Australian Government

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

SCSEEC successful school attendance strategies evidence-based project

Summary report

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Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Canberra

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Acknowledgments

Abbreviations

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

Summary

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

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

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

- recognised the importance of attendance as an issue for the school

- identified individual students for whom non-attendance is an issue

- investigated and understood the reasons behind non-attendance

- developed and implemented effective strategies to address those issues to enhance the likelihood that children and young people attend school regularly.

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

- the 4 key domains that can be barriers or enhancers to school attendance (school factors, family factors, student factors, community/structural factors)

- 9 strategies with demonstrated effectiveness and the various ways in which schools implemented those strategies

- lessons for developing and implementing strategies that are effective in improving the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the long-term. These represent the key underpinning factors that the schools have said are essential to have in place before specific strategies can be implemented successfully

- the 6 elements that the schools reported as being critical to successfully improving and maintaining attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students because they address the factors underpinning non-attendance.

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

1   Introduction

This report highlights the key findings of the SCSEEC Successful School Attendance Strategies Evidence-based Project (the Project) carried out by staff of the Indigenous and Children's Group at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The Project was funded by SCSEEC (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood) to progress National Collaborative Action 22 from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (ATSIEAP):

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

Combining the findings of a comprehensive literature review with qualitative evidence from a series of consultations held with 9 diverse school communities in 2 jurisdictions, the AIHW provided a final project report to the ATSIEAP Working Group, which concluded that:

- There is now a body of evidence demonstrating that there are effective strategies for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that address identified barriers to regular school attendance.

- One effective potential method for sharing that evidence would be a 'one-stop-shop' web portal which combines a searchable evidence base with practical implementation tools and with opportunities for sharing ideas among education practitioners and school communities.

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

The rest of this paper provides an overview of the background to the Project, outlines its methodology and summarises its key findings.

Background

There are clear links between school attendance, achievement in school, school completion rates and overall educational attainment (Musser 2011; Zubrick et al. 2006). Recent research has also shown that high rates of school attendance may have a substantially higher impact on skill development for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds than for those from more highly advantaged backgrounds (Ready 2010).

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

Closing this gap in school attendance is critical to reducing the gaps in educational outcomes and in employment in later life. This also has an impact on closing the gap in life expectancy

and child mortality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians as recognised in the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap initiatives.

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

The Project thus focused on identifying the key factors underpinning successful strategies to increase school attendance by conducting a literature review and by consulting school communities who have successfully improved attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The Project was also tasked with investigating the feasibility of a web-based tool to be used as a practical resource for school communities through recommendations about design, content, method of delivery, governance, legal and technical issues.

The project had 3 main components:

- an expert literature review of attendance strategies and policies that successfully increase school attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

- a coordinated stakeholder consultation process on effective school attendance strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the assessment of community engagement requirements for an effective online tool

- detailed recommendations for developing an online evidence-based tool.

The next section describes the methodology used in the Project.

2 Overview of Methodology

As shown below in Figure 1, the 3 main components of this project were interrelated.

Figure 1: Relationships between components of the Project
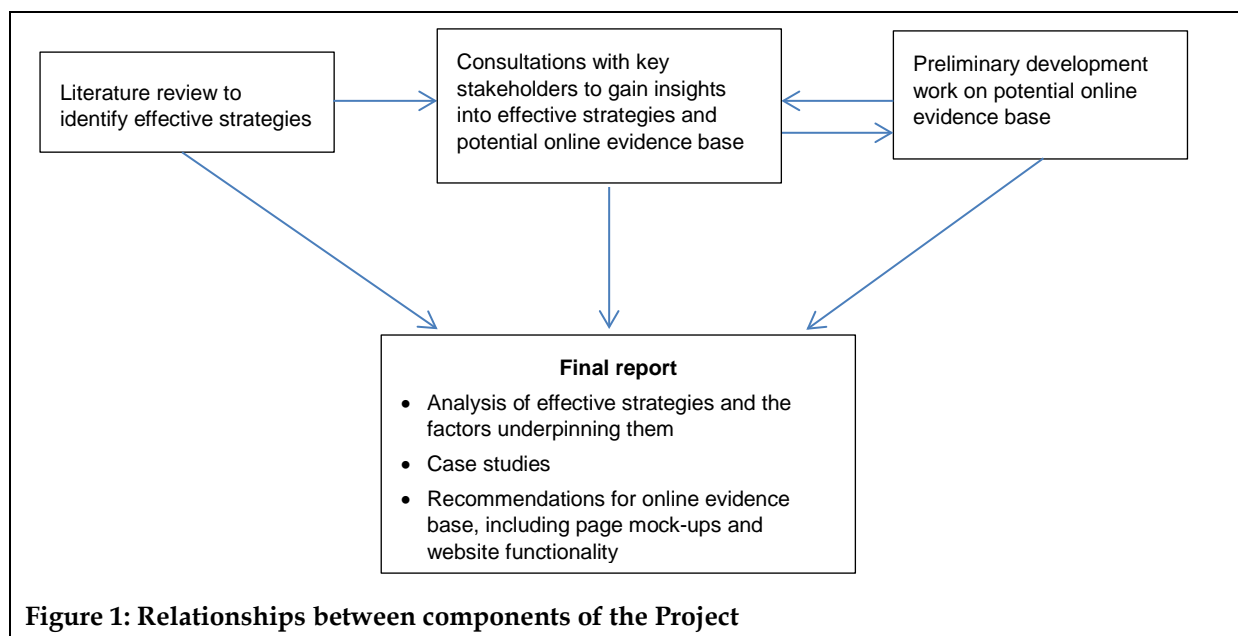
The literature review had 2 purposes:

(1) to examine the individual, contextual and structural factors that influence school attendance (and non-attendance) among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, summarise the policy context, and review national and international evidence on effective attendance strategies and the mechanisms behind them

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

Nine distinct strategies were found to be effective in increasing school attendance:

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

The next step was engaging directly with schools and communities who have used these strategies to understand their experiences and perspectives on the key factors underpinning success and the lessons that they would pass on to other schools and communities.

Using nominated contacts in jurisdictional Education departments provided by the Project Team members, the AIHW sought nominations for schools (both government and non-government) which had used these strategies successfully. From a list of 37 possible schools within 2 states, 9 initial schools were selected. Following ethics approval, the schools were approached, and all but 1 agreed to participate. A replacement school with similar characteristics was found and agreed to take part.

The 9 schools were categorised as follows:

- 3 independent schools
- 6 government schools
- 3 metropolitan schools
- 4 regional schools
- 2 remote schools
- 4 primary schools
- 2 high schools
- 3 K–12 schools.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at each school ranged from just under 50 to over 100, representing 13% to 93% of the respective student bodies.

Twenty-four staff members participated in the interviews/focus groups, including 7 principals, 4 vice-principals, 8 Aboriginal education/liaison officers, 3 members of student welfare teams, 1 administrative staff member, and 1 program-specific staff member.

Table 1 details the types of strategies initially identified by the state contacts; Table 2 shows that, in practice, each of the schools was employing nearly all the strategies.

Table 1: Initially identified strategies by school

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

Notes: The ninth strategy, parental consequences, is not reflected as it is a government, not a school-initiated, policy. Metro. = metropolitan. Comp. = composite (K-12).

Table 2: Strategies being used by schools identified through the consultations

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

Notes: The ninth strategy, parental consequences, is not reflected as it is a government, not a school-initiated, policy. Metro. = metropolitan. Comp. = composite (K-12).

The schools included in the Project provided excellent coverage of strategies across locations, school sectors and school types as shown in Table 2. The schools were similar in that they all experienced challenges related to attendance and were actively working to address attendance on multiple levels. However, the ways in which they implemented the particular strategies depended upon their local circumstances, resources and needs.

The consultations focused on the school and community contexts, details about specific strategies that had been selected and their implementation, underlying mechanisms, and lessons learned. Participants also provided feedback on the purpose and content of a potential online evidence base, which was aided by a series of wireframes (page schematics of websites) and style tiles (visual references of font and colours).

3   Findings

The evidence from the literature review and the consultations demonstrated that, at the local school level, closing the gap in school attendance rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students requires several key steps:

- recognising the importance of attendance as an issue for the school

- identifying individual students for whom non-attendance is an issue

- understanding the reasons behind non-attendance

- developing and implementing effective strategies that address those issues and that enhance the likelihood that children and young people will attend school regularly.

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

Policy initiatives such as the required reporting of attendance data, and funding opportunities for attendance-related programs and staff members through National Partnership agreements or state-funded initiatives, also allowed schools to increase their focus on attendance.

Factors affecting attendance — domains and strategies

Before appropriate programs and policies could be developed, it was critical for schools to identify individual students with attendance-related issues and to understand the reasons behind non-attendance. The factors affecting attendance and non-attendance at school among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are multifaceted and complex, and vary across communities, geographic locations, school sectors and school types. As found in the literature review, these factors can be categorised into 4 domains affecting attendance (in either a positive or negative way), namely:

- school factors

- family factors

- structural/community factors

- student factors.

Box 1 provides an overview of key issues within each of these domains. All factors were cited by the schools included in the consultations (without prompting) as barriers to attendance among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, although their level of importance varied across the schools depending upon local contexts and histories.

Box 1: Factors affecting non-attendance among Indigenous students by domain

School factors

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

Family factors

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

Structural/community factors

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

Student factors

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

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

Box 2 lists the effective strategies identified in the literature review, which were reinforced in the consultations, by the type of domain they target.

Box 2: Effective strategies by domains targeted

School factors

- Whole-of-school approaches
- Attendance monitoring programs

Family factors

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

Structural/community factors

- School/family/community partnerships
- Transport

Student factors

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

The nature of the factors varies by local context. Just as there were different triggers behind the focus on attendance, schools used a range of strategies as described in Box 2 to address

those triggers. Schools also differed in their approaches to selecting strategies: some resulted from local problem solving; others came about as targeted interventions (such as external programs brought into the school).

One of the key messages to emerge from the consultations about the ways in which these schools were able to improve the attendance of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was that there was no 'one size fits all' approach, and that schools had to be both innovative and committed.

Table 3 provides examples of the specific ways in which the 9 schools implemented the particular types of strategies they used (with parental consequences the only strategy not to be covered). It also illustrates that there are both similarities and differences in the ways in which the schools applied the strategies. For example, some schools used personalised learning plans to engage students; others used sporting programs, playgroups and preschool programs, links to post-school options, and cultural programs.

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

Student factors

Schools used a number of strategies to meet the physical and mental health needs of their students. These included:

- ensuring that student support/welfare teams include appropriately skilled staff (for example, some schools with high needs have a school psychologist and social worker)

- working with the families to organise screening and follow-up therapies; if necessary, taking students to medical appointments themselves

- liaising with other services and using a case management approach to ensure that needs are being followed up (as part of its building program, a high school is constructing an integrated onsite community service centre)

- providing an onsite school nurse (funded partly through school funds and partly through external funds) and liaising with the local Division of General Practice (now Medicare Local) or Aboriginal Medical Service to provide health services onsite at least once a week.

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

Table 3: Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools

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

(continued)

Table 3 (continued): Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools

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

(continued)

Table 3 (continued): Summary of specific strategies used by the participating schools

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

Schools also provided information and support for post-school options, which included:

- trying to build students' aspirations about what they could achieve after high school (both through formal programs and as a general priority within their teaching/counselling), and then

- helping students make those post-school options a reality by providing information and direct links to the opportunities (including finding scholarships, filling out forms, helping prepare students for job interviews, and so on).

Several of the schools also used school trips and camps as a way to expose students to opportunities beyond their current communities and to broaden their perspectives. This was felt to be particularly important for students in late primary/early high school as a way of developing aspirations that they could then work towards.

What I've learnt over the last couple of years is that you've got to start young. So the lesson I actually had with the kids today was exactly that. Think about our camps, what kind of jobs did you see happening? The Year 6/7s was very focused on that this year. But just getting the younger kids talking…what are the jobs around? From that, that's when we're going to start doing a whole heap on just goal setting—'that looks like an interesting job', but doing it young. I think they need to be focused. And they need to see there's more of the world, but you can still come back.

Aboriginal education/liaison workers were cited as an important element of a number of these strategies, both in the literature review and the consultations.

One staff member described their position as follows:

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

Family factors

All of the family-related issues and the strategies from the literature review were relevant for the schools in the consultations. All schools discussed the fact that breaking down barriers between families, communities and the school and developing a trusting relationship was a fundamental element for improving school attendance and for understanding the particular circumstances affecting individual students. For example:

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

Schools used numerous strategies to build relationships with families. This included having staff who were well respected within the local community (although not necessarily always Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members).

Some of the key strategies that worked for the schools included:

- treating families and members of the community with respect

- contacting them when the students had done well in school and also inviting them into the school for positive occasions—assemblies, performances, barbeques, student awards, NAIDOC week—so that contact was not always focused on what was 'wrong' with their families or their children

- engaging with them on occasions outside of school. Schools reported that informal contact at the local shops when staff members stopped to chat with families and students was an effective way of building connections.

Being present at funerals, family events when invited and community events were other useful practices, and had symbolic as well as practical consequences.

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

One way to build early engagement with education was for the primary/combined schools to run playgroups, preschools or transition programs. These served several important functions, which included:

- the actual early childhood education experience for the children (which affects their school readiness)

- a chance for families to build connections with each other, as a way to engage families early on with the school itself as well as promoting the value of education

- an opportunity to run programs for the families themselves (including parenting programs as well as arts and cultural programs).

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

Structural/community factors

The importance and occurrence of community and structural issues was reinforced throughout the school consultations.

All 9 schools were either in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas or the school population itself was disadvantaged compared with the surrounding community. Nearly half of the schools reported they were characterised by both historical and current levels of mistrust between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. For example, staff at 2 schools reported that their Indigenous students were subject to racist comments in the broader community and in local sporting events, and another school found it difficult to schedule

sporting events against other schools because the other schools perceived their students as 'too rough'.

Transport was an issue in regional areas, where some students travelled around 90 minutes one way to get to school. Commuting made it difficult for the school to organise after-school activities (such as homework clubs) because alternative transportation home was unavailable. Transportation was not an issue in the remote schools that were included in the consultations.

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

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

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

The importance of a strong community is illustrated in the following example:

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

The availability of and relationships with community services were vital to schools in addition to the established relationships and support with the broader community. A number of children were in out-of-home care, and some students were also dealing with issues of child abuse, child neglect, sexual abuse, domestic violence and substance misuse. Some may have also have had family members in prison.

The complex range of issues meant that schools were heavily involved with both broader community services as well as with individual families. How well those relationships worked across areas varied. For example, a staff member at the following school where the agencies and school worked in partnership reported:

I would say one of our big differences is our involvement with these outside agencies to the point where parents pick up on, and the community picks up on, us working together…Youth justice will come up and we'll give them a meeting room and they'll talk [here]…*the community service*

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

School factors

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

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

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

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

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

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

According to another school:

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

Particular strategies that schools and staff have used to create a welcoming cultural environment have included:

- involving the students in Aboriginal artworks

- displaying names for things in the traditional language as well as in English

- putting up an Aboriginal seasons wheel

- always doing a welcome to country before assemblies, and providing cultural-specific activities at the school (for example, dance, art).

One school provided a separate 'enclave' in an old demountable room, which was given a traditional language name. According to staff: *anything Aboriginal that happens, happens in that room.* This included cultural activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students once a week during school time, playgroups, parent meetings, artwork, cooking, the antenatal group, and so on. The Aboriginal liaison officers are also based there.

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

Attendance monitoring and follow-up strategies not only were present at each of the schools, but also their importance was emphasised in several key ways. The first was through dedicated attendance officers: *if you're looking at improving attendance in any school, if you don't*

have a dedicated person to look at that, the principal does not have the time to address the needs of every child in the school. The second was setting up a process whereby attendance was the responsibility of the whole school, not just of the attendance officer.

The specific role of Aboriginal education/liaison/support workers was discussed with each school (and was highlighted in the discussion of student factors). Staff at all schools believed that this was an important role and that, particularly where students had home lives that were characterised by high levels of stress and disruption, the staff member provided stability in the students' lives.

In addition to home visits and building connections with families and the community, staff felt that the role of these workers was to support other staff members' learning and development about Indigenous issues, culture, practices and ways of communication, which then also provided key symbolic value to the schools.

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

Key lessons

The key lessons for developing and implementing strategies that are effective in improving the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the long-term are presented in Box 3.

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

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

Box 3. Key lessons for developing and implementing effective attendance strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

- Improving/maintaining attendance requires strong leadership from the principal, who not only allocates resources and priorities, but also sets the tone that attendance is an important whole-of-school issue. Following on from this is having highly skilled, well-trained and committed staff.

- Ongoing collection and monitoring of attendance data at an individual student level (as well as at a school level) with dedicated processes in place for follow-up is vital to identifying attendance patterns as well as at risk students. This includes having at least 1 dedicated staff member whose role is to follow up attendance issues with students and families.

- Improving attendance among at risk students requires a focus on the whole child, including their physical and mental health, their family situations, their literacy and numeracy skills, their social skills and their aspirations. Addressing these issues requires close working relationships with services outside the school.

- The school environment needs to be a safe and welcoming place where students want to be. This includes cultural safety, physical safety and emotional safety (for example, no racism and bullying), as well as having appropriate teaching and behaviour management practices.

- The school needs to have a culture of high expectations that all students can achieve, balanced with appropriate individual goals and supports to develop academic and social skills.

- Developing a trusting relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families, the local community and the school is essential to maintain and improve attendance levels. It requires commitment from all staff, and needs to be viewed as an ongoing and long-term process. A key element in this process is open, honest and respectful communication.

- Schools, students and families need to be 'on the same page' with regard to the importance of education in general and attendance at school specifically, which, particularly for high school students, involves building the connection between education and post-school options.

- Improving attendance requires a multifaceted approach, and what works in certain schools may not be as effective in others because of particular local circumstances.

- Once policies, staff, programs and/or structures are in place that are effective in improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, they need to be embedded within the school in order to be sustainable (which may require ongoing funding). Long-term sustainability requires that they not depend upon a single individual who may leave that role.

These key lessons can be distilled into 6 key elements for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Figure 2). These elements were present in all of the schools selected for inclusion in the consultations. It is important to note that the schools were selected precisely because they either had consistently high levels of attendance among their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students or because they had managed to raise their levels of attendance significantly.

Figure 2: Key elements for improving attendance among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
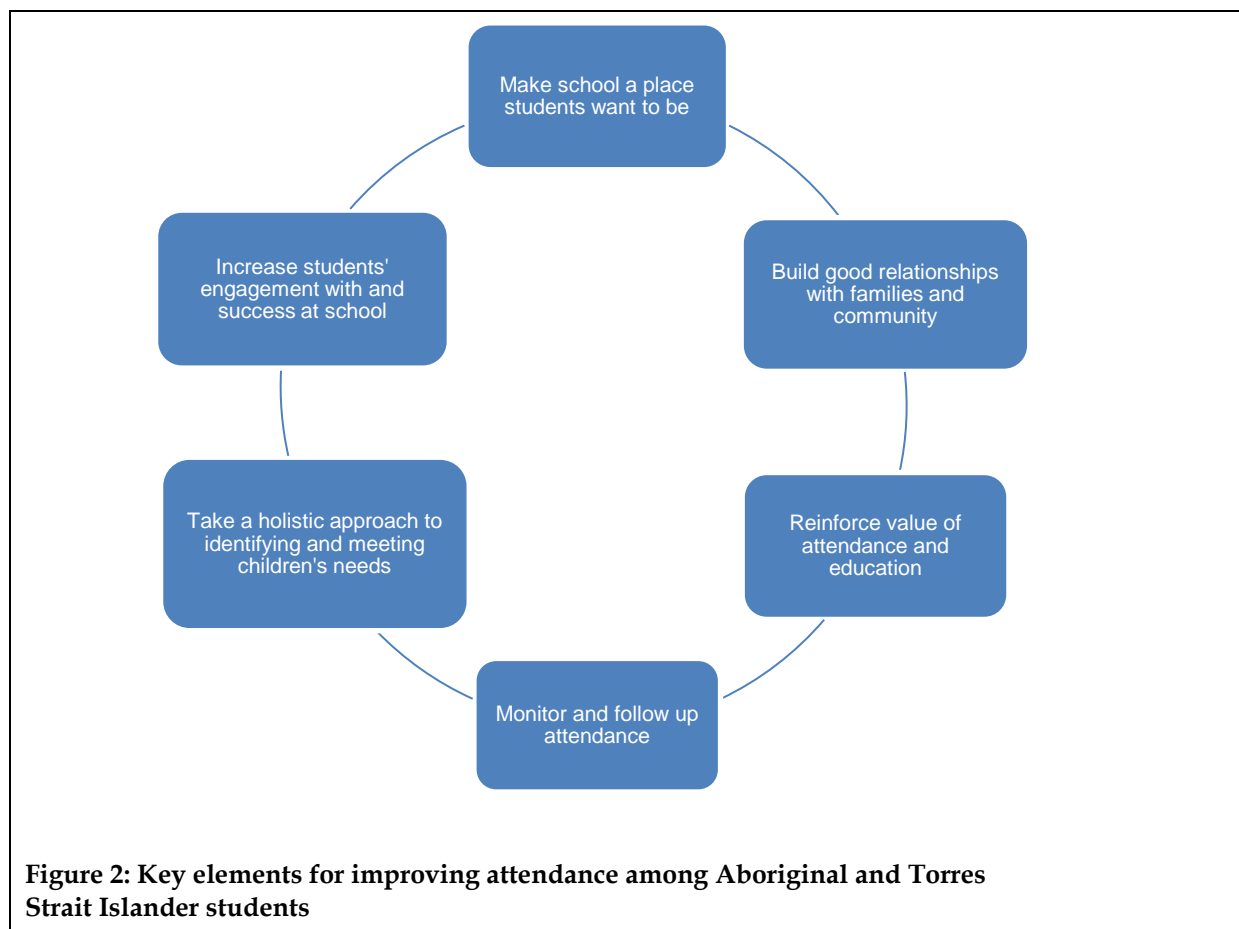
These key elements relate directly to the 6 priority domains of the ATSIEAP:

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

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

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

How schools might use these findings

There are numerous ways that schools and school communities can use these findings. As well as using the key lessons in Box 3 as a 'starting point' for an initial discussion about attendance in their own school, schools could also:

- use the 4 domains to begin to identify the particular barriers to school attendance that are relevant for their communities

- use the 6 key elements in Figure 2 as a framework to identify strengths/areas of improvement for their school

- assess whether any of the strategies in the report might be appropriate for their school.

4 Sharing the evidence: A web-based strategy

Enthusiastic feedback was received from education professionals in the school consultations about the potential development of a dedicated school attendance 'one-stop-shop' website. For example: *I would use that, definitely, as a principal. And I'm sure our attendance officer would if she knew that there was something out there. You know, it's about sharing and it's about 'oh geez, look at what they did there'.*

The education professionals felt that the primary users of a website would be principals, Aboriginal education/liaison officers, teachers, school administrators, policy analysts, and those from related community services who deal with students. They felt that the information and functionality should be targeted to those groups.

Consistent feedback was received on the potential website's functionality and content. Key elements include:

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

- Links, particularly to attendance policies, resources, staff training/professional development opportunities, funding sources/opportunities, scholarships, post-school options, and information on the issues 'behind' non-attendance, with links to resources for dealing with them: *You know what I'd like to see? Having a website as a resource. As a one-stop resource, for example: here's a list of scholarships that are going this year…this is the website to go to, this is the email address, because these things are hard to find…or health. These are the resources, these are the issues, so you might have a school that's new to Indigenous education – these are the issues that you will confront, these are the things that you need to look out for.*

- An opportunity for linking up or engaging directly with other schools as well as a moderated bulletin board where schools could ask for help from other schools or share ideas: *An ideas forum. Like the Department of Rec* [Recreation] *– I would never have thought of that but for the fact that I sat next to this guy and we got chatting about it and they ran a traditional Indigenous games session for us.* Participants also wanted a separate section on the website where Aboriginal education/liaison officers could connect directly with each other to share their experiences.

- A searchable evidence base which would include relevant articles, resources and practical tips and summaries of key articles or issues that principals could use to foster discussion with their staff. Participants also wanted searchable case studies to select those that were most relevant to their situations: *I'd want success stories, research, attendance, breakfast, whatever it is, like the whole ramification of things that you're going to tackle if you have any issues with attendance, government initiatives, funding, programs, even personal learning plans for schools – like a toolbox that schools can say 'here's a model, and here's a case study of how this school does it; they do it through this process' so I can take it and modify*

it… and there's many facets, and maybe schools might not have thought about 1 facet or 2 facets, you know what I mean, unless they actually see it they might not think about it.

- Sign-up for notifications (by email or text) when new content was posted on the website, so participants would know to check it.

The consultations provided clear guiding principles for the development of the website. In essence, it would need to be clear in its purpose, practical, easy to navigate, and include information/links to factors related to attendance issues (for example, health, housing, domestic violence, substance misuse). In order to be useful, it would need to be updated regularly. Other key messages were that the website would need to have inherent reliability and validity (that is, its content, by definition, would be trustworthy); it should have access to the latest government-sponsored research, data, funding and policies; and that it would need to be promoted through the relevant jurisdictional department or peak body websites.

The AIHW recommends adopting the following good practice principles in respect to establishing and managing such a website:

- clear identification of the website's functions and intended users

- establishment of ongoing processes to identify users' information needs

- quick and easy accessibility to information and materials for intended users, in formats and distribution modes that are appropriate for their individual and workplace contexts

- provision of information that is valid, reliable, current, comprehensive and useful for intended users

- establishment of robust quality assurance mechanisms, including quality standards and criteria for material acquisition, review, synthesis, research (where applicable), publication and dissemination

- engagement of a range of personnel (both internal and external, as needed) with an appropriate mix of qualifications, experience and expertise to undertake the website's identified functions for its target audiences

- implementation of stakeholder satisfaction surveys.

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

The AIHW recommends that a Reference Group be established to provide strategic direction and to oversee the operations of an online evidence base were it to be developed. In addition, a scientific advisory board more focused on the specific content of the website could also be established to provide more operational oversight, including establishing protocols to source and assess content.

One issue requiring further consultation with key stakeholders is the extent to which any such website should be branded as being specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The schools in the Project clearly recognised that attendance is not only an Indigenous issue, and that all schools could benefit from the information (not just those with Indigenous students).

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