



THE
WARATAH
PROJECT

Update from interim school reports

April 2021



Wellington Christian School

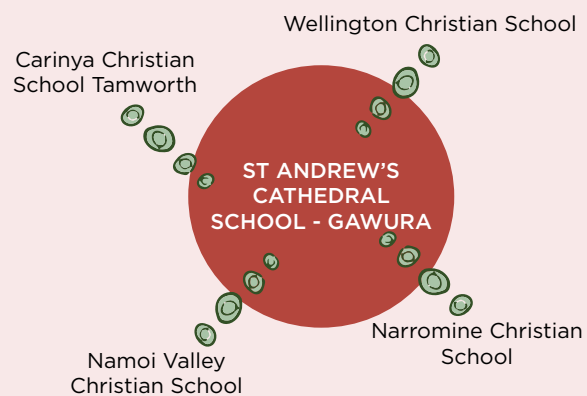
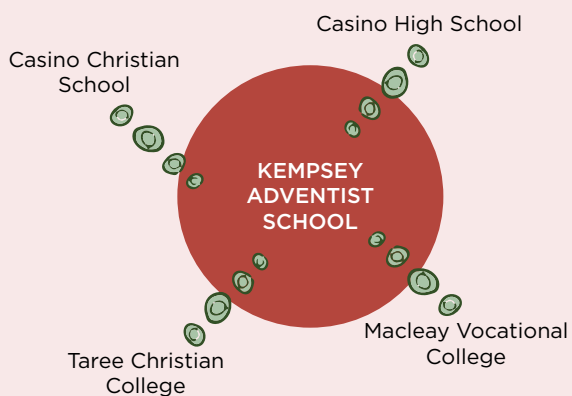


Wingara
LEARNINGS SHARED TOGETHER

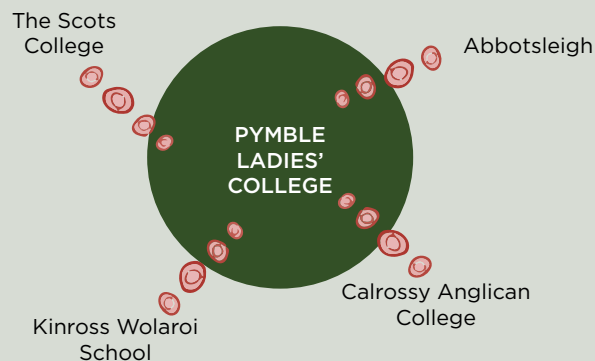
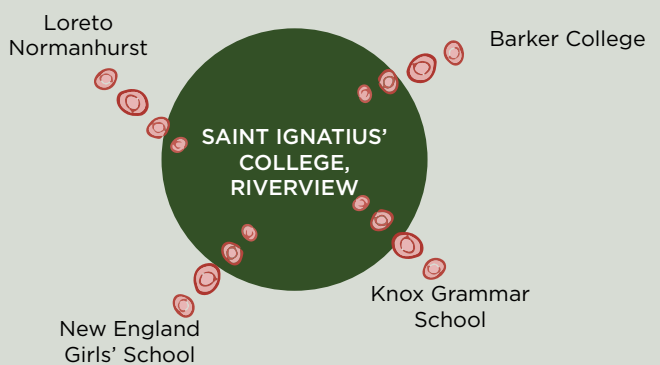
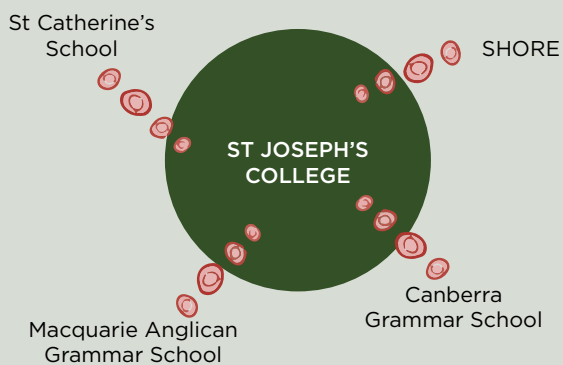


Participating School Networks

Day School Networks



Boarding School Networks



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The Waratah Project, an innovative initiative to improve education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, continues to grow in its effectiveness and reach across NSW independent schools. The project builds on the success of previous pilot phases of the project which commenced in 2016 at four NSW independent schools, growing to include 16 schools by 2019. The initial project, designed and implemented by the Association of Independent Schools of NSW (AISNSW), was recently recognised with the *Excellence in Indigenous Education & Boarding Leadership* award from Indigenous Education & Boarding Australia (IEBA).

An evaluation by the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research at the University of Technology Sydney found The Waratah Project's activities delivered significant results, including improved literacy (particularly reading), academic results and class rankings and positive and successful transitions into the schools and boarding environments.

A framework for building further success

The next stage of The Waratah Project, commencing in 2020, has been expanded to 25 schools, with support from the Australian Government's Choice and Affordability Fund. Learnings from the pilot phases have informed the design and implementation of the current phase, which is being externally evaluated by Murawin Professional Services.

The Waratah Outcomes Framework, developed during the pilot phases by AISNSW in partnership with the Jumbunna Institute, underpins The Waratah Project. The Framework has four key focus areas which can be used as a lens through which to gauge the success of outcomes to date, as indicated by the first set of six-monthly reports recently submitted by participating schools.

i) Student outcomes: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have improved educational, sociocultural and wellbeing outcomes

Each participating school has prioritised the goal of increasing academic, sociocultural and wellbeing outcomes for their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Targeted learning support for literacy and numeracy has been based on rigorous academic assessments, and in some cases on psychometric testing, to discover each student's strengths and learning needs and also to establish cohort-wide baseline data.

Personalised learning plans are being used extensively, involving students, their families (wherever possible) and school staff to understand and make a commitment to each student's planned learning journey. Targeted assessment and support programs are being implemented, and in some cases, direct or explicit instruction is being used successfully right across the school.

In many schools, the additional support has been programmed as part of each student's timetable. Boarding schools have a unique opportunity to provide learning support, and this is often done less conspicuously through homework or prep sessions after school where students can access both the Aboriginal support worker and specialist staff as needed.

"Students who receive extra literacy support in Years 7 and 8 are positive about being withdrawn from classes for writing groups. Some of the year 8 boys who struggle with concentration/behaviour in classes will often ask if I am coming to take them for a writing session."

- Kempsey Adventist School

Perhaps the most significant strategy has been for schools to employ an Aboriginal Education Coordinator, Aboriginal learning support staff member, or teacher's aide. These staff have played key roles in providing a centralised and recognised base of advice and understanding, and have provided additional support through in-class, withdrawal and after-class assistance and tutoring, being conducted both in small groups and one-to-one as needed.

The way that learning support is being offered is an important consideration, as some schools have noted that their students can feel a sense of shame if singled out for attention. This speaks to the need for all students to feel culturally safe and empowered in their learning.

Fundamental to any improvement in academic outcomes is a strong focus on the wellbeing of students. Many schools have a wellbeing centre, chaplain, and/or an Indigenous student office, where students feel safe to explore and be supported around issues such as learning difficulties, ADHD, sorry business, emotional support for family issues, as well as increasing their confidence in being able to ask questions, share cultural insights and to share their own culture.

Despite the project being in its early stages of implementation with formal data available only from pre-testing, most schools are already reporting anecdotal, interview and survey evidence from teachers, students and parents of increased engagement in learning, improved results in literacy and numeracy, and a decrease in behavioural issues.

ii) Relationship outcomes: Relationships between key stakeholders (in schools and the wider community) have become stronger and more culturally informed

The project has encouraged stronger relationships between schools and families, prior to, during and after enrolment, noting that these transition times are the most challenging for many students, particularly those entering a boarding environment for the first time. Strategies have included visits to students' families by pastoral carers and boarding staff, and hosting family visits to the school. As a result, boarding students have experienced less homesickness, and there has been very positive engagement with their families.



Pymble Ladies College

"I loved working with Mrs Gray, she was so helpful. She explained things in different ways til we found one that I really got. She didn't rush me. After breaking down the question she gave me time to practice. She asked me how I did things too, so she could give me tips of more effective ways." - Pymble Ladies College

“(This student) seems to be really enjoying his time at the college, he seems to be growing in confidence every day. He takes things very seriously when he needs to e.g. work. I have noticed he is a carer of homesick boys in the boarding house and shows great leadership in encouraging others to do their best. (The student) spends time in my office talking to a range of boys from different year groups, so he is learning from all walks of life and also teaching them which is outstanding.”

- St Ignatius College

Personalised learning plans, which are developed in consultation with each student and their family, are a direct way of building these relationships, and foster a sense of ownership in the learning journey, while providing the school with a wide range of information which contributes to a more holistic view of each student and their context.

The engagement of Indigenous support workers has been pivotal in providing a link through which such relationships can flourish. Families are more likely to engage directly with such a person, and this positive contact is reinforced through activities such as parents attending weekend and sporting and boarding events, cultural immersion and on-country excursions for staff, and visits to home communities.



Many schools have also developed productive relationships with local organisations such as the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and other local cultural groups, forming links with local Elders who can come into the school to share knowledge and culture, including language learning, art and dance workshops. Some schools have established committees, advisory boards or yarning circles for parents so that parent voice can be heard more easily, and relationships strengthened.

Feedback about the impact of conscious relationship-building has been provided through surveys, interviews, emails, phone calls and anecdotal evidence, and has been positive, with parents and community members being very supportive and increasing their direct communication and involvement with schools. Trust has increased, with ongoing and more open dialogue based on mutual respect and understanding.

iii) Staff outcomes: School leadership and staff are engaged, supportive and culturally competent towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

The cultural competency of staff underpins successful enhancement of relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Staff professional learning programs, together with the employment of specialist Aboriginal staff, have enabled schools to engage more authentically with students and their families. Most schools have identified needs and programmed opportunities for staff to attend relevant events and courses.

“My experience with the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program has expanded my toolkit not only to meet the needs of First Nations students within my care, but also to advocate on their behalf within the broader school community.”

- Barker College

Some of these, such as the Stronger, Smarter Leadership Program, and engagement with the Development Hub in Cultural Competency and local AECGs, have particularly focused on the importance of strong leadership for school executive staff, who can then provide leadership and support throughout the school.



“I feel confident in my ability to incorporate meaningful Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the curriculum.”

- Shore

Professional learning has been applied across whole staff cohorts, as well as being targeted for individual staff members, and has included cultural immersion events, culturally appropriate upskilling of wellbeing staff, training in mental health, training in the use of specific literacy and numeracy support programs, the application of pedagogical practices which support the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, and specific cultural competency training through organisations such as AISNSW and the Centre for Cultural Competency Australia.

“(Aboriginal teacher’s aide) is an excellent team member and has been a huge asset to my team, connecting with students who previously have struggled to access learning support.”

- Kempsey Adventist School

The valuable contributions of Aboriginal support staff cannot be underestimated – for their impact on the academic and wellbeing outcomes of individual students, for their influence and leadership of other school staff, input into authentic curriculum, and as builders and facilitators of relationships with families and communities. These staff are an integral part of the learning processes for students, enabling them to ask questions more easily and to become more confident learners and participants in school life.

iv) School outcomes: Indigenous cultures and perspectives are acknowledged, valued, and integrated into curriculum and school life

Schools have recognised that merely increasing familiarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is not enough—the next steps involve implementing culturally safe, culturally relevant and culturally responsive practices and protocols and changing the way that cultures and perspectives are acknowledged, valued, and integrated into curriculum and school life. Engaged leadership is the key to broad cultural change within any school.

“An additional key aspect, apparent in this report, is how we are engaging College leadership and staff more intentionally in goals to support excellence in Indigenous education.”

- Pymble Ladies College

“By getting the Executive Leadership Team on board, we are able to have a more proactive and positive influence in the development of curriculum. We are focused on supporting staff in the development of authentic Indigenous perspectives in their respective departments. We want the staff teaching our boys to understand their academic and pastoral needs whilst still holding high expectations.”

- The Scots College

Several schools have working parties to focus on a reconciliation program, with some approved by Narragunnawali, a program of Reconciliation Australia, and there have been a range of strategies to begin to fundamentally change school culture. These have included the implementation of a “two way approach” in some cases, where Aboriginal educators have increased their voice in classrooms, developing a formal mentoring program and learning the craft of teaching alongside a qualified teacher who simultaneously is learning the craft of the local Aboriginal community.

Changes are occurring across all cohorts of students—some schools are sharing their Indigenous support worker with younger years, including those in early childhood settings, to reflect a change of culture throughout the school. Additional information, support and encouragement is being presented to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to support their transition to the workforce and/or further education, with reports of higher academic expectations, increased numbers of students graduating with an HSC and increased student retention in senior years.

Some schools are partnering with Indigenous organisations and enterprises to organise and facilitate programs and school-wide workshops, such as TIPIAC, Opportunity Hub, Young Australian Sharing Culture Workshop, Yinarr Maramali, and Winangali Infusions. The Ochre and Salt consultancy has been used to conduct an evaluation and review of policy and processes around student wellbeing.



Wellington Christian School

Indigenous perspectives are being embedded in curricula and teaching programs, often with the assistance of Aboriginal staff, with the result that when combined with targeted literacy and numeracy interventions, there is evidence of greater engagement of students across the school. Some schools are investigating more deeply how such perspectives can be meaningfully included across subjects such as law, philosophy and ethics, society and environment, and HPDE. As a result, parents have stated through surveys for example that cultural differences are now valued at school, and that their children are learning about their history and culture while at the school.

“This artwork means a lot to me because as an Aboriginal student at Casino Christian School it is a gift to share my culture through the artwork and to teach other students about indigenous culture.” - *Casino Christian School*

Many schools are using maps, art and signs across the campus to underline the value and importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, with some designing and issuing sports jerseys using student art work. In other schools, off-site locations are being used as a tool and place of celebration and learning about indigenous plants, and bush-tucker.

Acknowledgement of Country is being conducted more often by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who are drawing more confidently on their own cultural knowledge. In addition there is evidence that school-wide public speaking about culture has also increased across the school in staff meetings, board meetings and year meetings.

Relationships underpin success in all areas

None of these four thematic areas exists independently from the others—rather, success in each underpins outcomes in the others. As was revealed by the pilot projects, authentic and respectful relationships between students, staff, families and communities are the foundation for developing better academic, social and emotional outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Equally important is the engagement and commitment of school executive and leaders to implement and sustain change and to support improved student outcomes.

Next steps

The ongoing evaluation by Murawin will provide more detailed information on project outcomes, drawing on recordings of focus groups run by each school, who have all received training in this data collection technique. Murawin will also visit six case study schools to investigate the impact of project activities in greater depth. The case studies, together with schools’ final reports, will inform Murawin’s final evaluation report, due by the end of 2021.



Kempsey Adventist School