



Forward

It is with great pleasure that I present to the Aboriginal community of Western Australia this report resulting from the numerous community forums on School and Community Partnership Agreements. The forums were held to inform Aboriginal people of the critical role they must play in these partnerships which are advocated and emphasised in the report entitled Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005 - 2008.

Many individuals and groups participated in the forums and subsequently are responsible for the contributions made to this report which we are calling The Voice of Our People. I thank you for your contributions and acknowledge the wisdom and frank advice that each participant provided.

Ms Lorna Pedersen, Administrative Assistant at the WAAETC did an outstanding job organising travel, accommodation, catering and numerous other things that needed to be done. Many of you may know Lorna from your regular contacts with the WAAETC. I would like to thank Lorna for her excellent work and the support that she provided to districts and the team working with me.

The hard work of the Managers of Aboriginal Education was appreciated and I thank them for organising participants' attendance at the forums.

I would especially like to express my heartfelt thanks and deep appreciation to community members including parents and carers who participated in the forums. My colleagues and I were overwhelmed with the generosity of your time, the genuineness of comments and the contributions generally from your education and community experiences.

My colleagues Kevin O'Keefe, Paul Bridge and Gerry Cleveland worked very hard and I thank them for their unrelenting support and dedication to building community capacity. Their work on imparting knowledge and building relationships with communities across Western Australia is acknowledged and appreciated.

I hope you enjoy reading this report and I look forward to more opportunities to keep the promises made throughout the consultation process – to meet up with you again soon. I look forward to continuing our work together as we strive to improve the educational outcomes of all Aboriginal students.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carol Garlett'.

CAROL GARLETT
WAAETC Chairperson

Introduction

This report, *The Voices of Our People: Aboriginal Communities Speak Out on School and Community Partnerships*, will serve primarily as feedback for the Aboriginal¹ community members who attended a series of school and community forums across Western Australia from September 2007 to March 2008. The report provides an overview of the discussions that took place during those forums. The report was compiled and written by consultant Gerard Cleveland with support from Carol Garlett, Kevin O’Keefe and Paul Bridge.

Overview

Aboriginal audiences across Western Australia heard that in May 2005 all State, Territory and Commonwealth ministers of education and training agreed that improving Aboriginal education outcomes was THE TOP priority for education providers. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) agreed that key priority areas for improving Aboriginal Education were as follows:

1. Early Childhood Education (0 – 5 years)
- 2. School and Community educational partnerships**
3. School Leadership
4. Quality Teaching
5. Pathways to training, employment and higher education.

This report will focus on Western Australia’s initial efforts to engage Aboriginal communities, inform them about the school and community partnerships and, most importantly, listen to and report back on what Aboriginal communities had to say about education issues.

The facilitators represented senior officials from the Department of Education and Training (DET), the Aboriginal Education and Training Council (AETC) and a non-profit Legal Centre (MHLC). The Law Centre provided forum attendees and local community groups with a non-aligned perspective on the impact of school and community partnerships in relation to both health and legal issues.

The facilitators visited 15 communities across the State and met with various Aboriginal community members, including parents, educational staff and other agency service providers. The AETC organised the forums with support from district education staff. Following is a list of the Western Australian towns and communities where the forums took place:

- Albany
- Bunbury
- Coolbellup (metropolitan)
- Esperance
- Fitzroy Crossing
- Geraldton
- Gosnells (metropolitan)

¹Forum attendees generally preferred that we use the term “Aboriginal” rather than “Indigenous”

- Hedland
- Joondalup (metropolitan)
- Kalgoorlie
- Kununurra
- Midland (metropolitan)
- Narrogin
- Northam
- Roebourne

Generally, between 30 and 40 community members attended the forums which were two days in length in rural areas and one day in Metropolitan Perth locations. The forums took place over six to seven hours and were followed by a meeting with local principals and other education managers. Attendees were introduced to three (3) essential issues at the beginning of each session. They were advised to focus on ***what they agreed on was critical, that it must be 'real'*** and achievable and that as many ***participants*** as possible should be involved in the process.



Slide courtesy of Gerry Cleveland, Conscious Community Solutions

offices and central office educators believe they were being inviting and inclusive by attempting to include Aboriginal parents in a formal agreement. There was a general consensus among Aboriginal attendees that **the agreements must be substantial, reasonable, genuine and realistic**. Further, *the agreements had to deal with school and community responses to issues such as attendance, cultural education programs, substance abuse, health concerns, staff and parent training and the presence or absence of resources.*

Beware of “feel good” agreements

Community members across the State consistently argued quite strongly against vague, generalised, “feel good” statements that sound positive and inclusive, but are not measurable as real-life outcomes. Terms such as “helping students achieve”, “respecting parents” and “welcoming environments” are fine according to the forum attendees, but only as philosophy statements, and not as the substance of the agreements.

What Communities Wanted

Communities wanted their input in the school and community agreements to reflect LOCAL rather than systemic needs. They wanted input into specifics such as staffing, curriculum delivery, health delivery at schools, social and cultural programming. They wanted the agreements to bind the school not only to consider, but also to implement what the community outlines in the agreement.

Most significantly, by way of overview, community groups clearly stated that they valued this opportunity to enter into partnerships with the schools. They were, however, collectively cautious in their initial support. In each forum, community members **spoke at length regarding their wishes not to be promised a true partnership only to be left with empty and shallow policy documents** speaking of inclusion and respect while nothing of substance changes.

One Aboriginal leader from the Pilbara community summarised this general consensus when she characterised these agreements as a “marriage proposal”. She and many others could not help but feel that they were going to be “left at the altar”. She pointed out that because of past failures by government agencies to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people - whether educational or health outcomes - community members were extremely wary of promises of inclusion and respect.

A view on Department Policy versus Community Need

An issue which arose that should give rise to some caution is that department policy may be a blockade to progress. Attendees from across the State confirmed that **the value of the partnerships would be determined by how easily the school could ignore or override the community input**. Forum attendees indicated that if the wishes of the community were subject to department “policy” they would place little value in the community-school partnerships being proposed.



Support Community Requires



Independent Facilitators to help the community

Assistance through the WAAETC

Language to reflect both sides! (esp. North)

More parent training – Capacity Building for community

Staff training regarding Aboriginal needs

Don't keep doing “external” rewards

Take agreement to community when writing it

Give community time – don't move too fast

Revisit with community when drawing up agreement

Slide courtesy of Gerry Cleveland, Conscious Community Solutions

**WHAT THE COMMUNITIES THOUGHT SHOULD GO INTO AGREEMENTS:
KEY THEMES AND ISSUES.**

The key themes which arose from the advice given by the forum attendees can be categorised into twelve separate areas. These themes are areas that the communities want the school-community agreement to address. They include:

- 1. Cultural Awareness**
- 2. Social Issues (Drugs, Alcohol, Mental Health - impact on schools)**
- 3. Welcoming School environment**
- 4. Good/Bad teacher issues**
- 5. Capacity Building (Capacity building being social and professional skills training)**
- 6. Individual pathway planning for students**
- 7. Teaching styles**
- 8. Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) roles and responsibilities**
- 9. Parent Involvement and Parent Training**
- 10. Celebration of successes by Aboriginal students and parents**
- 11. Communication between schools and communities**
- 12. Schools must reflect the distinct natures of their communities (staffing, operations, seasonal influences)**

POINT FORM COMMENTS FROM THE ABORIGINAL AUDIENCES FOR EACH THEMATIC AREA

1. Cultural Awareness

Many principals, teachers and administration staff lack Aboriginal cultural awareness and the communities called for urgent attention to addressing this matter. Cross cultural understandings are necessary to improving and building strong relationships between schools and Aboriginal communities.

In many cases, principals and teachers are not culturally aware when they arrive in a remote community or in a community with a high proportion of Aboriginal people.

More effort is required to recognise Aboriginal culture in the schools. Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum is one of the resources available to schools to enable them to embed a cultural perspective in all learning areas. Schools should establish calendars of cultural awareness:

e.g. at least 4 days a year for special Aboriginal events and celebrations. Additionally the Department of Education and Training should establish a schedule of cultural awareness training for all principals.

Cultural awareness training for teachers is vitally important in assisting them to understand Aboriginal children. Teachers need to be aware that the tone of their voice is important when working with Aboriginal students. Understanding the students' background, family connections and the needs of the children must improve. Adapting to localised cultural issues must be fostered in all non-Aboriginal staff.

Negotiating cultural awareness, teaching expectations, and roles of all involved in educating students should be written into the agreements.



2. Social Issues

The communities discussed home environment concerns at considerable length. For example, the attendees reported that the causes of child neglect cannot be seen in isolation from other serious social issues, such as substance abuse, homelessness, school failure, unemployment and mental illness.

Attendees also indicated that school staff must recognise that it is widely documented that Aboriginal people who turn to petrol sniffing, self harm and suicide are doing so from

diminished self esteem resulting from a rupture in their cultural heritage and loss of contact with their land-based traditions.

The communities called for the continuation of Breakfast Programs for students who were coming to school hungry as a result of family dysfunction. They were firm in their stand that the Breakfast Programs should be there to support these students, but that measures needed to be put in place to make the parents of these children more responsible and accountable for the welfare and care of their children.





Will agreements deal with this?



In previous year 22%
of 4-17 year old Aboriginal children in WA



The Health and Welfare of
Australia's Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Peoples
2005

7 or more life stressors
in 12 months - 5 x more likely
for emotional or behavioural difficulties

IF ONLY 2



Slide courtesy of Gerry Cleveland, Conscious Community Solutions

The communities acknowledged that there are many Aboriginal students who are not getting enough sleep because their parents/carers were:

- either not being responsible for their children and were neglecting the overall welfare of the children
- or being responsible, but due to factors outside their immediate control such as late night parties, alcohol abuse and anti-social behaviour in the community their children's sleep was being disrupted.

Tiredness, fatigue, poor nutrition and sleeping habits remain serious problems. The audiences reported that too many children watch e.g. TV, videos, games, FoxTel, basketball until late at night. Some students walk around town or the community during evening hours and are tired at school. This behaviour is not to be encouraged and should not be accepted as normal behaviour of Aboriginal children. Participants indicated that there is a requirement for parents to be responsible for their children and to take care of them and raise them so that they are strong in their Aboriginal identity and have every opportunity to succeed in their formal education.

There was high praise for schools which provided programs that supported children who were not receiving appropriate nourishment. The daily fruit programs are helpful in sustaining children throughout the morning; Far more students stayed at school and attended more regularly when schools provided lunches, as this strategy assists in stopping students from

leaving school grounds at lunch time and not coming back for the rest of the day.

All of the following **MUST** be dealt with in the agreements:

- family environment and home life
- disengaged students and parents
- health and nutrition
- teachers' expectations must be defined
- relationship with students and the issues regarding regular attendance such as the impact of coming late to school, transient families, parents leaving their children with other carers, social behaviour problems, outside of school/family influences, drugs and alcohol.

Alcohol/Drug Support

Specific programs regarding alcohol and drugs education and the linking of support services to students, parents and teachers should be a focus for community-school agreements.

Transient Families

There are many transient families in communities across Western Australia. Schools need to acknowledge this lifestyle as one factor that they cannot change. However, schools can make transitions for travelling families easier by not shaming children when they return to school.

Addressing other social issues

Schools will marginalise Aboriginal students' learning and education if they preclude Aboriginal students from an education available

to all other students. Schools must ensure that the principle of inclusivity applies to its Aboriginal students, and other students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They must have strategies in place to address such issues as:

- computer access
- homework support for students who don't have a place to study or are not able to get assistance from their parents with their homework because the parents have a limited education themselves
- training for staff to deal with domestic violence trauma
- students not having equipment such as pens and books and other essential tools for schools - this lack of basic resources causes embarrassment and shame for Aboriginal students and families which can lead to poor attendance
- parents who have no money to pay for uniforms and other essential school requirements

Taking care of the Carers

The school-community agreements should consider methods to provide support for the grandparents who are stressed from doing too much caring for grandchildren. Far too many parents are abrogating their responsibility as parents and are expecting others to take care of their children. Parents must have the responsibility for raising their children and support must be provided that enables them to take on their responsibility. At present, because of the percentage of children not living with parents, it is vital that support be provided to

carers in terms of dealing with issues of stress, behaviour, academic support, finance and coping strategies.

3. Welcoming school environment

For schools to have welcoming environments they must adopt a two-pronged approach.

Parents and schools must work as equal partners in a team environment. For example, one issue stressed was that schools must make students and parents aware of rules in an on-going manner. If parents are constantly updated on school rules, they can more easily support the school by further explaining the rules and consequences to their children.

Aboriginal parents must make an effort to become more involved in everyday events at schools. School staff should invite parents to assemblies and make them feel welcome when they arrive. Schools and communities must create an environment that fosters respectful communication between parents and staff members.

A challenging barrier that schools must address is the seen but unspoken **power play** identified by the attendees. Community members report that often the body language or the voice tone of school staff members inhibits the participation of parents and community members. Subtle, often non-verbal, messages that shift the blame for wrongdoing to the family instead of placing it within the school environment have to be recognised and avoided. Parents must also recognise that **they** play a vital role in keeping feuding OUT of the school.



4. Good/Bad Teacher Issues

Good teacher attributes

According to the community audiences, the most important qualities of good teachers are that they care about children and wish to provide them with a sound education through excellent teaching.

Good teachers show respect for people and seek to build strong relationships with the parents and leaders in the community. These teachers will make time for people, especially Aboriginal parents and their children. They will have good interpersonal skills and be especially good at listening. Good teachers have a sense of humour. They are firm but fair with Aboriginal students and have the ability to distinguish when strictness or understanding are needed. Good teachers have excellent communication skills and are able to teach these skills and model them daily.

A good teacher is approachable, trustworthy and contributes to the well-being of the community by encouraging parents and others to come into the school. These teachers persist with students who may be struggling and are unrelenting in keeping Aboriginal students on task. They believe all students are reachable and all students are teachable. They will not give up on Aboriginal students. Cultural learning and awareness are part of every day planning. Good teachers are cognisant of the principles of inclusivity by ensuring that the educational experience includes Aboriginal culture and history.

Good teachers have regular teacher-parent meetings so that parents are kept informed regarding their children's progress. Teachers have to listen and tune in to what is going on with the students in their classes and the dynamics within the community. Communities want teachers to develop their cultural awareness through formal training programs, professional development, by listening to Aboriginal students, and by informally interacting with the community.

Good teachers are emotionally smart and culturally sensitive. Generally they will be respected and liked by the Aboriginal staff and parents. Good teachers respect and value the AIEOs' contributions to the education program. They spend time with the AIEOs seeking advice from them, planning the education program and reviewing what structure would best suit the needs of the Aboriginal students in their classes.

Audiences further indicated that good teachers teach in a culturally appropriate mode and implement the curriculum in a manner that is relevant to the student, but **not second rate or watered down**. Such teachers have high expectations of themselves and of their students.



They are clear about student achievement and build relationships with students. Good teachers provide continuity of service by remaining in a school beyond the first opportunity they have to leave.

Negative Teacher Attributes (bad teachers or bad school characteristics)

Community forums noted that teachers stop students achieving when they exhibit negative attitudes and are unwilling to change or adapt. This type of teacher does not engage the AIEOs effectively in the educational program because they neither involve the AIEOs in planning nor do they actively seek their advice. As a result they will not grow professionally and will demonstrate a lack of cultural understanding or cultural sensitivities.

Bad teachers may well show interest in a student's progress but will have little or no time for parents. As a result, no professional relationship with parents develops to keep parents informed regarding their children's progress. This lack of communication may be due to poor training or limited teaching skills or it may be because of a lack of empathy. Community members indicated that a perception exists that a bad teacher is not friendly and their classrooms are not welcoming places for students or parents.

Language barriers are often used by bad teachers to put parents off from asking questions. Bad teachers use words or language that is teacher-friendly but not understood by many parents. This is a strategy used by weak teachers to cover up poor achievement and gives the appearance that they know what they are doing. Teachers

with limited skills are not emotionally intelligent or socially smart. They think they can bluff their way through the day and that students and parents cannot see their poor teaching skills and their inability to build strong relationships with students, staff and parents. Many of these teachers have negative attitudes and blame the parents for a struggling student.

Bad teachers have low expectations of Aboriginal children's capabilities and show ignorance about Aboriginal culture or education. They will discipline students in front of the other students or act without gathering all the facts. Because they lack cultural understanding or have not developed good professional relationships with the students and parents they may worsen problems or issues through prejudgement of students based on family or social groups.

Bad teachers use intimidating body language and loud voices. Often they are from overseas or different areas within Australia and they lack the ability or the will to adapt to local circumstances. They fail to follow up on students not attending. Bad teachers bully other staff, parents and students. Additionally bad teachers do not take time to ascertain the correct meaning of what the students are telling them or they are telling the students. Finally, and most obviously, a racist teacher is a bad teacher.

5. Capacity Building requirements

Capacity building or building the human capital of parents and communities is essential for the meaningful engagement of Aboriginal parents, carers, families and community members

interacting with schools. This is not to say that Aboriginal parents, carers, families and community members are empty vessels waiting to be filled. Capacity building is about building onto the knowledge base, skills and understandings that Aboriginal people already have. Audiences wanted to develop their knowledge, skills and understandings of schools, system processes and policies, and general education so that they can confidently engage in education. More AIEO and parent-community capacity building workshops and seminars will further develop the confidence of Aboriginal adults when engaging with teachers and schools.

Capacity building workshops, seminars and forums based on the Kimberley District Education Office model develop the skills of Aboriginal staff so that they confidently contribute to positive educational outcomes of students and are not at school merely to watch over the disobedient children. As a result of ongoing capacity building workshops in the Kimberley, Goldfields, and Metropolitan Perth Districts there is a realisation by Aboriginal staff that more work is needed to build on the skills of parents so that they are empowered to deal with their children's bad behaviour.

Capacity building programs which develop the leadership skills of Aboriginal people are being implemented and must be ongoing so that more Aboriginal staff and parents can take on leadership roles in the school and community. Furthermore, developing the leadership capacities of Aboriginal students who are doing well, and not just academically well, should be a priority!

The use of 'shame' is a major problem that Aboriginal communities face in helping children succeed. The capacity building program in the Kimberley identified this as an issue and provided Aboriginal staff with strategies to deal with it - first by dealing with it amongst the Aboriginal staff members themselves.

Communities need capacity building to help them deal with on-going issues that will arise with the school-community partnerships, including learning the literacy of conflict, the ability to work with children at academic risk, and the ability to deal with uncooperative, or even toxic, work or school environments.

6. Pathway planning for individual students

Considering the gap in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students, it is essential that all Aboriginal students have an individualised approach to learning. This includes the development of individual pathway plans addressing their specific educational needs and aspirations. The *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005 - 2008* report supports this approach.

These individual pathway plans should include approaches for a seamless transition for Aboriginal students from primary to secondary and to further education and training.

Communities indicated that the slow progress made in improving attendance, retention and graduation of Aboriginal students provides educators with basic evidence for the serious need for individual pathway plans. In fact, if school systems and sectors are committed to accelerating the educational outcomes of



Aboriginal students then these individual pathways plans must be mandated. Some students will require case management and their plans must involve the parents working in concert with the school and external agencies.

7. Teaching styles

Regular attendance at school is required for Aboriginal students to have any chance of achieving a basic education. Regular attendance and student engagement in the educational process will ensure much better outcomes than basic literacy and numeracy skills. Quality teaching is therefore fundamental to ensuring both engagement in the learning program and a culturally inclusive environment for Aboriginal students.

Quality teaching will cater for intensive work or transition programs for children who are away for periods of time in order to bring them up to speed. It will make provision for students who have been away from school and at the same time cater for students who attend school consistently and regularly. Quality teaching incorporates specific skills and strategies that target the learning needs of students and engage them in learning. Some specific strategies for quality teaching with Aboriginal students may include:

- Use of Creole when appropriate to teach young children
- Identify and cater for individual needs

- Curriculum linked to cultural activity such as art, dance and music
- Cater for multiple intelligences
- Deal with issues that exist in high school (especially for girls) such as bullying and gossip
- Adapt language classes for high school students
- Include Aboriginal people with cultural expertise in schools wherever possible and appropriate
- Provide support to LOTE teachers
- Localise learning and focus the curriculum on practical things that impact on Aboriginal children - such as building or fixing cars. The key is to focus on problems which the students can solve
- Expand the learning of students and have high aspirations and standards



8. Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs)/ Aboriginal Teacher Assistants (ATAs): roles and responsibilities

Communities indicated the following information about AIEOs/ATAs:

- More AIEOs/ATAs needed in schools
- AIEOs/ATAs must be good role models and attend school regularly
- AIEOs/ATAs must not involve themselves in inter-family conflicts
- Value other AIEOs/ATAs and community input
- AIEOs/ATAs must work with small groups on school development planning
- Recognise that when Aboriginal staff are involved in a positive manner, children perform better
- AIEOs/ATAs need to have Professional Development on Aboriginal learning styles
- AIEOs/ATAs need to be consulted on issues
- AIEOs/ATAs should be engaged in teaching and learning processes rather than merely photocopying and other mundane jobs
- AIEOs/ATAs need to have an office or place to have private conversations with community members
- AIEOs/ATAs need to be involved in meetings with teachers, parents and community members
- Effective utilisation of AIEOs/ATAs
- AIEOs/ATAs are in schools to support Aboriginal students/parents
- AIEOs/ATAs must be involved in the daily communication between parents and schools
- Individual strengths and weaknesses of students are well known by the AIEOs/ATAs
- AIEOs/ATAs need to do personal capacity building so that they can confidently engage with Aboriginal students, parents and staff
- AIEOs/ATAs should not be locked up in classrooms but engaged in meaningful community liaison work on a daily basis
- New AIEOs/ATAs need to undertake an induction program at a school and a district/ regional level
- AIEOs/ATAs and teachers need to be doing outreach together
- AIEOs/ATAs to organise a school assembly on a regular basis and include parents
- Cultural education programs organised by parents and AIEOs/ATAs
- Increase AIEOs/ATAs hours from part-time to full-time
- Clarification of AIEO/ATAs roles – liaison versus classroom work/time
- Build into agreements home visits by AIEOs/ATAs
- All school staff to receive information on the work/roles of AIEOs/ATAs
- Use AIEOs/ATAs to build up rapport between the Aboriginal community and the school



Who has the most impact with children?



Parents do!

Slide courtesy of Gerry Cleveland, Conscious Community Solutions

- Train AIEOs/ATAs so that they can effectively mediate and advocate
- In the school-community agreement, include regular meetings between the AIEO/ATAs and the parents and community
- Schools often do not take advice from AIEOs/ATAs
- Teams within schools must be inclusive of AIEOs/ATAs and record and discuss their input
- Value the advice given by AIEOs/ATAs as they generally come from the local community and know the cultural issues relevant to the schooling context
- Level 3 AIEOs to teach and support cross-cultural awareness
- Support and encourage AIEOs/ATAs to become teachers
- AIEOs/ATAs should be kept informed of Aboriginal funds that come into their respective schools
- Review line management of AIEOs/ATAs
- Transfer of AIEOs between schools, in particular when they come from another language group, is an issue which needs careful consideration
- Leadership training of AIEOs/ATAs
- Regular network meeting of AIEOs/ATAs
- AIEOs/ATAs should be involved in the induction of new Aboriginal students into school
- Mentoring of AIEOs/ATAs in schools
- There should be strong support for AIEOs/ATAs by all staff
- AIEOs/ATAs in secondary schools need appropriate training to work effectively with secondary students
- AIEOs/ATAs replacements should be in place before the previous AIEOs/ATAs leave
- A sound knowledge of the role and responsibilities of AIEOs/ATAs is crucial for teachers and administrative staff

9. Parent Involvement

School Councils must include Aboriginal representation and these representatives may require support to engage effectively in Councils. Some parents may also need training programs so that they understand the role of School Councils, their purpose and responsibilities.

Schools should not assume that parents understand the operations of these organisations. Some parents can feel quite alienated by schools, while others may be intimidated by their processes (rules, governance and protocols). Principals need to be emotionally smart in this regard and offer workshops that meet the needs of parents, obviously providing guidance on what can be offered and seeking guidance on what parents require to meet their needs. Some training workshop topics suggested by community members included leadership, computing, meeting procedures, assertiveness, public speaking, negotiation and conflict resolution.

Parents can also be involved in the development of curriculum and learning programs specific to their locality or language group as well as broader curriculum development. Aboriginal

parents may need some encouragement to be involved, and this takes skill by school leaders. Sporting events and NAIDOC week activities are good starting points to facilitate parent involvement. Get parents to identify what they can contribute and encourage them to contribute by identifying their particular skills or talents. The leadership teams in schools need to identify parents who they believe will have success encouraging other Aboriginal adults to get involved.

School meetings should not ONLY be about what the school wants. The meetings must also ensure that the community has ample chance to have their 'say' about issues important to the community. Information sessions for parents should be incorporated into parent meetings and good leaders will also incorporate information sessions for schools staff, thereby providing a two-way exchange of information between the school and its community.



10. Celebrations, acknowledgement rewards for achievement

Much of what happens in school that is negative is reported to parents, but community forum members insisted that Aboriginal parents want and need to celebrate when their children perform well or attend regularly. The community groups focused on some of the positive highlights that schools should encourage in the school-community agreements. They included:

- attendance incentives for good attendance
- interesting and motivating/relevant programs of work e.g. outdoors education programs
- NAIDOC Week, special days/events
- Attendance-Medals for 100% attendance each term (and/or Certificates/Books each term)
- Bank Book rewards - student designed bank book to earn money to buy weekly prizes

11. Communication between school and its communities

To enhance communication between schools and Aboriginal community members, the forum participants suggested the following list of options that could be included in school-community agreements:

- SMS reporting to parents from teachers
- teachers providing email updates to the parents to ensure an open line of communication

- positive feedback to the parents rather than just contacting the parents when their children may have been in trouble at the school and require discipline
- teachers have to be open and honest
- GOOD listener to the community e.g. Principal must listen and be proactive to ideas

12. Schools must reflect the distinct nature of their communities

Schools should develop an Aboriginal parent and community committee which can advise and support decision making for Aboriginal perspectives. Committees may need support in learning how to run meetings. This needs to be sensitively negotiated so that the school doesn't take over. Often schools are busy places and want things done quickly. Acting in this manner could discourage some willing parents or other Aboriginal community people because they won't feel as though they are being listened to. The community must say upfront where and how the meetings should happen to ensure they feel part of what's going on. This is part of the cultural education process and the building of good relationships between the school and the community.

There must be a good handover from outgoing principals to incoming principals on the distinct nature of the school and its community. The Aboriginal parent and community committees could assist the principals with the handover where appropriate.

AGENDAS FOR THE FORUMS

Kevin O’Keefe and/or Paul Bridge from the Department of Education and Training (DET) and Carol Garlett from the Aboriginal Education and Training Council (AETC) offered the forum members a brief introduction. A community issues briefing regarding local issues followed.

Forum Introductions:

The audience considered the following questions regarding the school-community partnerships:

What will be in these partnership agreements?

What will the school put in?

What will the community put in?

The audiences were then provided with a brief overview as to what DET would consider a ‘starting point’ for each agreement. These were outlined in the following points:

School-community partnerships

- (a) are expressed in plain language
- (b) enable broad community engagement in the selection of the school principal and teaching staff
- (c) enable community input into all school planning and decision-making processes
- (d) establish agreement on school goals and policies relating to matters such as attendance and academic achievement

- (e) provide greater flexibility in the development and adaptation of curricula, while maintaining high educational standards
- (f) provide flexibility in the operation of the school and use of resources
- (g) are referred to Aboriginal education consultative bodies for information
- (h) are sustainable over time, irrespective of change of principal, and re-negotiated to suit changing demands

Following these brief introductions, the forum attendees separated into small groups of five or six members.

An effort was made to keep the Aboriginal community members in their own groups to voice their views and opinions openly.



WORKSHOP QUESTIONS

The facilitators acted as silent scribes and recorded the answers to a series of questions put to the attendees. Those questions were the same for every group. The groups spent approximately 1 to 1.5 hours discussing the questions and answering them. Their conversations were recorded and compiled. The questions were as follows:

- 1. What works well in your school to help the kids? How do we put that into the agreement?**
- 2. What are the things that will stop the kids working well at the school? How would the agreement stop this?**
- 3. Will there be problems with working with your school?**
- 4. What do you think the partnership at your school should focus on?**
- 5. What support will the community need to make their agreement with the school?**
- 6. What do we do if the agreement stops working?**

Following a break, the attendees would regroup as a plenary session and the facilitators would ask representatives from each group to outline and discuss the highlights of their group discussion. Follow up comments and discussions would be recorded during this presentation process.



A NON-ALIGNED PERSPECTIVE ON ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN THE SCHOOL–COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS.

Following lunch, the attendees would come together as a plenary group. At this time, they would listen to a talk by Gerard Cleveland, a lawyer with the Mental Health Law Centre.

Mr. Cleveland discussed joining learning and social issues and the interplay between those in any possible agreement between schools and communities. Issues such as mental illness, drug use, conflict resolution and dealing with students at educational risk were presented as

prospective topics for consideration. A lively discussion followed each of the presentations.

There was a consistent accord among the Aboriginal attendees that a school could **not be isolated socially, culturally or emotionally from the community** it serves. Audience members at each venue discussed a wide gamut of social concerns that they would like to include in both the curriculum and any school and community agreement that results in the future.

CONCLUSION:

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY FORUMS

Once all groups had presented, the facilitators would ask the following summative questions:

1. **What did we miss?**
2. **What else do you want in the agreements?**

Facilitators would again record answers, followed by a brief overview.

The workshops would end with a brief planning session that the attendees would undertake. Each member of the audience was encouraged by the facilitators to go into their community and discuss the school-community partnerships and discover what others in the community thought about the potential for such agreements.

The sessions ended with the facilitators PROMISING that they would be back to listen to what the participants had discovered in their discussions with other community members.

An informal chat with the Aboriginal community members at dinner followed each forum. The consensus among the facilitators was that these discussions focused on the need for more training and follow up on the process of writing and implementing the school-community forums. Each of the facilitators left the meetings with the sense that the communities were supportive of the agreements, but they were cautious, and hopeful that the process would not become one of lofty rhetoric followed by unfulfilled promises.



PRINCIPALS' MEETINGS

After an afternoon tea break with the Aboriginal Community a shortened version of the above schedule occurred following all but five of the community forums. Once the program was presented to the group, principals and district office staff would present their thoughts and reactions to the facilitators. Kevin O'Keefe or Paul Bridge, and Carol Garlett would note their comments and provide responses to questions. Gerard Cleveland would speak briefly about the Aboriginal community attendees' responses to the social-educational potential within each agreement. The principals were generally very

pleased that social concerns and considerations were being discussed, but were worried that the schools were going to be asked to provide more services (including social services) than they could possibly deliver. Again, lively, but positive discussions regarding what was within and what lay outside the purview of the school followed each of the principals' forums.

Once the principals' thoughts and views were recorded the groups disbanded for informal discussions.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The forums provided a much needed outlet for expression across the State. Aboriginal audiences said that they felt it was a positive experience for them to voice their opinions. They generally look forward to having a formal partnership with schools and they have a range of suggestions which they believe will help schools to carry on in a culturally appropriate, educationally sound program for their children. The Aboriginal Education and Training Council met in December 2007 and received a briefing from the facilitators. They supported the comments and the themes and gave their voice to the belief that the process, once begun, must not be abandoned.

This sense that Aboriginal people would be asked their opinion followed by a lack of activity to pursue these agreements on the part of the school system was a concern across Western Australian Aboriginal communities.

Also of concern was the issue that if school-community partnerships did come to fruition, they would be little more than “paper agreements” promising little that could be enforced, and might be overridden by the Department of Education and Training whenever community wishes and expectations conflicted with system policy.

Given the 12 themes offered by the audiences, however, we believe we have a fundamental and

well-grounded start to this process that must be in place in just two years. We encourage the Department of Education and Training to build upon its excellent beginning to this process.

For the sake of the many communities we visited, and the hundreds of participants, we hope that our agreements in Western Australia will become a model for schools and communities to draft and implement meaningful and workable agreements across Australia.

