



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# Closing the gap clearinghouse

## Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students

Resource sheet no. 6 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse

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### Summary

School completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are well below the rates for non-Indigenous students. The target of halving the gap by 2020 in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a major national challenge.

### What we know

The main factors that influence completion rates for Indigenous students are access, attendance and achievement. The barriers to their access to school are:

- physical (for example, due to geographic isolation)
- cultural (for example, due to discrimination)
- economic (for example, due to the costs associated with attending school)
- informational (for example, due to the lower levels of literacy in Indigenous communities).

Absenteeism among Indigenous students is markedly higher than among non-Indigenous students. Poorer access and absenteeism contribute to lower academic achievement, making it more difficult for many Indigenous students to successfully complete school.

Closing the school completion gap is a major national challenge and will require effort in a range of related areas, not just in schools. Gains in education may be limited unless other aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage are improved, such as health, nutrition, housing and employment.

### What works

Research in Australia and overseas points to strategies in three main areas that have shown to be effective in secondary schools for increasing engagement, achievement and school completion among Indigenous students:

- a school culture and leadership that acknowledges and supports Indigenous students and families, including
  - a shared vision for the school community
  - high expectations of success for both staff and students
  - a learning environment that is responsive to individual needs
  - a drive for continuous improvement
  - involvement of the Indigenous community in planning and providing education



- school-wide strategies that work to maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes, including
  - broad curriculum provision
  - quality vocational education and training (VET) options
  - school absenteeism and attendance programs
  - quality career education
- student-focused strategies that directly meet the needs of students at risk of low achievement or early leaving, including
  - targeted skill development
  - mentoring
  - school engagement programs
  - welfare support
  - intensive case management.

## What doesn't work

The following strategies have not been effective in increasing the engagement, academic achievement or school completion rates for Indigenous students:

- a 'one size fits all' approach that either treats Indigenous students the same as non-Indigenous students or assumes that all Indigenous young people are the same
- short-term, piecemeal interventions that are not funded adequately or implemented for long enough to make a significant impact
- interventions that are adopted without considering local needs and collaborating with Indigenous communities
- attempting to solve the problem of leaving school early without dealing with its underlying causes and providing sustained institutional support. An example is raising the school leaving age without putting programs in place to retain students at school.

## What we don't know

- There is insufficient evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of many programs that are designed to improve the outcomes for Indigenous young people.
- Much of the work undertaken has been short term and piecemeal, or has not been evaluated in a robust way.
- There is insufficient longitudinal data that tracks the progress of Indigenous individuals and accurately measures the effects of different approaches. Furthermore, Indigenous samples within longitudinal studies are small, which makes it difficult to generalise on the basis of such limited information.
- Little information is available on the conditions needed for programs to work—on resources, quality of implementation, and the sorts of arrangements on which interventions or strategies work or not (facilitators and inhibitors).
- As much of the research describes outcomes for Indigenous students as a whole, there is insufficient evidence on outcomes for particular types or subgroups of Indigenous students.

## Introduction

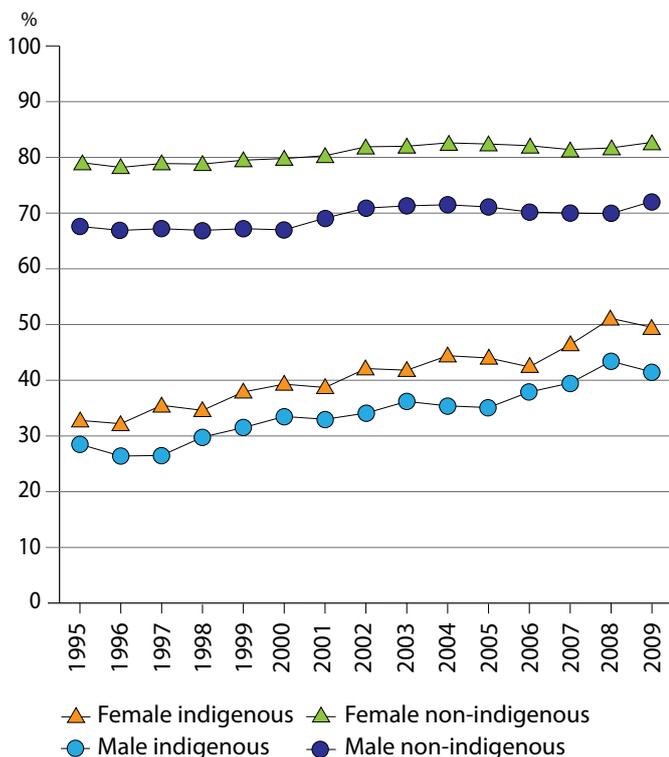
In 2008 the Council of Australian Governments agreed to a number of ambitious targets relating to Indigenous education, employment, health and life expectancy. Included under education is the target to halve, by 2020, the gap in Year 12 (or equivalent) completion rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (FaHCSIA 2009). This target is set in the context of a national target of 90% of all young people completing Year 12, or its equivalent, by 2015. Achieving the goal will not be an easy task. An estimate from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing suggests that the national completion rate for all young Australians is currently at about 70%, only a little higher than that recorded in the previous Census 5 years earlier, and is currently about 40% for Indigenous students (Lamb & Mason 2008).

There are many aspects of schooling that will need to be considered in the development of policies, if the new targets are to be achieved. An important initial step is to identify effective practices that schools and school systems can implement to help raise completion rates.



# Rates of completion among Indigenous Australians

Figure 1 shows that, despite a decline of more than one-quarter over the last 15 years in the gap in apparent retention rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people, the gap is still almost 30 points: 41.5% compared with 72.1% for males, and 49.5% compared with 82.7% for females. While apparent retention rates are not an actual measure of attainment or completion, they do provide a measure of student survival to the final year of school and are one of the few measures that can be used reliably over an extended number of years.



Source: Figures derived from *Schools Australia* (ABS 2009).

**Figure 1: Apparent retention from Year 7/8 to Year 12, by Indigenous status, 1995–2009**

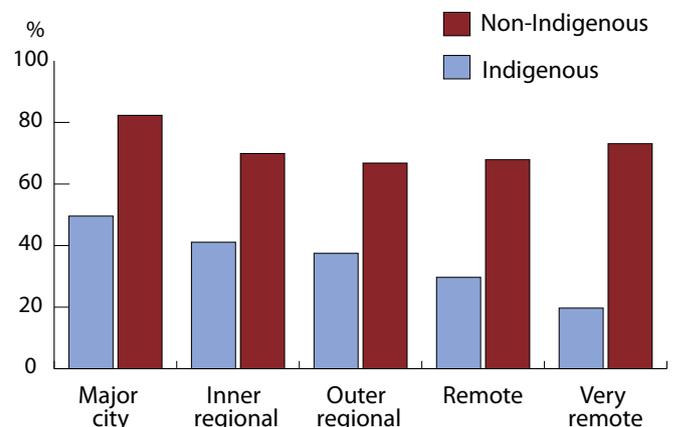
School completion rates for Indigenous students are very low compared with almost every other demographic group in Australia, and more than 30 percentage points below the rates for non-Indigenous students (Long 2009).

It is important to recognise that aggregated data on school completion tend to mask important regional

differences. Figure 2 shows that completion of Year 12 is strongly associated with place of residence, with failure to complete being much more likely in rural and remote areas.

One striking feature of Figure 2 is that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous completion is greatest in *Very remote* locations: more than 50 percentage points. What needs to be considered in looking at this gap is that considerable numbers of Indigenous young people (17% of 20–24 year olds) live in *Very remote* locations in Australia, compared with 0.4% of non-Indigenous young people (ABS 2006). Thus, reducing the national gap in completion rates will require a concentrated effort in *Very remote* locations.

Biddle (2010) provides a detailed picture of regional differences in the size of the school completion gap, and notes that there is as much, if not more, variation within the Indigenous population by region as there is between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.



Source: Figures derived from the Census of Population and Housing (ABS 2006)

**Figure 2: Attainment of Year 12 or equivalent qualifications, by Indigenous status and remoteness location, 20–24 year olds, 2006**

## Causes of low completion

For young Indigenous students the key factors that contribute to higher rates of early leaving are access to school (provision), school participation (attendance) and academic achievement.

Indigenous students in remote areas do not have the same access to secondary education as young people in other parts of the country. They often have longer distances to travel, or may have to leave home to



continue with secondary school. They may live in communities where English is a second language and where there are fewer incentives for persisting with education, because of a lack of jobs to aspire to and few adults who have completed secondary education. Other barriers for those living in remote Australia include higher transport and tuition costs (Biddle 2010).

While the majority of Indigenous young people attend school regularly and consistently, the attendance gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens greatly in the early secondary years. Rates of absenteeism are also significantly higher in *Remote and very remote* communities (Purdie & Buckley 2010). The main factors contributing to non-attendance relate to a lack of recognition by schools of Indigenous culture and history; a failure to fully engage parents, carers and the community; ongoing socioeconomic disadvantage; and health problems. For a fuller, more general discussion of the factors contributing to non-attendance and educational marginalisation, see Hunter (2010), Purdie and Buckley (2010), and Reid (2008).

Non-attendance has a significant impact on learning outcomes (Zubrick et al. 2006), and has been shown to be a strong predictor of dropping out (Bridgeland et al. 2006). Low academic achievement makes it more difficult for students to successfully complete school. Academic achievement, as measured by academic progress and the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, is one of the strongest influences on Year 12 completion (Lamb et al. 2004). According to NAPLAN, high proportions of Indigenous students fail to meet national minimum benchmarks in academic achievement in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (MCEECDYA 2009), which highlights the importance of lifting their academic achievement.

## Improving retention of Indigenous students

A major study of effective strategies to improve school completion (Lamb & Rice 2009) points to strategies in three areas:

- **School culture and leadership:** Schools with high retention have a supportive school culture with a shared vision across the school community, high expectations of staff and student success, responsiveness to individual needs and a drive for continuous improvement.

- **School-wide strategies:** Strategies that help improve student engagement and reduce early leaving are adopted across the school for all students.
- **Student-focused strategies:** Programs are put in place to directly meet the individual or group needs of at-risk students, with strong and active links to welfare providers.

Because many of the programs focusing on Indigenous students have not been subject to rigorous evaluation, this paper includes examples of targeted strategies that demonstrate the application of these principles. See also Purdie and Buckley (2010) for a comprehensive account of strategies that have been trialled to increase attendance and retention.

## School culture and leadership

Research on successful school interventions and strategies for improving student outcomes has reported that the quality of school culture plays a critical part in efforts to engage and retain students. For example, a study by Socias and colleagues (2007) found that the development of a supportive school culture that fostered connections with students, parents and the community, and a school climate of high expectations and accountability was vital to success in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Similarly, the factors that researchers and school systems point to when describing quality schools, and the features of schools with improved effectiveness, include commitment to success for all, flexibility and responsiveness to individual need, high expectations, shared vision, focus on continuous improvement, challenging and stimulating teaching, and a strong and fair disciplinary climate (Brown 2004; Fullan 1991; Zepeda 2004).

Many researchers and Indigenous leaders in Australia stress the importance of an inclusive and safe school culture that is free from racism. Behrendt and McCausland (2008) note that high-quality teachers and a strong leadership culture in the school are the keys to creating an educational environment that students want to be part of. This has been demonstrated at a range of schools, including Cherbourg State School in Queensland. In this school, significant improvements in attendance and achievement were achieved in a program of school renewal that included Indigenous leadership, community involvement, high expectations of students and an Aboriginal studies program (Sarra 2006). School staff worked closely with the community to build strong relationships and a shared set of community values and expectations for children attending the school.



## The Stronger Smarter Learning Communities initiative: Tullawong State High School

Tullawong State High School in Caboolture, Queensland, has an enrolment of 1,250 students, of which about 70 are Indigenous. The school leadership has built a shared vision based on five core values: respect, encouragement, aspiration, care and honesty (REACH). These values underpin all school decisions. The school's pastoral care structure of five vertical houses enhances student-staff relationships.

Some strategies include:

- involving the local Indigenous community in the curriculum, staff cultural awareness and capacity building
- a full-time teacher aide dedicated to Indigenous literacy
- boys' and girls' health days involving community health services, invited speakers and health providers
- school cultural excursions to sacred sites
- Indigenous Leaders Activity Program
- employing an Indigenous Elder for a couple of days a week. The Elder works on the school's Indigenous handbooks and provides support and advice on other significant Indigenous matters.

For more information see: <<http://www.stronger-smarter.qut.edu.au/stories/story.jsp?story=13>>.

## School-wide strategies

Strategies adopted school-wide that help improve student engagement and reduce early leaving include attendance strategies, broad curriculum provision and quality careers education. Strategies applied school-wide also help to identify students in need of targeted assistance.

### Broad curriculum provision, including quality VET options

Providing a curriculum that is broad (Russell et al. 2005), diverse and flexible (Lamb et al. 2004), and that can accommodate a wide range of student interests and skill levels is an important contributing factor to improving school engagement and retention.

Schools that offer a range of VET programs identify these as playing an important part in retaining at-risk students. Studies have found that offering students VET in the senior school years tends to increase school attendance and completion and improve the labour market outcomes of school completers (Bishop & Mane 2004; Lamb 2008). A range of VET options, including school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, is an important strategy in secondary schools for building stronger rates of completion.

School-based traineeships are widely used and valued as a means of retaining Indigenous students. They provide the opportunity for senior secondary students to start a traineeship while completing their senior school certificate. Under these arrangements the student is both a full-time student and a part-time employee, with the same employment and training responsibilities as other trainees.

### Aboriginal school-based training in Western Australia

Aboriginal school-based training provides opportunities for Aboriginal students in Years 10, 11 and 12 to start training in school to gain a qualification or sustainable employment, or go on to further education or training.

These programs are at Certificate I level and aim to get Aboriginal students work-ready and competitive through a range of courses that take into account their specific needs. Students learn about the world of work, workplace expectations and cultural norms in the workplace, as well as undertake real or simulated work experience. Once assessed as work-ready, students choose one of four apprenticeship or traineeship options covering a broad range of industry areas. Some students may choose to start a school-based traineeship or apprenticeship, while others may opt to leave school to start a full-time apprenticeship or traineeship.

Students normally spend 3 days at school, 1 day at training and 1 day at work each week. A free Aboriginal cultural awareness program is being offered by the Department of Training and Workforce Development to those staff involved in the delivery of Aboriginal school-based training.

For more information see: <<http://www.trainingwa.wa.gov.au/apprenticentre/>>.



## Attendance strategies

Attendance has a significant effect on student learning and retention. Barnes (2004) found that attendance levels were significantly higher among Indigenous students when teachers got in touch with their parents to talk about how they were going at school. The most successful programs involved a strong attendance policy with a system of parental contact for students where attendance was an issue, as well as having a dedicated staff member to monitor and follow up cases of chronic truancy. The 'Ready, Set, Go' attendance strategy in Cape York is structured according to these principles and, while yet to be evaluated, shows great promise. It has a policy of 100% attendance, employs attendance case managers who visit parents if a student is late or absent from school, and rewards students for reaching attendance milestones. For more information see: <<http://www.capeyorkpartnerships.com/ready-set-go-school-attendance>>.

## Quality careers education

Highly coordinated individual case management is a central pillar of effective career development support for Indigenous people (Alford & James 2007; Helme 2010; Lamb & Rice 2009). According to Sarra (1997), career counsellors must also have a good understanding of who their clients are—as individuals and as Indigenous Australians—and of the issues they face as Indigenous people. These studies recommend strong advocacy by career personnel and liaison with external agencies so that Indigenous students not only have access to information about financial assistance, scholarships and other forms of support but are also supported in accessing these resources.

Helme (2010) noted the need for 'hands on' assistance for Indigenous families, to ensure their engagement in the career development process, so that families with no history of working or with limited understanding of the education system can build the knowledge and confidence to discuss career plans with their children.

In a recent review of the education and training outcomes of Indigenous young people, the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2009) concluded that work experience programs, work-based training, and work placements connected to study and local work opportunities for Indigenous young people are central to building a strong economic and social future for Indigenous communities. It recommended that schools are funded to expand workplace experience programs to include, for example, part-time and casual work, holiday cadetships and structured volunteering

opportunities. Workplace experience is invaluable because many Indigenous students live in families and communities that have no personal experience of tertiary education or employment outside Indigenous organisations.

### Managed Individual Pathways

Managed Individual Pathways (MIPS) is a Victorian scheme that offers all students aged 15 years and over individual assistance to develop pathways plans. A review of the scheme found that many schools reported that MIPS had improved student engagement and staff–student relations, increased the responsiveness of school staff to the needs of all students and raised completion rates (DEECD 2010).

Some of the successful Victorian schools studied by Lamb and Rice (2009) organised careers education around pathways planning through MIPS, but began pathways planning and support much earlier than at age 15, operating the program as early as Year 7, particularly for students at risk.

For more information see: <<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/sensecyouth/careertrans/mips/default.htm>>.

## Student-focused strategies

While whole-of-school programs are important in increasing student completion, some students often struggle with a variety of social and personal issues that affect engagement and the quality of their learning. Individual-level strategies are needed to solve these problems. The provision of strategic, targeted welfare and skill programs can have a substantial impact on the capacity of at-risk students to remain in education. Students at risk of early leaving need to be identified early and provided with appropriate support. Strategies shown to be effective include mentoring, targeted skill development assistance, school engagement programs, welfare support and intensive case management.

### Targeted skill development

Given that academic achievement is one of the strongest influences on Year 12 completion, improving the learning outcomes of low-achieving Indigenous students is crucial. There are many examples of supplementary support programs, both in Australia and overseas,



that target improvement of academic skills. Strategies include homework clubs, specific literacy and numeracy assistance, and remediation programs, such as Reading Recovery, a supplementary English language program for low-achieving first graders. In Victoria, expert literacy coaches have been appointed to advise schools and regions on dealing with the learning needs of Indigenous students.

Examples of targeted assistance for Indigenous students include:

- one-to-one tutorial assistance, such as Wannik Tutorial Assistance in Victoria <<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/curricman/support/3-15.pdf>>
- Let's Stay Put for Literacy and Numeracy, a program in Queensland that develops the capacity of teachers to manage the needs of highly mobile students <<http://www.jcu.edu.au/letsstayput>>.

The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) in the Northern Territory is an ambitious attempt to implement a method of literacy teaching, known as Accelerated Literacy, in 100 primary and secondary schools. NALP attempts to address the literacy outcomes of the Northern Territory's Indigenous population and is the largest project of its kind in the Territory. A recent evaluation of the program (Robinson et al. 2009) showed that it was able to contribute to closing the gap for Indigenous students in the major centres of Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine. However, it was less effective in very remote locations, where more students spoke a language other than English at home and had very low initial reading scores, and the level and quality of implementation of accelerated literacy was inconsistent.

## Mentoring

A crucial factor in the retention of students at risk of early leaving is the availability of an adult to provide support and to advocate on behalf of a student. Mentoring is one of the most commonly used strategies in effective programs that keep students in school and engaged. While there are many mentoring programs, some have proven to be particularly effective with Indigenous students, such as the Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) in New South Wales and the Seamless Transition Education Pathways Program (STEPP) in Victoria. In both of these programs, students with the potential for university study are mentored by university students to encourage them to stay at school and proceed to tertiary education.

### Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience

Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME) provides a 6-year mentoring program for Indigenous students while they are undertaking high school studies from Years 7 to 12. AIME partners university student volunteers in a one-on-one mentoring relationship with a high school Indigenous student, for an hour a week over the course of a 17-week program. AIME's goals are to improve Year 10 and Year 12 completion rates and university admission rates for all participating students.

While AIME has yet to be independently evaluated, outcome data for 2009 indicate that the:

- Year 10 to Year 11 progression rate was 81% for AIME participants, compared with the New South Wales rate of 59% for all Indigenous students
- Year 11 to Year 12 progression rate was 92% for AIME participants, compared with the New South Wales rate of 63% for all Indigenous students
- Year 12 completion rate was 73% for AIME participants, compared with the New South Wales rate of 60% for all Indigenous students
- university admission rates for AIME participants were 11 times the national average.

For more information see: <<http://www.aimementoring.com/about/>>.

## School engagement programs

These programs focus on engaging, or re-engaging, students who are at risk of dropping out of school. There are several examples, one of which is the Dare to Achieve Program at Djarragun College, Queensland. This program incorporates experiential, adventure-based learning into the weekly timetable, encouraging students to work interdependently while challenging them physically, mentally and socially. The program leaders note that the program has had a positive effect on student relationships, classroom dynamics and school attendance (Tiller 2008). The Spirited Education for Energetic Kids (SEEK) program is another example.



### **The Spirited Education for Energetic Kids program at Lakes Entrance Secondary College**

Lakes Entrance Secondary College introduced the Spirited Education for Energetic Kids off-campus re-engagement program in 2007. It was designed to re-engage years 7–10 students (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who had high absenteeism, low self-confidence, poor social skills, and poor literacy and numeracy skills. The program provides practical experience (for example, building, gardening) in the local community. Running the programs at the neighbourhood house gives students the opportunity to interact with adults, which has a positive effect on their behaviour. Because the program is part time, participants still feel connected to the school and welcomed back into mainstream classes at any time. One main outcome is that in 2008 attendance rates for these students increased from 30% to 85%.

For more information see Lamb and Rice (2009).

There are many examples of collaborative partnerships among schools, philanthropic organisations and Indigenous communities that implement programs to engage students through relevant and challenging project-based learning activities:

- Hands on Learning takes at-risk students out of the classroom for 1 day a week to work on practical building projects. The out-of-school setting provides a natural habitat for mentoring, counselling and role modelling in small teams (see <<http://handsonlearning.info/>>)
- The Clontarf Football Academies use football to engage and retain young Indigenous males (see <<http://www.clontarffootball.com/>>)
- The Partnership for Success projects are the central element of the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation (see <<http://www.pff.com.au/>>). Each project involves local Indigenous communities, private and government partners and the foundation working together in partnership to provide intensive and targeted support through tutorial assistance and study skills programs.

### **Welfare support**

Welfare support is essential for students who have high levels of need associated with family or personal problems. Problems such as poverty, drug or family abuse, teenage pregnancy and homelessness can be substantial barriers to engagement in school. Integrated service models and on-site support services have a positive effect on

engagement (Lamb et al. 2004). A school which was innovative in this area had established a welfare centre with a welfare coordinator, school nurse and a visiting GP. The centre provides coordinated services for students in need, as well as operating programs on interpersonal and social issues. (Lamb & Rice 2009).

### **A focus on welfare**

Traralgon Secondary College has a strong focus on student welfare and runs a range of programs aimed at improving student engagement and retention. Among these is an engagement program for Indigenous students, which runs at the school's junior campus. About 40 students take part in the program which entails weekly sessions consisting of two students at a time meeting with one staff member for extra tuition as well as welfare support.

Key ingredients in the success of this program are the support of the principal and the leadership team, and community support. Before commencing the program the College fostered links with the local Indigenous community. This included developing strong relationships through different community events and an annual meeting with the whole Indigenous community. The school employs Indigenous educators who are well-known to the community, and maintains ongoing contact with the students' families who, according to one report, 'just love the program.'

Four specialist staff are dedicated to the program: two Indigenous non-teaching staff and two qualified teachers, who are freed from other extra duties so that they can devote more time to the students. The school nurse and chaplain, as well as the two social workers on staff, also provide valuable support. As part of the program, students attend a homework club two evenings a week that provides intensive literacy support in small groups or one-on-one. 'It works,' said one staff member. 'The kids turn up in the evening, do well and they're happy.' It appears that students find a sense of community at the school on those evenings. 'They come here to connect', noted another staff member.

Another aspect of welfare support at the school is the breakfast club. Open to all students it fosters positive relationships and gives students a healthier start to the day. Mentors are integral to the success of the program. Training for mentors is provided by the local TAFE and supported by the Gippsland Mentoring Alliance. Mentors include retired teachers, community police, youth workers and young mothers.

For more information see Lamb and Rice (2009).



## Intensive case management

Intensive case management is one of the most effective strategies for directly assessing an individual student's needs, targeting appropriate assistance and monitoring progress. Lamb and Rice (2009) found that, in Victoria, the most successful schools implemented MIPS from Year 7, in order to identify and assess individual students' needs as early as possible, particularly for students at risk. They provided intensive and ongoing intervention through case management with careers teachers often working as case managers.

Personalised learning plans (PLPs) are now widely used in Australian schools to deal with the individual learning needs of students. While states and territories have their own formats and procedures for these plans, they generally involve setting learning goals in collaboration with the student and their family, and reviewing progress at regular intervals. The effects of PLPs have yet to be evaluated.

A successful example of managing students on a case-by-case basis is a US-based program, Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS), which is a junior high school intervention designed to address student, school, family and community factors that affect engagement and retention (Gandara et al. 1998). Every at-risk student is assigned a counsellor who monitors attendance, behaviour and academic achievement. The counsellor provides feedback and coordinates students, families, and teachers or other supports that the student may need. Counsellors also serve as advocates for students and intervene when problems are identified.

## Facilitators and barriers

Implementing new initiatives and programs can present some major challenges for schools. Having some knowledge of what is likely to facilitate success and what is likely to impede it is important. Some key factors to consider follow.

**Staffing and staff skills:** Attracting and retaining appropriate teaching staff can be a problem for many schools, particularly in rural and remote locations. This in turn places limits on the breadth and quality of the programs that schools are able to offer. Schools with experienced and resourceful teachers, and allied support staff such as school psychologists and youth workers, can improve the effectiveness of initiatives designed to engage and retain students. However, schools with few of these types of staff, and high turnover, can make it difficult to establish ongoing quality relationships between students and staff.

**Attitudinal factors:** Attitudes of staff, families and students can be an important facilitator, or a barrier, to the success of retention programs and strategies. Views on the status of subjects such as VET in schools, student aspirations, parental aspirations, openness to change (on the part of students, parents and teachers) and teacher expectations can all shape the success of initiatives.

**Resources:** Lack of funding is often raised by schools as a major challenge to the success of programs and initiatives, particularly for schools serving very poor communities with limited family and community resources. Lack of funds to implement new courses and to train staff, or simply to address the multiple social needs presented by at-risk students, presents a barrier to successful implementation. Insufficient funding and the high cost of some programs (e.g. VET in schools, case management, tutoring) are one set of issues. Lack of funding continuity and certainty, following implementation, is another.

**Organisation and community:** Some of the initiatives that have worked in raising retention rates require flexibility in the way schools work and strong links with community. School timetables, for example, can impose constraints on some initiatives while supporting others. Some programs require strong community links to make the best use of available resources and opportunities, and to confront the following sorts of issues:

- remoteness and student transport
- small school size, limiting the breadth of subject offerings
- student transience and mobility
- lack of coordination with other schools and government departments
- lack of allied support staff.

## Conclusion

A number of strategies have been shown to be effective in increasing the engagement, achievement and school completion of Indigenous students.

A school culture and leadership that acknowledges and supports Indigenous students and families is most important. This includes the provision of professional development to staff to raise awareness of Indigenous culture, involvement of the Indigenous community in education planning and provision, and increasing respect in the broader school community for Indigenous languages and culture. Strategies for the whole school, such as providing a broad curriculum, attendance



programs and quality careers education, help maintain student engagement, improve learning outcomes and lift school completion rates. These strategies also enable schools to identify students at risk. Finally, student-focused strategies, such as mentoring, engagement programs, targeted skill development, intensive case management and welfare support, target the needs of individual students at risk of low achievement or early leaving.

For Indigenous students to complete school, they must enter secondary education on the same footing as their non-Indigenous classmates. This means ensuring that Indigenous children attend preschool, and that primary schools also focus on improving attendance, engagement and achievement.

Closing the school completion gap is a major national challenge, and will require effort in a range of related areas, not just in schools. Gains in education may be limited unless other aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage are improved, such as health, nutrition, housing and employment.

## Terminology

**Indigenous:** 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' and 'Indigenous' are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to Australia's first people.

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