The Waratah Education Program is designed to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have difficulty in participating in the school environment, re-engage with school and reconnect with learning. It explores Aboriginal culture and identity and addresses education from a ‘Koori’ perspective using student-centred activities to build skills and self esteem and assist students to deal with life issues and problems.

‘Waratah’ is managed by WEAVE Youth and Community Services, a not-for-profit community organisation that has been working with disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, women, children and families in the City of Sydney and South Sydney areas for nearly 40 years. WEAVE provides a range of services that include practical support, counselling, mental health services, education programs and help with information about services for Aboriginal people.

TARGET GROUP: STUDENTS AT RISK
Years 7-10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have disengaged with learning and are at risk of leaving school early.
OVERVIEW
Each of the three participating high schools identifies fifteen students (male and female) who would best benefit from program participation. The Waratah coordinator, an Aboriginal man, works one day per week for thirty-eight weeks in each school implementing negotiated activities and interventions.

The program includes morning group sessions where culturally significant components such as Young Mob Leaders, Our Journey to Respect and Lateral Violence are delivered. After the group session, the coordinator remains at the school working with small groups and/or individual students. This support can involve in-class literacy and numeracy assistance, one-on-one tutoring or additional career planning and behaviour modification sessions. If a student is experiencing difficult personal issues the support is more intensive often drawing on available community resources.

The program is flexible and responsive to local contexts, needs and issues. School staff and students are involved in its planning and implementation.

REFERRAL PROCESS
Schools generally refer students in Year 7-9 to the program in Term 4 of the preceding year thus allowing time for programs and activities to be tailored to meet identified needs. Although the process is different in each school, all referrals have input from the year advisor, school counsellor, Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO), the welfare team and the principal or deputy principal.

As well as Aboriginality, referrals are based on a range of academic, behavioural and emotional factors as well as personal issues such as family dysfunction, isolation, and negative peer association. However, the most important referral consideration is the program’s ability to meet the needs of a student and that student’s capacity to respond favourably to the intervention.

When the students have been identified, the Waratah coordinator visits each school and meets with the deputy principal, the school Links to Learning Coordinator and the AEO. The reason for each referral is reviewed and the student’s suitability for inclusion assessed. Discussions then determine how the content and structure of the Waratah program can best support the school’s concerns and the students’ needs. Communication and review processes are also set up at this meeting.

PROGRAM FEATURES
The Waratah program is about strengthening a student’s connections to school, identity and community through knowledge and understanding of culture. Activities are designed to build the students’ social, cultural and educational capacity providing them with the confidence, skills and attitudes required to support their re-engagement with learning.
Cultural awareness and skills enhancement are also features of the Lateral Violence component, the objective of which is to promote cultural safety through the prevention and restriction of violence. It was introduced in Term 3 as a response to concerns raised about the escalating racism and violence between the Aboriginal and the Pacific Islander students.

Lateral violence refers to the physical, social, emotional, psychological, economic and spiritual violence carried out by Aboriginal community members against each other. Many of the students referred to the Waratah program participate in, or are exposed to, destructive behaviours such as bullying, shaming or family feuding and suffer from the debilitating effects such behaviours have on learning. In this component students learnt to appreciate the traumatic impact of lateral violence on themselves, on others and on their communities.

In the workshops, led by Aboriginal people, students practised skills in mediation, negotiation and resilience and looked at how to overcome shame and create safe learning environments. In the review session all forty-nine students said this aspect of the program had given them a framework for understanding, reflecting on and modifying their actions and behaviours. The overwhelmingly positive feedback, promising student outcomes and community valuing of the Lateral Violence component, led to the decision to make it an ongoing feature of the Waratah program.

Other program components (Our Journey to Respect, the Surfing Indigenous Program and the NAIDOC celebrations) also encouraged relationship building, cultural connections and skills development.

The Nura Gili (Indigenous Programs Unit, UNSW) component of the program promoted university study as a pathway for Aboriginal students. Students are assigned a mentor from Nura Gili and are familiarised with the campus. They are informed about subject selection for university degrees, programs, university life and the personal and academic services available to support access and participation. As a result of this experience, a number of the students expressed a desire to finish school and attend university.

A requirement of the Links to Learning program is that students have a ‘participation and pathway plan’. All students in the Waratah program developed a plan that set educational goals and addressed personal needs, homework expectations and tutoring requirements.
The coordinator worked very closely with the students to support the achievement of these goals and to develop next-step strategies. Regular meetings were held with the deputy principal, the year advisor, the school Links to Learning coordinator and the AEO to discuss each student’s progress, pathway plan and school attendance and behaviour. All fifty students completed their negotiated activities, exiting the program with pathway plans in place.

**BENEFITS, SUCCESSES AND OUTCOMES**

The Waratah program has delivered improved social and educational outcomes for all participants through a developmental and culturally relevant approach to learning. Strengthening the students’ connections with school, community and with their ‘Koori’ identity has resulted in improved, student engagement, student achievement and student attendance.

A ‘Waratah rule’ is that students cannot continue in the program if their attendance at school on non-program days is not satisfactory. The value students place on their inclusion is evident, with the attendance rates of some students doubling to over eighty per cent. Suspension figures for students have also improved.

Students enjoy being part of the program and connect to its student-centred approach and emphasis on ‘relatedness’, an important Aboriginal concept. Activities are given relevance to everyday situations and linked to culture. Students are asked what they want and are involved in decision-making. They are listened to and their progress is supported, acknowledged and celebrated. Most importantly, they experience being part of a ‘connected community’.

Planning and managing the NAIDOC celebrations has given students opportunities to develop valuable connections with local Elders and Aboriginal organisations and gain a greater appreciation of the richness of their culture. Having a highly trained and skilled Aboriginal person lead the program has been a very powerful image, one that is further reinforced through ‘local heroes’ a showcasing of local Aboriginal people involved in a variety of roles and occupations. Students are now more secure in their Koori identity and realise that completing school will provide them with improved life choices and options.

The success of the Waratah program is also due to the powerful collaborative partnerships developed and nurtured with schools and the Aboriginal community. Authentic dialogue and mutual support has facilitated trust, consistency and program improvement and, most importantly, has opened up learning opportunities for Aboriginal students. Schools report that students are now more engaged in learning.
Student outcomes include:

- students who completed the program all stated that the experience increased their self-esteem and confidence as well as their leadership and public speaking skills
- three students were selected to present a workshop about Justice Reinvestment at the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition held in Adelaide
- students more engaged in learning, the learning space and the school community and are better able to manage the learning process and take responsibility for their actions
- 49 out of the 50 students completed all negotiated activities.

All students are being supported to transition back into normal school routines or into other pathways to training and employment.

**STUDENT SNAPSHOT A**

Brock, a 16 year-old student in Year 10, attended the Waratah program throughout 2013. The issues Brock was facing at the beginning of the year were many including failing to complete class work or assignments, truancy, behavioural problems and numerous suspensions.

At the start of the program, all participants were asked to identify a goal for the year. Brock’s goal was to complete Year 10 and then get a job working for National Parks and Wildlife Australia.

Throughout the year, with the in-class support of the Waratah program, Brock’s attitude turned around. He started completing his class work and handing assignments in on time. Brock’s behaviour became much more manageable and his school attendance improved from 42% in 2012 to 85% in 2013. Brock completed Year 10 and accepted an offer of a traineeship with National Parks and Wildlife.

**STUDENT SNAPSHOT B**

Jade was in Year 10 when he was referred to the Waratah program in 2013. He was failing academically, truanting and had been suspended a number of times because of unacceptable behaviours. Jade’s goal for the year was to play professional rugby league. Throughout the course of the year, the Waratah program supported Jade to become more focussed on his future, to complete his school work and to improve his behaviour. His school attendance increased from 24% the previous year to 81% in 2013. Jade completed Year 10 and was then picked to play for the Australian Indigenous Under 16s. As part of this team, Jade toured France and England, playing their grand final as the curtain raiser for the Australian test team. Jade, upon his return to school, was approached by the Sydney City Roosters and offered a contract.

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PROGRAM SNAPSHOT

Organisation: WEAVE
Program Name: Waratah Education Program
Contact: 9318 0539
Target group: ATSI Students at Risk
Years 7-10
Program strands: Young Mob Leaders
Our Journey to Respect
Lateral Violence
NSW Surfing Indigenous Program
Nura Gili
NAIDOC Celebrations
Duration of program: 38 weeks
Days per week: 3 days
Main referring points: 3 secondary schools
Groups per year: 3
No. of students: 50