. In some country schools, all Aboriginal students take a VET course whether or not they aspire to go to university.

Nationally there is an increase in the numbers of students taking VET courses. In 2003, 47 percent percent of all students enrolled in a senior secondary school certificate in Australia were enrolled in VET in Schools and 95 percent of all schools with senior secondary programs offered VET in Schools. Nearly 50 percent of programs were in tourism/hospitality, business and clerical areas, and computing. About 10 500 students nationally commenced a school-based New Apprenticeship in 2003.38

VET courses enable students to study courses that are relevant to industry needs and have clear links to workplace destinations. They are part of the Australian Qualifications Framework. Students taking VET courses within the Higher School Certificate program may be eligible for an AQF VET Certificate issued by TAFE NSW or the Board of Studies NSW on behalf of school sector registered training organisations (RTOs) or credit towards such a certificate.

The Board of Studies NSW has developed VET industry curriculum frameworks for nine industries. Within each framework there is a number of courses including

38 Data provided by NSW DET’s VET Directorate.
extension courses. One designated 240-hour course (2 units in each of Preliminary year and HSC year, totalling 4 units) in each framework may contribute toward the UAI. The industry curriculum frameworks are: Business Services; Construction; Entertainment; Hospitality; Information Technology; Metal and Engineering; Primary Industries; Retail; and Tourism.

In New South Wales fewer Aboriginal students as a proportion take a VET course in Years 11 and 12 than non-Aboriginal students.

**Table 3.5.1: Aboriginal students completing VET courses in 2002 (derived from Board of Studies NSW and NSW DET mid-year census).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aboriginal students</th>
<th>All students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number completing VET course(s)</td>
<td>% of all Aboriginal students in Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>45.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.05%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While most schools deliver VET courses within the school, in many schools HSC VET courses are delivered at a TAFE NSW college (TVET, TAFE-delivered VET). In 2003 TAFE NSW was delivering TVET courses to 842 Aboriginal students in both Years 11 and 12. Some students do more than one course. During the period 2000 to 2003 this participation level grew from 525 to 842 (60 percent).

In 2003 there were 537 Year 11 Aboriginal students in the HSC Industry Curriculum Frameworks. Hospitality was the most popular VET course with Aboriginal students, with 202 enrolments.

In 2003 there were 136 Year 11 Aboriginal enrolments in Board Endorsed Courses: 32 in Automotive and 27 in Child Studies as the most popular (Board Endorsed Courses do not contribute to the UAI.) In 2003 there were 293 Year 12 Aboriginal students in Industry Curriculum Frameworks, with 103 of these in Hospitality Operations. Seventy Aboriginal students were enrolled in Board Endorsed Courses (the highest numbers were in Child Studies with 12 and Automotive with 8 students.)

The report *Young Visions* (Polesel et al, 2003) prepared for the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation found a considerable improvement in the image of VET among students and teachers. The factors that make VET in Schools successful are well documented in a number of publications, as are the barriers to success. The success factors can be summarised as attitude, commitment and connections:

- School principals, teachers, parents and students need to have a positive belief in vocational education.
- Teachers require commitment because of the additional time required to timetable, plan, deliver and record vocational outcomes.
- Teachers need connections with other teachers and good relationships with local TAFE NSW colleges, local employers and the local community.

Structured workplace learning and assessment is a mandatory feature of VET in Schools. Aboriginal students reported that they learned more at their workplace.
than at school (77.7 percent Aboriginal compared to 47.4 percent non-Aboriginal) (Polesel et al., 2003). Another key difference was in relation to the role of work placement in helping them secure future employment: 92.8 percent of Aboriginal students reported that their work placement could help them move into a good job in the future, compared to 75.4 percent of non-Aboriginal students.

However, Aboriginal students were less likely to report that their work placement helped them with their self-confidence (63.5 percent compared to 79.3 percent). It is worth noting also that 51 percent of male students in VET courses reported that they would rather be in work than at school. Students saw the weakest aspect of careers advice and assistance as being that area related to advice or help in making a direct entry to the workforce. Aboriginal students see this as a more important service than non-Aboriginal students (Polesel, 2003, p. 67).

Review teams were told Aboriginal students are hesitant about the mandatory work placements for the Frameworks VET courses. Work placement was seen as an alienating experience for many students. With intergenerational unemployment, many Aboriginal students do not have role models who can counsel them about work placement, and what employers expect. Teachers reported that students feel racism in the workplace and leave the course.

DET has developed a number of partnerships with government organisations and group training organisations in relation to increasing participation and improving access for Aboriginal students in the School Based Traineeship program. This included 41 Aboriginal students across 2002–2003.

Employment of Aboriginal students as School Based Trainees is part of a broader strategy to encourage greater participation and employment of Aboriginal people in the legal professions.

Introduction of School Based Traineeships with the Attorney General’s Department in New South Wales is an initiative sponsored by the NSW Attorney General’s Department and supported by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, Vocational Education in Schools Directorate.

The NSW Attorney General’s Department was seeking to recruit Aboriginal students for School Based Traineeships in Office Administration. These traineeships form part of a broader strategy that seeks to increase the representation of Aboriginal people in the legal occupations and to assist Aboriginal people to gain formal qualifications in these legal occupations. This strategy targets Aboriginal students commencing in Year 11.

Currently, the Certificate II in Business is endorsed for the School Based Traineeships in the New South Wales program.

In 2002 eight Aboriginal School Based Trainees commenced a Certificate II in Business with the Attorney General’s Department. These trainees were placed in the local courthouses in Moree (2), Bourke (1), Wagga Wagga (1), Wyong (1), Toronto (1) and Campbelltown (2).
In 2004 another four Aboriginal students have commenced the School Based Traineeship program in Campbelltown (1), Lismore (2) and Nowra (1) local courthouses.

Successful outcomes of this program include a retention rate of 75 percent in Year 12 for the first cohort of students commencing in 2002. Of this cohort three students have secured further employment and training with the Attorney General’s Department in the local courthouse.

However, School Based New Apprenticeships are not without their problems. Their educational efficacy is contested (Smith & Wilson, 2002, p. 14). They argue there is not a neat fit between the work demands of new apprenticeships and school organisation. Of great concern is the issue of possible consequences for student well-being of spending school holidays catching up working hours or attending a training provider.

Although there has been a significant take-up of VET courses by Aboriginal students, their HSC completion rates have declined. It may be more useful to also look at how “academic” subjects can be taught differently. In Learning to Work the following statement is made:

… the emphasis needs to be on the right type of information for the students and also on getting teachers to making a pedagogical mind shift and understand that is not their subject in isolation that is important. They have got to place that student in the real world, and that involves work, employment, further training, everything (2004, p. 108).

Greater and more sophisticated research needs to occur around the VET in Schools project to ensure Aboriginal students do succeed broadly and are well prepared for the demands of working in the rapidly expanding “knowledge economy”.

Low levels of literacy and numeracy are as significant an impediment for such VET courses as for general or academic courses (Learning to Work, 2004, pp. 89–90).

Vocational Education in Schools has an important role to play in engaging senior secondary school students. However, an increased uptake by Aboriginal students of VET programs is not matched by an increase in overall retention rates to the end of Year 12.

The United Nations World Youth Report 2003 makes reference to an OECD 14-country review of how young people make the transition between education, training and employment, and concluded that young people are decreasingly likely to decide to follow an upper secondary vocational qualification pathway if this does not lead to eligibility to enter tertiary education later (should they decide they wish to do so rather than entering the labour market) (p. 38).
Pathways in secondary education through TAFE NSW

The number of Aboriginal students under the age of 19 enrolled in Access courses in TAFE NSW is about 1500 – the equivalent of a large state high school. These students are spread across all TAFE NSW Institutes and colleges, and in formal award courses ranging from Language, Literacy and Numeracy up to the Higher School Certificate.

The number of under 19-year-old Aboriginal students enrolled in TAFE NSW’s general education and Access courses has increased by 63.9 percent in the period 1998–2003. This compares to 24.5 percent for non-Aboriginal students.

![General Education Access Participation Indigenous Under 19 years](image)

**Figure 3.5.7: Participation of under 19-year-old Aboriginal students in Access and general education courses.**

As can be seen in Figure 3.5 7, two-thirds (1014) of young Aboriginal students were enrolled in courses addressing basic skill levels in literacy, numeracy and general education. The Certificate I in Foundation and Vocational Education, the largest cohort, enables students to progress to the Certificate in General and Vocational Education (CGVE), a School Certificate equivalent course.

There is much debate around the term “second chance” education, as many Aboriginal people feel they did not get a first chance. TAFE NSW uses the terms Access and General Education for a range of courses including those that prepare students for further study and expanded vocational options.

The statistics used in this section are from DET Statistics using the TAFE NSW data warehouse.
The CGVE, with 335 Aboriginal students in 2003, equates to the School Certificate for HSC entry and is equivalent in its level of educational attainment. The course enables students to combine general education and vocational modules, and can be achieved by assembling a number of statements of attainment. This provides early and frequent success as an alternative to focusing on a single qualification as the end result. Teachers in *Youth at Risk* programs find that vocational modules are a way of re-engaging young people in preparation for undertaking mainstream educational pathways. However, the Review was also advised by the TAFE NSW Access and General Education Curriculum Centre that the majority of students enrolled in Year 10 and Year 11 equivalent courses and the HSC in TAFE NSW do not choose the vocational modules, even though vocational pathways have been promoted. The IT pathway is an exception to this. Otherwise student demand is for general education modules.

The fact that Access courses are attempted by so many Aboriginal students shows how highly valued they are by Aboriginal communities and this was confirmed in the Review’s field trips. Concerns were expressed by communities that funding priorities adopted by TAFE NSW may see the number of Access courses decline, particularly the CGVE.

Aboriginal participation rates in the CGVE (Year 10) are variable across TAFE NSW Institutes, and these variations are difficult to explain. However, many Institutes are enrolling Aboriginal students into courses at a much higher rate than their demographic profile. It is important that there is a continuing commitment to CGVE courses in TAFE NSW, and that encouragement is provided to Aboriginal students to enrol. However, enrolment does not guarantee success.

![CGVE Indigenous Participation as a Percentage of Enrolments](image)

*Figure 3.5.7: Aboriginal participation in the CGVE as a percentage of enrolments.*
The CGVE is a vitally important alternative to the School Certificate for Aboriginal students. The successful completion rate of 41 percent represents a significant improvement in respect to school results, even though non-Aboriginal students have a higher completion rate at 49.1 percent. The overall results for the Foundation and Vocational Education Certificate vary from 53 percent to 68 percent for Aboriginal students, depending on how the course enrolments were configured.

The variation in enrolments in Aboriginal participation rates in the CGVE (Year 10) reflects the different levels of enrolments of Aboriginal students across TAFE NSW Institutes, and the priorities established within the Institutes’ planning strategies. In New England Institute, for example, Aboriginal students represent 13.6 percent of total enrolments. Aboriginal enrolment rates in most metropolitan Institutes are much lower, despite a higher population concentration in the communities served by those Institutes.

Case study

Riverina Institute Griffith Campus offers the Koori Kool program, in partnership with Centrelink, Department of Community Services, Griffith Lands Council, Lagunyah House Youth Refuge, Koori Health Post and other government agencies. Students study the Certificate 1 in Access to Work and Educational Opportunities, which has been developed in consultation with Aboriginal Elders, teachers and mentors. Students develop skills in language, literacy and numeracy as well as interpersonal skills and Aboriginal culture. Transport to class is provided. Case management and mentors are features of the course. Twelve of the fifteen students enrolled graduated to the Year 10 equivalent course, Certificate II in General and Vocational Education.

In the Higher School Certificate, the TAFE NSW completion rate for Aboriginal students was 23 percent, compared to 61 percent for non-Aboriginal students.

Student results need to be understood with respect to a number of issues – the Commonwealth requirements for maintaining a Youth Allowance mean there are many reluctant “starters” in TAFE NSW courses; TAFE NSW is an adult learning environment which is not ideal for many young learners; (TAFE NSW had more than 230 Aboriginal students under the age of 15 in 2003); and TAFE NSW Institutes are funded on a formula basis calculated on an average cost per hour of teaching. Because the learning needs of Aboriginal students are much deeper and their support needs are greater, they generate costs that are much higher than the formula usually provides. Institutes do have discretion on how to fund these courses. Nonetheless, the rates are much lower than those applied in high schools, for secondary students.

Recent NCVER research (Polesel et al, 2004, p. 47) has found that those students who reported a low level of satisfaction with the quality of learning at school were also more likely to report poor levels of satisfaction with TAFE NSW training, particularly at the lower AQF levels. Compounding this is the Review finding that the average Year 7 Aboriginal student enters high school three years behind the expected literacy level, with limited programs in place to make up the gap. This
reinforces further the need for a more flexible and realistic approach to funding TAFE-delivered Access programs to Aboriginal students. As good literacy skills are essential for success in life, it is important that there is a continuing commitment to CGVE courses in TAFE NSW, and that encouragement is provided to Aboriginal students to enrol.

TAFE NSW has developed alternative learning programs for young people who have experienced difficulties in traditional high schools. Senior school programs that link with TAFE NSW include: Bradfield College at North Sydney, Coffs Harbour Educational Campus and CityEast@Randwick College.

Features of these programs include case management; pastoral care; strong community linkages; a four-day program (Bradfield) and three at Coffs Harbour; direct university linkages (Coffs Harbour); adult mentors for all students (Randwick); individual learning programs (Randwick); and dedicated counselling (Bradfield/Randwick). All course programs enable students to achieve a UAI and a TAFE NSW credential. In the case of Randwick, the program is offered for Years 10, 11 and 12 and numbers are capped at about 360 to ensure all students receive personal attention.

At CityEast@Randwick, 10 percent of the Certificate in General and Vocational Education students are Aboriginal. A Koori Support Team has been established by CityEast’s Director, including a Student Counsellor, Aboriginal Development Manager and Vocational Officer (Careers). The Team meets fortnightly, and student progress is kept under constant review. Each student has an individual learning plan based on career and learning aspirations. High level contact is maintained on a cross-agency basis, particularly as some students have past experience of Juvenile Justice Centres.

In TAFE NSW, in order to monitor the progress made toward general education targets for Aboriginal people in the next decade, it would be of value to track at the local level the destinations of students from one course to another as part of core business in Colleges and Institutes. The national research conducted by Polesel et al, together with TAFE NSW’s statewide student satisfaction data, provide a data-rich tool for analysing and improving educational provision to young Aboriginal students at both the planning and delivery stages.

**Conclusion**

Retaining Aboriginal 15 to 19-year-old students in learning is a major challenge. Great emphasis needs to be placed on engagement, particularly in Years 10 and 11, when major drop-outs occur. Curriculum support, engagement strategies, better counselling and extensive support systems are all important in achieving equitable outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Solutions to improved retention and achievement for Aboriginal students need to be framed in the interests of individual students, their aspirations and their special strengths. This section has identified many strategies that can be adopted at the local school or TAFE campus, and wider systemic ideas for improving outcomes. Because Aboriginal students are so widely dispersed across schools and TAFE
campuses, provision of personalised learning plans and services will need to form a key part of school and TAFE approaches to ensuring that high expectations are held and met.

Funding arrangements must be equitable, so that Aboriginal students can complete Year 12 through the HSC or TAFE NSW equivalent courses. Funding must ensure that the support services needed for 15 to 19-year-olds in TAFE NSW are equal to those for school students through to Year 12.

Consultation with Aboriginal communities has made it clear that they want the same opportunities and pathways for their children as non-Aboriginal children. Aboriginal students must be supported to succeed in the HSC. Similarly, alternative pathways or more flexible pathways within the HSC structure should be available as options to Aboriginal students who may be likely to “drop out”, and indeed all students who may be at risk of leaving school because courses do not seem relevant or engaging. High expectations, curriculum engagement and good teaching remain the fundamental planks of Aboriginal student success.
Section 6: Vocational Education and Training and Employment

The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody made a number of recommendations about Aboriginal education. The Report expressed strong support for the principle of self-determination.

The only chance for improving education as a social resource for Aboriginal people will come as a result of Aboriginal people deciding for themselves what it is they require of education and then having the means of determining how that end is to be achieved.\(^{40}\)

The current New South Wales Aboriginal Education Review has provided an opportunity for Aboriginal communities to be consulted about what they perceive as the shortfalls of the system and what needs to be changed to achieve quality learning outcomes for Aboriginal students and communities. In relation to Vocational Education and Training (VET), the four key themes that emerged were:

- improvement of educational outcomes, particularly course completion rates
- improved employment rates
- lower rates of recidivism for people in Corrective Services Centres and Juvenile Justice Centres, and most importantly
- the need for greater assistance for community capacity building.

Participation in VET

Over the last five years the number of enrolments by Aboriginal people in TAFE NSW has grown by 25 percent, from 15,715 in 1999 to 19,632 in 2003. Most of the enrolments are in rural areas (80.4 percent) with Western Institute having the highest number of Aboriginal students with 4173 enrolments. This represents 11.6 percent of the Institute’s total enrolments. New England follows with 3159 enrolments which represents 13.1 percent of total enrolments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.6.1: Percentage of Aboriginal enrolments in TAFE NSW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institute</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illawarra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Western Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{40}\) Quoted in Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Committee, 2000.
2003 ACE enrolments

A similar pattern is evident in Adult and Community Education (ACE) participation levels.

**Table 3.6.2: Percentage of Aboriginal enrolments in ACE Colleges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Indigenous %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater Sth West</td>
<td>7,399</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>829</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner West</td>
<td>45,609</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1,355</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid Nth Coast</td>
<td>24,820</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Inland</td>
<td>10,943</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Rivers</td>
<td>23,588</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>2,233</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East</td>
<td>7,398</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watagan</td>
<td>36,467</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total rural</strong></td>
<td>156,224</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>5,874</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>220,535</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>376,759</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>6,446</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participation in TAFE NSW**

![Indigenous Participation by Age Group 2003](image)

**Figure 3.6.1: Age distribution of Aboriginal students enrolled in TAFE NSW.**

In Figure 3.6.1 the largest single cohort is the 15 to 19-year-old group. Their participation in vocational education has been discussed in Section 5 of this Review. However, as the chart shows, there is also high participation by the 30 to 39-year-old age group as many adults return to study.
The most popular courses undertaken by TAFE NSW Aboriginal students were Access courses, with enrolments in this area accounting for 35 percent of total Aboriginal enrolments. This is because these courses provide an entry back into education by adults who left school early. All educational categories recorded growth in Aboriginal enrolments between 1999 and 2003, with the exception of the Information Technology, Arts and Media Division, where there was a slight decrease. The most significant growth occurred in the Primary Industries and Natural Resources Division where enrolments grew by more than 80 percent, from 1034 in 1999 to 1869 in 2003.

ACE Colleges also provide both general and VET programs for Aboriginal people. The number of Aboriginal enrolments in ACE Colleges has increased from 2053 (0.6%) in 1998 to 6047 (1.6%) in 2003. The courses with the highest enrolments are Literacy and Numeracy; Automotive Vehicle Operations; Occupational Health and Safety; First Aid; Land, Parks and Wildlife Management; Practical Computing Skills; and Work Practices Programs. Ninety-one percent of enrolments were in rural areas.

As well, there are several independent Aboriginal adult education providers such as Tranby Aboriginal Cooperative, the Aboriginal Dance Theatre Redfern, National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Inc (NAISDA), and Booroongen Djugun College at Kempsey, which offer nationally accredited courses. Booroongen Djugun College started in response to the training needs of its Aboriginal people’s aged-care facility but now also provides courses over a wide range of subjects that are industry-approved and nationally recognised. Australian Vocational Education and Training Management Information Statistics (AVETMISS) figures for 2002 show 839 enrolments in VET courses in independent Aboriginal adult education colleges.

![TAFE NSW Aboriginal Enrolments 1999 and 2003](image)

**Figure 3.6.2: TAFE NSW enrolments by qualification level for Aboriginal students.**
Despite the relatively high levels of participation, concern is continually expressed by government agencies about the fact that Aboriginal students are more likely to be involved in vocational education and training at the lower qualification levels. As Figure 3.6.2 shows, there has been some progress in increasing Aboriginal enrolments in higher level courses.

However, it should also be recognised that a large number of mature-age Aboriginal students enter TAFE NSW and ACE wanting to build up their basic education skills and self-confidence before they can progress to the more vocational and higher level courses. The field trips revealed a high level of support for the Access and Arts and Cultural Studies courses as they provide a non-threatening platform and a success cycle for those returning to study after leaving school early. These courses build up the confidence of students and give them the skills needed to continue their education and move on to other, higher level programs. There is also another benefit in that the older members of the community then lead the way for the entry of younger community members into post-secondary education. Research undertaken by TAFE NSW’s Access Division has found that 61 percent of all students who completed the general education courses subsequently enrolled in vocational courses the following year.

However, despite the continuing growth in participation, the field trips and submissions identified a number of inhibitors to access that need to be addressed.

A common theme was the lack of adequate transport, particularly in rural and remote areas where students might have to travel from one town to another to attend a campus that delivered the appropriate course. Contributing factors include lack of a vehicle, lack of access to public transport and the fact that many Aboriginal people don’t have a driver’s licence.

One way of addressing this issue is for VET providers to seek alternative ways of delivery that either limit the number of times a student needs to attend the campus through arrangements such as block release (apprentices are released from work to attend TAFE NSW for several days in a row rather than one day per week), or take the course to the student. Vocational education and training needs to be delivered when and where it is needed. TAFE NSW and other VET providers need to develop innovative and flexible vocational education and training services to meet the needs of Aboriginal communities and people.

One way that TAFE NSW has enhanced flexibility and provided a welcoming environment for Aboriginal communities is through the establishment of specialist colleges (such as Eora College, TAFE NSW – Sydney Institute) and centres (such as the Djigay Centre at Kempsey).

Distance education has been suggested as a way of enabling programs to be delivered to individuals when there is insufficient demand within small communities. The delivery of VET via on-line services may have considerable potential for Aboriginal Australians in urban, rural and remote environments. However, it needs to be recognised that as on-line learning generally requires a high level of literacy and self-directed learning skills, many Aboriginal students would require face-to-face literacy tuition and computing skills training prior to
commencing an on-line course. For on-line learning to be successful, students need to be prepared for on-line learning, supported during the program and continually monitored to ensure that they are progressing satisfactorily.

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**Eora**

The concept of Eora started in the inner-city Aboriginal community in 1984 with the provision of education and training in cooking and hygiene for women living on The Block in Redfern. By 1987 the focus for training had changed to visual and performing arts. In late 1993 the present Redfern site of Eora College was opened by The Hon Virginia Chadwick, ready for classes to begin in 1994. So this year marks the 20-year anniversary of the concept and 10 years of delivery of targeted training at the Abercrombie Street, Redfern site.

The philosophy of the College is to maintain cultural sensitivity and work towards reconciliation. To this end, an informal style is underpinned by structure and control. The student base of 70 percent Aboriginal students allows for inclusion of non-Aboriginal students from a wide ethnic mix.

The close affiliation of the College to the Redfern community is demonstrated by the use by the community of College facilities. Community building strategies within the College have included a fortnightly “cook up” resourced from Student Association funds, during which one class provides lunch for the entire College.

Programs from Eora can begin for students while they are still at school. *Youth at Risk* programs are run at the College and also in schools. A successful mentor program at Matraville High School focused on Years 7 and 8 students with the goal of increasing retention rates so the students could complete Year 10. Aboriginal students from Lismore and Bourke have visited the College in the last year. Students from Eora have, in turn, visited them. The visual and performing arts skills of Eora students have been showcased at concerts in schools once a fortnight.

The flexible approach shown towards students enrolled at the College includes a strong commitment to individual goals and acknowledgement of any constraints they face. The College has developed a specific Aboriginal curriculum, in particular the gap training provided by the Aboriginal Access to Further Studies course, which provides a pathway for Aboriginals to enter the Police Force, Armed Services and Fire Brigade. There is a strong commitment, Institute-wide, to strategies in place to support students who enrol in higher level courses.

While there are some high-profile graduates from the College who have forged successful careers in television production, stage management and performance, Eora is proud of the welcome and support it provides for every student.

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One reason why it is important that the use of information technology is explored as a method of delivery for rural and remote communities is that, as Australia continues to embrace information technology, there is a danger that those without the means or skills will slide further away from participating socially and economically alongside those who do (Campbell, 2000, p. 7). The lower socioeconomic conditions of the majority of Aboriginal people place them in greater danger of not being able to access technology to develop these skills. Currently there is a lack of IT infrastructure in many rural and remote communities and this situation needs to be recognised and resolved. The use of IT technology will require not only the hardware and software to enable access, but the development of appropriate programs, the regular review and upgrading of the
whole system and the implementation of expertise to assist students when either educational or technological problems arise.

There are some interesting new projects currently being piloted that may benefit people in remote areas. An example of this is the Interactive Distance Learning (IDL) project, which enables the TAFE NSW North Coast and Western Institute to provide interactive lessons and learning to students in remote New South Wales, including rural and remote Aboriginal communities, via satellite telecommunications technology. This three-year project is a partnership between Optus, the Department of Education and Training in New South Wales, the Department of Employment, Education and Training in the Northern Territory, as well as local communities and schools. Projects such as this need to be supported to ensure both sustainability at the end of the three years and expansion to other regions.

If participation in vocational education and training is to increase, it has to be relevant to the needs of the local community. Therefore, it is important that strong links be formed between VET providers and Aboriginal communities. It would be advantageous for:

- the Deputy Director-General, TAFE and Community Education to establish a statewide Aboriginal Advisory Committee for TAFE NSW and ACE which would consist of representatives from key Aboriginal organisations, and
- all TAFE NSW Institutes to establish an Aboriginal Education and Development Advisory Council and all TAFE NSW campuses to establish an Aboriginal Education and Advisory Committee. The Advisory Councils and Committees would provide advice on the development and implementation of Aboriginal Education and Development Plans for each campus and Institute.

**Completion rates**

The average module completion rate for Aboriginal students in TAFE NSW in 2003, at 64.1 percent, has improved by some 7.4 percentage points since 1999. The highest rates of module completion were for short courses, such as TAFE PLUS Statements (100 percent) and College Statements (72.5 percent). In terms of accredited AQF qualifications, module completion rates were highest for Certificate III level courses (67.8 percent) and lowest for courses at Certificate I and II (59.1 percent). Between 1999 and 2003, the number of Aboriginal graduates increased by 43 percent, from 4470 in 1999 to 6387 in 2003. However, despite this improvement, this is still significantly below the rate for all students. TAFE NSW recognises the need to improve completion rates and has strategies in place to achieve this. Each TAFE NSW Aboriginal Development Manager is required to report quarterly on progress made.

A 1999 study (Durnan & Boughton, 1999) of the outcomes of Aboriginal people enrolling in VET courses in independent Aboriginal adult education colleges found that pass rates were higher than Aboriginal outcomes attained by the VET sector as a whole. This result is thought to be due in part to the additional support and more
accommodating environment provided in independent Aboriginal adult education colleges, as well as more focused course offerings.

A number of submissions to the Review described initiatives that resulted in very good completion rates. The Booroongen Djugun College identified the key features of “Best practice Aboriginal Pedagogy”; the NSW Lands Council described the training program developed and implemented in partnership with TAFE NSW – Western Sydney Institute, and TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute described the success factors that resulted in all students enrolled in a Work Skills Certificate 1 course for Aboriginal students either completing the module or the course.

The success factors identified in these submissions included:

- regular involvement of the community and its representative organisations
- the use of Aboriginal teachers and community members as teachers, resource people and mentors and administration systems that facilitate this employment
- the provision of a friendly and welcoming learning environment
- appropriate teaching methodologies
- a holistic approach to curriculum development and delivery
- customisation of national training packages to local needs
- development of students’ positive self-identity, dignity and respect through cultural affirmation
- comprehensive student support services, including counselling, transport, childcare
- appropriate resourcing
- teaching and learning resources that are culturally inclusive.

These were all issues raised during the field trips. Community members believed that many TAFE NSW campuses were unwelcoming and provided insufficient support for Aboriginal students.

The following strategies are proposed to improve the completion rates of Aboriginal students:

- Training packages and courses to be delivered with sufficient flexibility to enable additional literacy, numeracy and communication support where needed by Aboriginal students, and assessment practices to have regard to cultural appropriateness.
- TAFE NSW and ACE Colleges to put strategies in place to ensure the learning environment for Aboriginal students is appropriate, there is genuine community involvement and that adequate and appropriate support and resourcing is provided.
- TAFE NSW campuses and ACE colleges to introduce a case management approach to ensure that each student is considered as an individual and receives the support appropriate for their needs.
Pathways

If both educational and employment outcomes are to be improved, it is essential that formal pathways are established to facilitate the movement of Aboriginal people between schools and TAFE; ACE and TAFE; TAFE and universities; higher education and work.

Aboriginal people are still under-represented in higher education. In 2001 there were 7341 Aboriginal students in higher education. This represents 1.2 percent of domestic students. According to the issues paper prepared for the Australian Government Review of Higher Education called Achieving Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes: Indigenous Australians in Higher Education, the Aboriginal higher education population shows a somewhat different profile to that of other students. In general, Aboriginal students are older than non-Aboriginal students and are more likely to come from rural and isolated parts of Australia. Aboriginal students are more likely to enter higher education through special entry schemes and to enrol in bridging courses or diploma courses than in bachelor or post-graduate courses. Aboriginal students are more likely to be enrolled externally or in multi-mode attendance (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002, p. 14).

Therefore, if the number of Aboriginal people in higher education is to be increased, it is imperative that a range of alternative pathways is developed and implemented. Partnerships between TAFE NSW and universities have led to the development of a number of joint programs specifically targeting Aboriginal students, whereby the first part of the course is done at TAFE NSW and the student then completes a bachelor degree at the university. This sort of model needs to be extended and other cooperative models developed.

Case study

There is a tripartite agreement between TAFE NSW – Illawarra Institute, Illawarra Area Health Service and the University of Wollongong. Aboriginal students who successfully complete an introductory health course may apply to do the Enrolled Nurse Education Program. On successful completion of the program, students are offered two years employment as enrolled nurses with the Illawarra Area Health Service. Following this, enrolled nurses may apply to the University of Wollongong to complete the undergraduate nursing program. Successful graduates may be offered two years employment with the Illawarra Area Health Service as registered nurses. TAFE NSW – Illawarra Institute and the University of Wollongong are also developing and implementing a joint degree program, the Bachelor of Science in Indigenous Health Studies. The degree is structured so students complete the Advanced Diploma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Health at Illawarra Institute with simultaneous enrolment and completion of a number of supporting programs (such as Introductory Communications) at the University of Wollongong. At the conclusion of the Advanced Diploma students articulate straight into the final stage of the degree at the University of Wollongong.

The following strategies can improve pathways for Aboriginal people if:

- TAFE NSW campuses and Institutes further develop formal links with their local schools, Aboriginal communities and universities to implement
strategies to improve retention rates in school to Year 12 and pathways to
TAFE NSW, university and employment
• TAFE NSW Institutes enter into partnership with universities and local
communities to develop bridging and joint programs to facilitate the entry
of Aboriginal people into TAFE NSW and university.
• TAFE NSW Curriculum Centres ensure that clear articulation pathways
and credit transfer arrangements are built into Aboriginal preparatory and
specialist courses.

Employment

A fundamental question raised during the consultations was “Education for what?”
From the VET sector perspective, the answer is “education for employment or
further education”. This also includes community capacity building to support
Aboriginal communities in taking charge of their own destinies. Both the field trips
and the submissions raised the importance of improving both educational and
employment outcomes including increasing the number of Aboriginal people
gaining apprenticeships and traineeships.

The employment statistics for Aboriginal people are not good. Just over 39 percent
of the Aboriginal population are employed compared with 55 percent of the total
population. The Aboriginal unemployment rate for 25–44 year-olds is much higher
than that for the total population (21.9 percent compared with 6.5 percent). Young
Aboriginal people (15–24 years) have an unemployment rate of 32.7 percent
compared with 12.8 percent for the total population. There is no sign that the gaps
between the Aboriginal population and the total population narrowed between

Aboriginal workers are under-represented in the two highest skill categories
(occupations requiring degree or diploma qualifications) and strongly over-
represented in the lowest skill categories. Almost 60 percent of Aboriginal workers
are employed as Routine Workers (National Institute of Economic and Industry
Research, 2001, p. 196)

Both State and Australian Governments have recognised the need to provide
programs that seek to improve Aboriginal employment prospects, particularly in
the private sector. The NSW Department of Education and Training administers
three New South Wales Government-funded programs, which together provide
over $3.3m for Aboriginal employment. These are the Elsa Dixon Aboriginal
Employment Program, the Aboriginal Enterprise Development Officer (AEDO)
Program and the New Careers for Aboriginal People (NCAP) Program. The
emphasis of all these programs is on providing funding to community-based
organisations to employ Aboriginal people to assist Aboriginal people to gain
employment. The Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace
Relations has developed an Indigenous Employment Programme which provides
support for employers and for Aboriginal people looking for work. All these
programs aim to encourage employers to take on Aboriginal employees.

However, the overall impact of these programs is hard to assess as they are
submission-based and there appears to be little coordination or interaction between
the management of state and national programs. There is a need for an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs to ascertain whether they have in fact improved economic capacity for Aboriginal people and, if so, were they short-term rather than-long term sustainable measures.

The need for programs to encourage private enterprise to employ more Aboriginal people is demonstrated by the findings of a survey of the views of Chief Executive Officers of large companies (Australian Centre for International Business, 2001). The survey revealed that only 14 percent of firms surveyed had a documented Aboriginal employment policy. The views reported by CEOs indicated that increasing the employment of Aboriginal workers is constrained most strongly by employers’ perceptions of the level of education, skills and commitment of Aboriginal job seekers. This translated into specific CEO concerns about possible absenteeism and non-retention and represents a significant barrier to increasing Aboriginal employment.

One strategy for overcoming this barrier is for VET providers to enter into partnerships with private companies and enterprises so that the students are “job-ready” for employment by the company. The partnership between Australia Post and the former TAFE NSW – Southern Sydney Institute is a good example of what can be achieved. Since the partnership commenced in 1996, over 250 Aboriginal people have been trained by the Institute and on successful completion have been employed by Australia Post.

**Hunter Community College (HCC)**

A unique partnership between three registered training organisations (RTOs), the Yarnteen ATSI Corporation and some local businesses in the Hunter region has worked to develop employment opportunities and to establish new models of Aboriginal education. Yarnteen sponsors a number of pre-vocational and culturally enriching training programs while Yamuloong provides vocational training. Hunter Community College (HCC) and Hunter Group Training Company (HGTC) are the other two RTOs in the partnership and they provide training in specialised areas. Specific businesses have been strategically linked to a number of training programs to provide work experience for the students and possible future employment.

The success of the programs rests largely on the supportive partnership that has emerged between Yarnteen, Yamuloong and HCC. Having a supportive environment has been critical to keeping the students in these courses. Teacher selection is another major factor. Another critical success factor is flexibility and the need for programs to evolve with the changing needs of the students.

The ATSIC submission to this Review supports models such as the Moree Aboriginal Strategy and the compacts initiative operating in Forster. A significant element in the success of these initiatives is the partnerships between schools, training providers, employers, communities and students. An important element was the case manager who provided an effective liaison between each of the parties in the partnership. This should be an essential component of all such partnerships and programs.

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A common theme during the field trips was the need for more Aboriginal apprentices and trainees. An analysis of apprentice and traineeship figures (Bowman, 2004, p. 8) has shown that there has been a less than 20 percent increase in the number of Aboriginal people undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships over the period 1997–2001. This compares with a doubling of the New Apprenticeship population over the same period.

As at May 2004, in New South Wales there were:

- 792 Aboriginal apprentices out of a total of 44,594 (1.7 percent)
- 596 Aboriginal existing worker traineeships out of a total of 39,334 (1.5 percent)
- 1,435 Aboriginal new entrant trainees out of a total of 53,726 (0.02 percent)
- A total of 2,822 Aboriginal apprentices and trainees out of a total of 137,654 (2 percent).

In response to this under-representation of Aboriginal people in apprenticeships and traineeships, the Department of Education and Training New Apprenticeships Centre (DETNAC) has been active in the promotion and development of apprenticeships and traineeships for Aboriginal people. Since 1 July 2003, 462 Aboriginal apprenticeships and traineeships have been facilitated. The DETNAC is currently planning a media and promotional campaign aimed at encouraging employers to provide apprenticeships and traineeships for Aboriginal people and at encouraging young Aboriginal people to consider apprenticeships and traineeships. The campaign will be supported by initiatives including:

- pre-vocational courses specifically tailored to assist young Aboriginal people to enter apprenticeships and traineeships
- a mentoring program involving support for Aboriginal apprentices and trainees provided by Aboriginal people in business, education and training
- a personal and leadership development program for Aboriginal apprentices and trainees.

However, as the figures show, there is still a very long way to go. If the numbers of Aboriginal people employed as apprentices and trainees is to increase and be broadened across all business sectors, there needs to be strong partnerships forged between both public and private agencies. In particular, there need to be strong links with Centrelink and Job Network agencies to ensure they recommend young Aboriginal people for apprenticeships and traineeships.

A component of the Australian Government’s Indigenous Employment Policy is the National Indigenous Cadetship Project (NICP). This project matches Aboriginal students studying full time at university with employers who can give them work skills and professional development. The need for cadetships for Aboriginal people was raised consistently through the field trips. Therefore the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations should extend the scheme to VET students as their need to gain employment is even greater than that of university students.
There was strong community support for the development of a New South Wales Employment Strategy for Aboriginal people so as to develop and implement a coordinated approach to improving employment outcomes. Development and implementation of such a strategy would need to involve key business and industry organisations as well as the public sector agencies with responsibility for the delivery of programs and services to Aboriginal communities.

The following strategies could be adopted to improve the employment prospects of Aboriginal people:

- The Premier could establish a high level not-for-profit foundation of New South Wales corporate leaders with a strong commitment to Aboriginal education and employment to promote the creation of viable and lasting employment of Aboriginal people in the private sector and to encourage the private sector to fund cadetships and scholarships for Aboriginal students.
- The New South Wales Government could develop a New South Wales Aboriginal Employment Strategy to improve the employment prospects of Aboriginal people and coordinate existing employment strategies, programs and resources into a holistic, strategic framework.
- Indigenous Organisation Training (IOT) could be made available in all areas of the state and its availability could be well promoted and communicated with Aboriginal communities and organisations.

**Corrective Services**

The report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, released in 1991, drew attention to the link between poor educational outcomes and high rates of imprisonment among Aboriginal Australians. Despite the recommendations of the Royal Commission for more non-custodial sentences, Aboriginal people in New South Wales continue to be incarcerated at greater rates than non-Aboriginal people compared to their population share of 1.9 percent in New South Wales.

<table>
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<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
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<td>1411 (18%)</td>
<td>6130 (79%)</td>
<td>290 (3%)</td>
<td>7831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
<td>166 (29%)</td>
<td>396 (69%)</td>
<td>16 (3%)</td>
<td>578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>1557 (19%)</td>
<td>6526 (78%)</td>
<td>306 (4%)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: AVETI, Department of Corrective Services.*

The Adult Vocational Education Training Institute (AVETI) is the registered training organisation of the Department of Corrective Services (DCS). AVETI provides a range of programs such as language, literacy and numeracy; vocational and work readiness skills; Aboriginal specific education; information technology and creative arts. AEVETI also undertakes entry-level diagnostic literacy and numeracy for offenders. It has been found that there is a clear link between low literacy levels and incarceration.

The Department of Corrective Services and TAFE NSW have a Memorandum of Understanding outlining TAFE NSW’s role and commitment in providing
vocational education and training for offenders in Correctional Centres. TAFE NSW and the Department of Corrective Services have jointly developed and recently launched the TAFE NSW Provision for Aboriginal Offenders Implementation Plan 2004–2005.

In 2003 the average module completion rate for Aboriginal students in Correctional Centres was 76.1 percent, which is much higher than the completion rate for other Aboriginal students in VET. However, the course completion rate was very low at 17 percent. It is likely that the main reason for this is because the offender did not have time to complete the course while in the Correctional Centre. This means that the programs in Correctional Centres are not being value added or maintained due to the lack of post-release programs that provide a linkage from Correctional Centres studies to a VET institution. TAFE NSW therefore needs to consider re-packaging programs so that students are able to gain recognition for the skills they have developed even though they may not have completed the whole qualification.

The provision of VET in Correctional Centres has a number of limitations because of the nature of the organisation. One of the problems that prisoners face when trying to complete VET courses is the lack of continuity. Offenders can be moved from centre to centre with subsequent disruption to study. Another limitation is that provision must be structured around the priorities of the centre. Participation may be limited or interrupted by such priorities as other offender programs, work, court appearances, transfers to other centres or lockdowns.

Given the movement of offenders within the correctional system, and the other limitations, flexible delivery including distance learning, continuous enrolments as well as variations to course entry and exit points are important methods of facilitating access to VET. It was suggested that TAFE NSW Institutes needed to work together to ensure that they were offering similar programs so that when offenders changed centres, they could still continue their courses. When providing courses within Correctional Centres, TAFE NSW Institutes also need to be mindful of the labour market of the community to which the offender will be returning. For example, it is of little use developing rural skills if the offender will be returning to an urban environment.

A recent initiative has been the piloting of traineeships within NSW DCS so as to provide industry-specific vocational education and training and work experiences that better re-integrate offenders into the broader employment market at the pre and post-release stages. Traineeships are currently operating at Yetta Dhinnakkal Correctional Centre which has mainly Aboriginal offenders. In 2004 there are thirteen Aboriginal and nine non-Aboriginal trainees enrolled in the Certificate II in General Construction and four Aboriginal and two non-Aboriginal trainees in the Certificate II in Horticulture. Although it is too early to assess the effectiveness of this initiative, it has the potential to make a significant difference to the employment prospects of those who participate in the scheme and perhaps to reduce the chance of re-offending.

The other major issue identified in the consultations was the need for much better pathways and networking post-release so that there are strong support systems in
place. DCS is committed to the implementation of Throughcare, which is recognition of the need for integration between community-based and institutional settings and the requirement for offenders to receive ongoing support if there is to be further significant gains in reducing re-offending. If offenders are to be able to complete their courses once they are released from custody, TAFE NSW will need to be involved in the Throughcare program before the offender is released so as to be able to provide counselling, career planning and the offer of enrolment immediately after release.

It is therefore recommended that:

- TAFE NSW, in partnership with key Aboriginal organisations, develop and implement a post-release program for Aboriginal offenders based on a case management approach which would incorporate counselling; enrolment in TAFE NSW programs to enable ex-offenders to complete courses commenced in Correctional Centres; and provision of mentoring and community support necessary to reduce the chances of them re-offending.

**Building community capacity**

A critical review of the VET research and policy literature (Boughton, 1998) suggests that the problem is not so much participation in education and training per se (or the lack of it) by Aboriginal people, but rather the lack of opportunities for appropriate participation. Boughton said that one aim of a national Aboriginal strategy should surely be wherever possible to provide Aboriginal people with the education and training they need to be able to raise their living standards on their own lands and in their own communities. It is essential that the educational system has a holistic approach to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people and communities.

One issue that emerged as a constant theme during the consultations was that many Aboriginal parents were ill-equipped to provide assistance and support for their children’s education. It is widely accepted that a critical factor in children’s success at school is the value parents place on education. Parental involvement and support in the home for educational processes is recognised as being fundamental to a child’s successful engagement and outcomes (Schwab, 2001, p. 4). Often parents who have not had good experiences in school themselves and who have low self-esteem because of their low levels of formal education and poor literacy and numeracy skills are unable to provide this support to their children. In addition, many young fathers and mothers not only lack parenting skills but are forced to leave education early to look after the children.

Vocational education and training providers, particularly TAFE NSW, have a crucial role in providing programs that will assist parents to raise their levels of education and acquire parenting skills. An example of this type of program is the pilot program being run by South Western Sydney Institute at the Tahmoor Primary School in partnership with the Campbelltown SEA (School Education Area) to provide Koori parents with the skills to assist the literacy and numeracy development of their children. It is envisaged that educational pathways will be developed to assist these parents gain qualifications to move into full or part-time
work to assist Aboriginal students. This type of support should be available to all communities who want it.

It is therefore recommended that TAFE NSW develop and promote an Aboriginal family education program which leads to accredited course outcomes. This would include programs for young parents to support them in their own development as well as the development of their own children; basic education for parents to assist them support their children educationally, and volunteer literacy tutoring to provide Aboriginal parents with the skills to enable them to participate in the in-school tuition program. Unless Aboriginal children acquire literacy and numeracy skills at the same rate as other students, their educational outcomes will continue to be below the rest of the student population.

Another important area of community capacity building is through the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). The *Independent Review of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme* (Spicer, 1997) says that, across Australia, CDEP has been critical to developing an improved sense of pride in community and culture and has provided the basis for acquiring greater skills, employment and enterprise development resulting in ongoing social and economic growth. Consultations during the CDEP Review revealed that training is seen as important in contributing to the successful outcomes of particular projects. The Review recommended that TAFE NSW systems and other training providers need to consider more flexible, community-focused, on-site delivery based on the concept of “TAFE without walls”.

Field trip interviews indicated that often CDEP participants got caught on the CDEP recycle treadmill in that they did not progress further into employment. Often, for young people, their only aspiration was CDEP, which in effect reduced their opportunities.

TAFE NSW Institutes and other VET providers need to continue to develop close links with CDEP programs to facilitate movement from CDEP to other employment. This includes the need to provide opportunities for the development of small business enterprises supported by relevant VET learning and modelling through methods such as business incubators.

Past experience has shown that the most successful projects are those developed in partnership with the community, which are project-based and delivered within the community. Projects must also be instigated with communities to generate genuine long-term jobs. VET institutions also need to work with CDEPs to assist them with strategic planning skills as part of capacity building.

The New South Wales Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) has funded a number of demonstration projects aimed at community capacity building. The Board’s project *Linking TAFE with CDEPs* addresses the training needs of Aboriginal people participating in CDEP throughout New South Wales. The training will enable Aboriginal communities to plan for and manage the skills training they need to manage CDEP projects and hence improve the education and training and material life of Aboriginal communities. There are several good examples of how CDEP has developed into commercial enterprises such as at
Murrin Bridge. The partnership between the community and TAFE NSW – Riverina Institute has resulted in the development of this commercially viable winery.

**Case study**

The Tharawal Aboriginal Women’s Project is a joint project of TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute, the Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council CDEP, and the Aboriginal Programs and Gender Equity Units of NSW DET. The project aims to increase the number of Aboriginal women participating in higher level courses and link their training to enterprise development, sustainable employment and/or further study. Eleven women completed the Certificate IV in Small Business Enterprise Management in 2003. Seven of these women have gone onto full-time employment coupled with further part-time study in Advanced Diploma level courses at TAFE NSW, while the remaining four have commenced full-time studies at university.

Another BVET-commissioned project that has the potential to be replicated in other areas is the Armidale-based project Pathways for Indigenous people in vocational education, training and employment, which addresses the need to link training with employment outcomes. With its combination of training, mentoring and business support through the Indigenous Business Enterprise, the Pathways project provides educational and flexible vocational training options that address the multiple strands of disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal people to ensure that existing employment and career development opportunities are not lost to local Aboriginal people.

Projects such as these provide very successful models of how VET organisations can work in partnership with communities to build capacity and support self-determination.

The following strategies should be considered to improve educational and employment outcomes:

- That TAFE NSW develop for and with Aboriginal communities an Advanced Diploma in Leadership and Learning which will support community capacity building at all levels of administration, leadership, governance and advocacy for policy change. Each Institute will establish a key centre for Aboriginal Leadership and Learning, which will provide a focus for resource development and will facilitate diffusion of the course through communities, according to the specific needs of different communities. The course will be flexible, and will have multiple entry and exit points, with appropriate levels of course accreditation; it will have experiential learning as its underpinning instructional foundation; and it will include opportunity for intensive literacy and numeracy support.
- That TAFE NSW in partnership with local communities support the development of small business enterprises by the provision of appropriate VET training and modelling through methods such as business incubators.
- That the Board of Vocational Education and Training (BVET) fund further mentoring programs similar to the current Innovations for the Regions project to provide more communities with the expertise to initiate and
develop community development programs and expand employment activities.

Conclusions

The field trips, consultations and research show that there are a lot of interesting and innovative vocational education and employment initiatives being introduced across New South Wales. However, most of these are occurring in pockets and so the overall impact on educational and vocational outcomes is marginal.

Meaningful outcomes require the realisation that Aboriginal Education is not the sole responsibility of any Aboriginal Education and Training Unit, but is core business within educational systems and TAFE NSW Institutes. Educational systems and structures need to analyse operations to develop a greater depth of understanding of Aboriginal issues in order to create real and sustainable change across the whole of the vocational education and training system.

In many ways TAFE NSW is seen as being successful for Aboriginal students. TAFE NSW Institutes are regarded as the national leaders in respect to the use of culturally inclusive curriculum and culturally appropriate teaching and learning resources and responsiveness to community and industry needs. However, it is important that TAFE NSW raises the benchmark to maintain its status as national leader and looks at new initiatives and makes personal and systemic challenges a component of the processes Institutes develop in the way they do their business.

Some strategies that could be used to improve VET delivery and outcomes include:

- mainstreaming equity initiatives so that these become a normal part of the institutions’ role
- better assessment at entry to vocational education and training and individual case management where required, particularly to ensure that students have the level of literacy and numeracy necessary to successfully complete their course
- community profiling and planning: the focus must not only be on individuals but on families and communities
- intra and inter-departmental planning coupled with private sector, other government agencies and community partnerships to deliver services that address whole of life issues.

In regard to offenders in Juvenile Justice and Correctional Centres, there must be a far greater emphasis on the reduction of recidivism, particularly through the provision of post-release case management and programs that will provide both educational and community support for the ex-offender.

A key issue that has emerged from the consultations both with communities and sections within the Department of Corrective Services that have involvement in Aboriginal education and employment is that the Department is operating in “silos”, with little interaction between sections and consequent lack of “value adding” that occurs through sharing expertise and resources. If any significant
improvements in educational and employment outcomes are to occur, the silos must be broken down so that the various sections of the Department work together so that new initiatives and the lessons learned from successful initiatives are disseminated across the whole Department.

If self-determination for Aboriginal communities is to be achieved, there needs to be a radical shift in focus and the development of a holistic, coordinated framework within which Aboriginal education and employment reforms are initiated and implemented, such as the framework shown in Figure 3.6.3.

“Working to improve Social, Educational, Economic and Cultural development for Aboriginal people and communities”

The emphasis needs to be on community capacity building through partnerships. VET systems cannot do this alone. New South Wales needs to develop a holistic, five-year strategy for building community capacity through improving educational (particularly literacy and numeracy) and employment outcomes in partnership with key Aboriginal community organisations, industry groups and government agencies.

Ensuring all Aboriginal people and communities have access to quality education and training is paramount, but without the basic skills, including literacy and numeracy, self-identification, self-esteem, confidence and knowing what you want in life, even the best teachers or systems would be struggling to improve social, educational, economic and cultural development for Aboriginal people. Community capacity building has to be accepted as a key organising concept for the development of future directions. This encompasses, as a major component, the maintenance and development of Aboriginal culture by creating an environment where Aboriginal culture can be expressed and developed in its own right.