



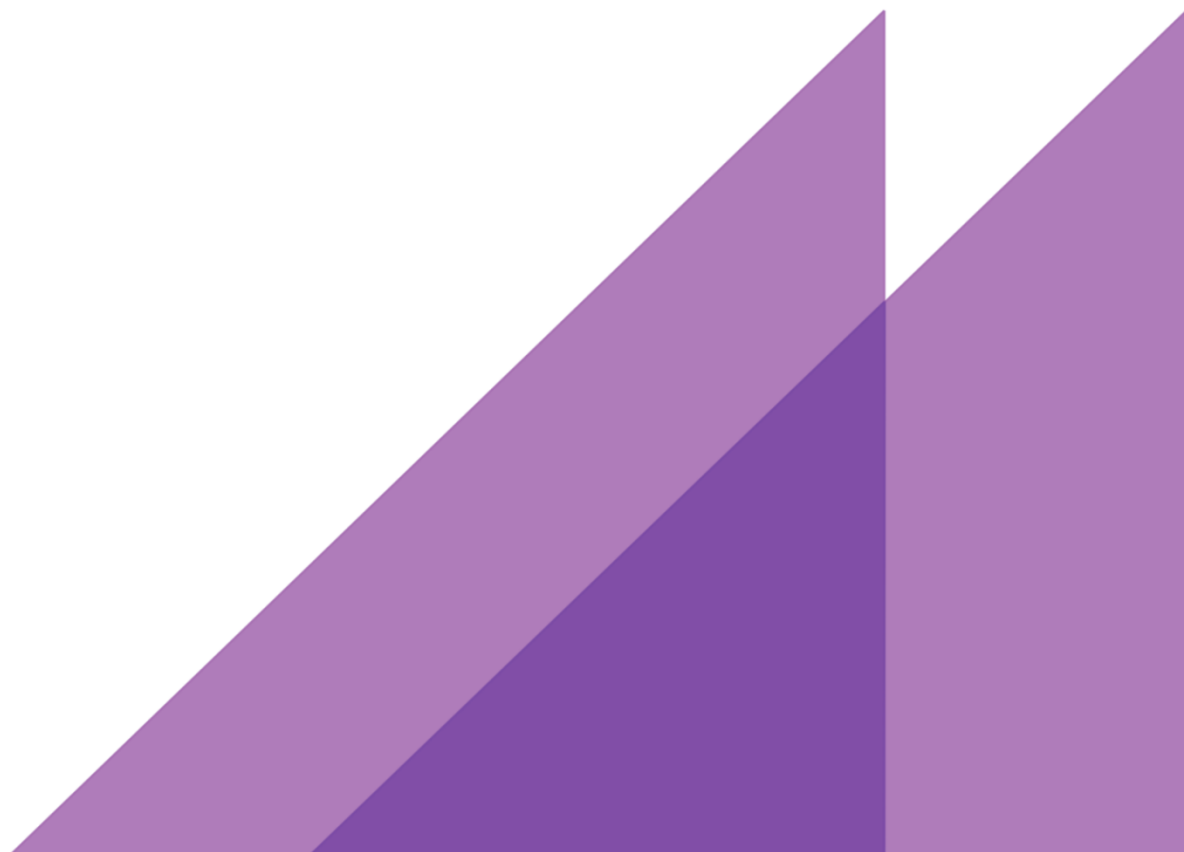
REPORT TO
THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
EDUCATION ADVISORY GROUP OF THE EDUCATION
COUNCIL

NOVEMBER 2014

EVALUATION OF THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION ACTION PLAN 2010-2014



FINAL EVALUATION REPORT





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C O N T E N T S

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Executive summary | i |
| 1 Background | 1 |
| 1.1 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14 | 1 |
| 1.2 Evaluation overview | 1 |
| 1.3 Report structure | 6 |
| 2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education context | 7 |
| 2.1 Demographics and student enrolments | 7 |
| 2.2 Educational challenges and considerations | 9 |
| 2.3 Policy responses over time | 11 |
| 2.4 Development and approval of the Action Plan | 14 |
| 3 Action Plan structure and design | 16 |
| 3.1 The Action Plan document | 16 |
| 3.2 Stakeholder views regarding the Action Plan | 23 |
| 3.3 Focus schools | 26 |
| 4 Action Plan funding | 30 |
| 4.1 Building in or bolting on funding | 30 |
| 4.2 Action Plan funding | 31 |
| 4.3 Implications of funding the Action Plan | 32 |
| 4.4 Reflections regarding the FSNS initiative | 35 |
| 4.1 Reflections regarding the IFS initiative | 36 |
| 5 Governance, monitoring and evaluation | 40 |
| 5.1 Governance structures | 40 |
| 5.2 Performance measurement and reporting | 44 |
| 5.3 Role of the evaluation | 47 |
| 6 National and systemic coordination | 49 |
| 6.1 National collaborative actions | 49 |
| 6.2 Systemic coordination | 51 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 7 Whole-of-school implementation | 57 |
| 7.1 Variability between schools | 57 |
| 7.2 Importance of culture and identity | 61 |
| 7.3 Challenges in remote school settings | 63 |
| 7.4 Data literacy | 66 |
| 7.5 Practice sharing | 68 |
| 8 School implementation by domain | 70 |
| 8.1 Introduction | 70 |
| 8.2 Domain one: readiness for school | 70 |
| 8.3 Domain two: engagement and connections | 76 |
| 8.4 Domain three: attendance | 86 |
| 8.5 Domain four: literacy and numeracy | 94 |
| 8.6 Domain five: leadership, quality teaching and workforce development | 100 |
| 8.7 Domain six: pathways to real post-school options | 105 |
| 9 Mobility study | 109 |
| 9.1 About the study | 109 |
| 9.2 Defining mobility | 110 |
| 9.3 Managing mobility in FNQ schools | 111 |
| 9.4 Mobility in relation to the Action Plan domains | 113 |
| 9.5 Lessons and broader application | 114 |
| 10 Summary of findings | 116 |
| 10.1 Achievements of the Action Plan | 116 |
| 10.2 Consolidated report findings | 117 |
| 11 Future directions | 121 |
| 11.1 Changing education context | 121 |
| 11.2 Future needs | 123 |
| 11.3 Design principles for future activity | 126 |
| 11.4 Future design considerations | 126 |
| 11.5 Setting and measuring outcomes | 130 |
| 11.6 Future coordination considerations | 130 |
| 11.7 Refining the priority domains | 131 |
| 12 Bibliography | 135 |

List of boxes

| | | |
|-------|--|----|
| Box 1 | INDIGENOUS EDUCATION: 'BUILT IN' OR 'BOLTED ON' | 30 |
| Box 2 | FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FSNS INITIATIVE | 35 |
| Box 3 | KALIK BARING KAYAP BARINGI: MANY PATHS ONE DESTINATION, THE SANDHURST ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION PLAN 2013-2017 | 55 |
| Box 4 | CLOSING THE GAP PRIME MINISTER'S REPORT 2014 | 87 |

List of figures

| | | |
|-----------|--|----|
| Figure 1 | EVALUATION WORKFLOW | 2 |
| Figure 2 | KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS | 4 |
| Figure 3 | DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES, INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, 2011 | 7 |
| Figure 4 | NUMBER OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS ENROLLED IN YEAR 1 TO 10, ALL JURISDICTIONS, 2006 TO 2013 | 8 |
| Figure 5 | STUDENT LEARNING FRAMEWORK | 9 |
| Figure 6 | CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION PLAN | 17 |
| Figure 7 | ACTION PLAN DOMAINS, ACTIONS, MEASURES AND INTENDED RESULTS | 18 |
| Figure 8 | LINKS BETWEEN DOMAINS IN AUSTRALIAN DIRECTIONS AND THE ACTION PLAN | 18 |
| Figure 9 | SCSEEC AND ATSIEWG COORDINATION STRUCTURES, 2013 | 41 |
| Figure 10 | ADOPTION OF NATIONAL DOMAINS AT THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL AND FLOW-ON IMPACTS | 53 |
| Figure 11 | IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACTION PLAN AT THE NATIONAL, SYSTEMIC AND LOCAL LEVELS | 54 |
| Figure 12 | AWARENESS OF THE ACTION PLAN BY JURISDICTION AND SCHOOL SECTOR, 2014 | 59 |
| Figure 13 | CHALLENGES ATTRACTING AND MAINTAINING A SKILLED AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT TEACHER WORKFORCE, PHASE THREE | 66 |
| Figure 14 | EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS PRIOR TO FORMAL SCHOOLING | 71 |
| Figure 15 | SCHOOLS' INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN PRIOR TO FORMAL SCHOOLING | 72 |
| Figure 16 | ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN TO SUPPORT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN PRIOR TO BEGINNING SCHOOL | 73 |
| Figure 17 | LEVEL OF CONTACT THE SCHOOL HAS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, PHASES ONE TO THREE | 77 |
| Figure 18 | SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS | 78 |
| Figure 19 | SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN PLACE | 79 |
| Figure 20 | STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS | 79 |
| Figure 21 | FAMILY FORUMS RUN OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS | 80 |
| Figure 22 | STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF FAMILY FORUMS | 80 |

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Figure 23 | PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WITH PERSONALISED LEARNING PLANS IN PLACE | 81 |
| Figure 24 | EFFECTIVENESS OF PERSONALISED LEARNING PLANS IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' LEARNING OUTCOMES | 82 |
| Figure 25 | ATTENDANCE STRATEGIES IN PLACE | 88 |
| Figure 26 | CHANGE IN LITERACY RESULTS SINCE 2009 | 96 |
| Figure 27 | CHANGE IN NUMERACY RESULTS SINCE 2009 | 96 |
| Figure 28 | STUDENT MOBILITY TREE | 110 |
| Figure 29 | FUTURE FOCUS FOR NATIONAL POLICY, AGGREGATED RESPONSES, PHASE THREE | 125 |
| Figure 30 | POTENTIAL FUTURE DOMAIN STRUCTURE | 134 |

List of tables

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| Table 1 | FULL TIME AND PART TIME ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS ENROLLED IN YEARS 1 TO 10, 2013 | 8 |
| Table 2 | TOTAL STATE AND TERRITORY FOCUS SCHOOLS BY GEO-LOCATION, 2010 | 27 |
| Table 3 | COMPARISON OF SURVEY RESPONSES FOR FSNS, IFS AND OTHER FOCUS SCHOOLS | 34 |
| Table 4 | READINESS FOR SCHOOL: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS | 71 |
| Table 5 | FURTHER ACTIVITIES THAT COULD IMPROVE STUDENT READINESS | 73 |
| Table 6 | ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS | 77 |
| Table 7 | FURTHER COMMENTS REGARDING ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS ACTIVITIES | 82 |
| Table 8 | ATTENDANCE: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS | 87 |
| Table 9 | ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE ENROLMENT, ATTENDANCE, ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION, PHASE THREE | 89 |
| Table 10 | LITERACY AND NUMERACY: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS | 95 |
| Table 11 | LEADERSHIP, QUALITY TEACHING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS | 100 |
| Table 12 | PATHWAYS TO REAL-POST SCHOOL OPTIONS: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS | 105 |
| Table 13 | PRIMARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT TRANSITIONS TO SECONDARY SCHOOL | 106 |
| Table 14 | KEY MOBILITY ISSUES BY ACTION PLAN DOMAIN | 114 |
| Table 15 | NATIONAL, SYSTEMIC, LOCAL AND IECB REFLECTIONS ON BENEFITS, SHORTFALLS AND FUTURE NEEDS FOR NATIONAL PLANS | 124 |
| Table 16 | DESIGN APPROACHES | 127 |

Executive summary

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14* (Action Plan) comprised 55 actions to 'assist education providers to accelerate improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes and contribute to the achievement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) closing the gap targets' (Action Plan, 2010, p.37). It was developed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at national, systemic and local levels, targeting approximately 940 selected focus schools across school sectors (government, Catholic and independent)¹. The Action Plan included 14 performance indicators.

ACIL Allen Consulting, in collaboration with PhillipsKPA and Professor Mark Rose from La Trobe University, monitored implementation and outcomes associated with the Action Plan through a longitudinal evaluation conducted across three years—2011 (phase one), 2012 (phase two) and 2013 (phase three). Each review phase involved a survey of over 100 focus school leaders, case studies in up to 32 focus schools, interviews with key education stakeholders and a review of outcomes data in relation to the Action Plan's performance indicators.

Role of the Action Plan

The evaluation found that the Action Plan influenced education practices at the national, systemic and school levels to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Education sector stakeholders outlined many benefits of the Action Plan, which:

- established a common language and framework for action that added legitimacy, momentum and authority for activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the national, systemic and school levels
- provided a focus for information sharing at the national and systemic levels through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group (ATSIEWG) of the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC)
- established a framework for jurisdictions and school sectors to reference in developing policy directions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- provided consistency of direction over time, despite changes in governments and education sector personnel
- created a focus for planning and implementation activities through the priority domain structure.

The evaluation also found that the ATSIEWG played a key role in driving implementation of the Action Plan. ATSIEWG membership comprised representatives from the Australian Government, state and territory government education departments in each jurisdiction, and one representative each from the Catholic and independent school sectors. Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs) from each jurisdiction were also invited to attend from 2012 onwards. The ATSIEWG coordinated and monitored implementation activity and outcomes across school sectors.

Stakeholders identified many benefits resulting from the Action Plan

The ATSIEWG played a key role in coordinating, progressing and monitoring activity across school sectors

¹ Based on the most recent available list of focus schools for August 2012 at: <http://www.scseec.edu.au/archive/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Education-Action-Plan/Focus-Schools1.aspx>

Influence of the Action Plan

At the national level, the Action Plan played both influencing and direct implementation roles

At the national level, the Action Plan helped to maintain a strong focus on directions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through education policies and programs, reinforcing those already in development prior to 2010. In some areas, such as promoting growth of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce, the Action Plan accelerated implementation of activities that would have been unlikely to progress with similar intensity in its absence.

Adoption of the Action Plan's directions was critical to implementation by schools in the government and Catholic sectors

The degree to which the Action Plan was embedded in systemic policies influenced implementation at the school level. Among public school sectors, the Action Plan's priority domains and actions were embedded explicitly within systemic policies in some cases. However, a number of jurisdictions focused less around the priority domains and instead focused on identified state or territory priorities. Similarly, some Catholic Dioceses embedded the domains and actions explicitly in education policies, but others did not do so.

An implementation lag effect was observed following agreement to the Action Plan

Various lag effects in implementation were also observed, with the Action Plan's directions being introduced at differing times by school sectors and schools. This resulted from the variable timeframes for policy development across school sectors, with some continuing prior policy directions during the early phases of the Action Plan's rollout. Additional delays in implementation resulted from the time required by school sectors, and later schools, to agree on and implement priority areas for action.

Variable influences on schools made judgements regarding attribution difficult

All focus schools visited through the evaluation were able to identify numerous activities being implemented across each of the Action Plan's priority domains. The progress of many focus schools in improving practices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was clearly evident, with many taking significant steps to change their school-wide culture and to better educate the teacher workforce. Given the Action Plan's variable degree of influence at the school level, however, it is difficult to precisely establish the impact of the Action Plan relative to other programs, priorities and pedagogical approaches. While the Action Plan has helped to sustain a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in many schools, outcomes achieved often reflected a combination of programs and priorities, rather than being attributable solely to the Action Plan.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce was vital for focus schools

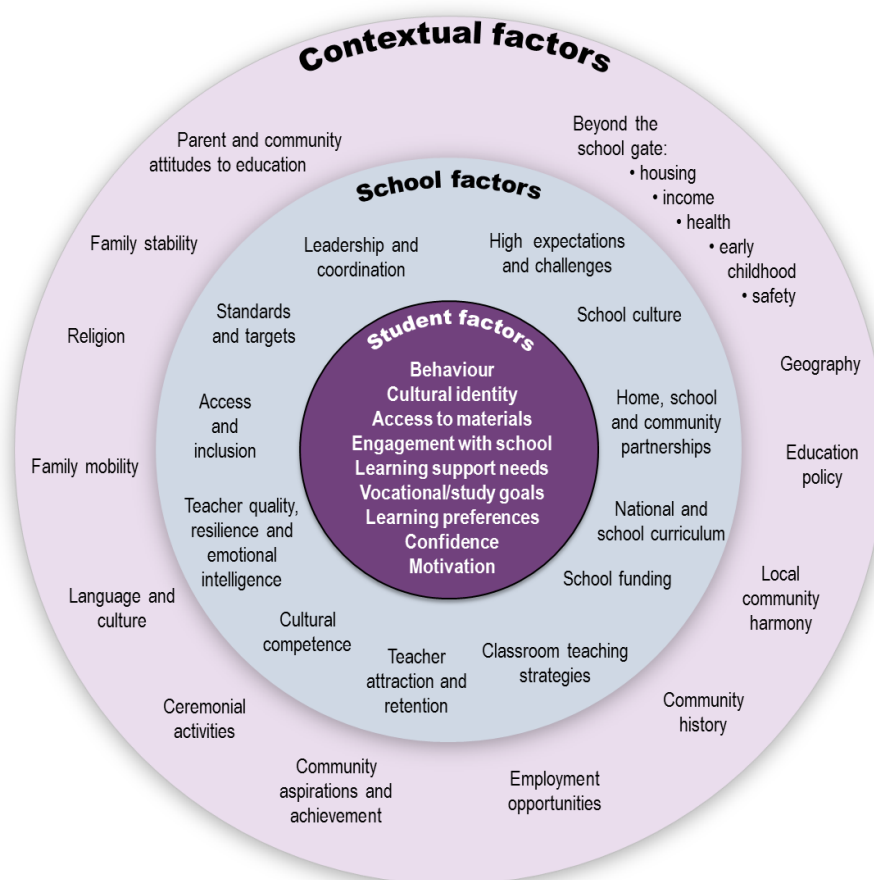
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support staff were identified as critical for many focus schools to establish relationships with students and their families. They were also important for the broader education of non-Indigenous school staff, many of whom sought more information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, identities and perspectives.

Data literacy at the school level was critical to understanding outcomes achieved

School case studies found varied capabilities in relation to data literacy for monitoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' outcomes. Some school leaders analysed available student data as a matter of practice, while others appeared less able to critically assess student outcomes. Schools with high levels of data literacy appeared better able to gauge the effectiveness of teaching approaches and tailor teaching practices to meet student needs.

Activities at the school level largely reflected systemic policies and local contextual needs

There was variable awareness of the Action Plan observed at the school level, with the Action Plan rarely being the primary driver of action. School activities instead reflected the priorities and programs supported by the relevant school sector, in combination with locally tailored responses to contextual needs. The student learning framework (Figure ES1) depicts the various contextual and school factors that may impact on students' learning.

Figure ES 1 **STUDENT LEARNING FRAMEWORK**

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

There was limited evidence of coordinated practice sharing among focus schools

Schools' implementation efforts were enhanced by additional Action Plan funding, though sustainability challenges remain

Significant efforts were applied during the rollout of the Action Plan to the achievement of its goals across school sectors and within schools. While the ATSIEWG provided a forum for practice sharing at the national and systemic levels, there was limited evidence of coordinated peer to peer practice sharing between schools.

In addition to funding allocated through National Partnership Agreements, from mid-2012, almost 400 focus schools or clusters of schools received additional funding to implement select Action Plan domains. A total of \$70 million was allocated through the Focus Schools Next Steps (FSNS) initiative and the Investing in Focus Schools (IFS) initiative. The evaluation's school survey results indicated that schools that received FSNS or IFS initiative funding experienced accelerated implementation results relative to focus schools that did not receive additional funding. However, the long-term sustainability of school-wide change resulting from these initiatives is uncertain given the limited program duration of two years.

Where nationally consistent and comparable data were available, it identified continuing gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students

Remote schools faced a distinct set of challenges

Stakeholders identified a number of areas where the Action Plan fell short of its intentions

There remains a need for nationally coordinated activity

The national education context is changing

The limited availability of nationally consistent data has made outcomes assessment difficult. Much of the information used to measure the Action Plan's outcomes is either qualitative or non-comparable between schools, school sectors or jurisdictions. The national data that are available in relation to the Action Plan's performance indicators indicate a mixed picture of achievement over recent years, with persistent gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students.

The contextual factors facing remote schools differ significantly from metropolitan and provincial schools. The Action Plan promoted a largely universal response, with few actions targeting national and systemic responses to issues associated with remoteness. Literacy and numeracy results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote areas have remained significantly poorer than for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in metropolitan and provincial locations since NAPLAN's inception in 2009. School case study information suggest that despite advanced and innovative practices adopted by many remote schools, gaps in literacy and numeracy and attendance outcomes remain significant.

Notwithstanding its achievements, stakeholders identified a number of issues in the Action Plan's design or implementation, specifically in relation to:

- actions that were overly prescriptive in some cases, which did not allow overarching objectives to be translated into flexible local solutions
- the large number of actions to be implemented, resulting in school sectors and schools selectively choosing priorities to pursue
- the short term nature of additional funding for selected focus schools to implement selected Action Plan domains, which may limit sustained activity
- the weakness of accountability mechanisms for implementation of the Action Plan across school sectors
- insufficient promotion of cultural recognition as a means of improving school-wide practices and levels of community awareness
- implementation practices that targeted action at focus schools, rather than all schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across Australia.

Future needs

Ongoing nationally coordinated activity is needed to retain and extend the commitment by school sectors and to engage schools that were not heavily involved in the Action Plan. This does not necessarily require a new plan but should build on lessons from the current Action Plan. Schools that have commenced school-wide change should be supported to sustain these activities. The future focus should be on activities that schools can implement within recurrent funding based on identified local needs, rather than through separate or additional programmatic funding.

The future national education context is evolving, with significant changes in policy directions and implementation structures are expected to influence practices that may be adopted by school sectors and schools. These include:

- new Australian Government school funding arrangements, which commenced in January 2014 and consist of a base amount per student plus specific loadings for student and school needs
- shifting programmatic responsibilities, with Australian Government programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being centralised in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

- new education priorities, with COAG recently establishing a set of agreed priority areas for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student education, focusing on school attendance, schools in remote areas and transitions from secondary school to post-school options
- revised national coordination structures, with the ATSIEWG evolving into a more strategic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group (ATSIEAG) and SCSEEC becoming the Education Council, with a broader remit.

These changes will have an important bearing on the design of any future national coordinated activity in this area.

**Lessons from the Action Plan
may guide future planning
activities**

The establishment of future priorities can learn from, and extend, the Action Plan, with reference to the following principles:

- *Extend existing directions*: support schools to sustain directions established under the Action Plan and encourage schools to extend their gains over time
- *Encompass all students, not select schools*: the focus school concept has supported early adoption, but future activity needs to be broader and seek to support all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rather than selected schools
- *Seek longer-term implementation*: sustained action requires time, with benefits of longer-term implementation more likely to be realised if future strategies are introduced as soon as possible and pursued over at least a five year period
- *Leverage recurrent funding*: the design of future action should support implementation using existing school funding arrangements and student loadings, rather than additional funding packages
- *Promote local flexibility*: there is limited value in prescribing local actions when schools require local flexibility to achieve agreed outcomes
- *Build capacity and share practices*: provide adequate information and support for schools to learn from practices that have proven effective elsewhere, supporting those that require additional assistance
- *Develop the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce*: future activity must continue to expand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce to support community engagement and student outcomes
- *Collaborate with parents and communities*: sustain the focus on engaging with, and promoting shared decision-making among, parents and families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- *Reduce the reporting burden*: work with existing data and reporting cycles to help school sectors focus their attention on supporting schools to achieve changes and capturing effective practices for wider sharing.

**Stakeholders' views
regarding future attention
should be considered**

National, systemic and IECB stakeholders identified that the key requirements for future nationally coordinated activity are to:

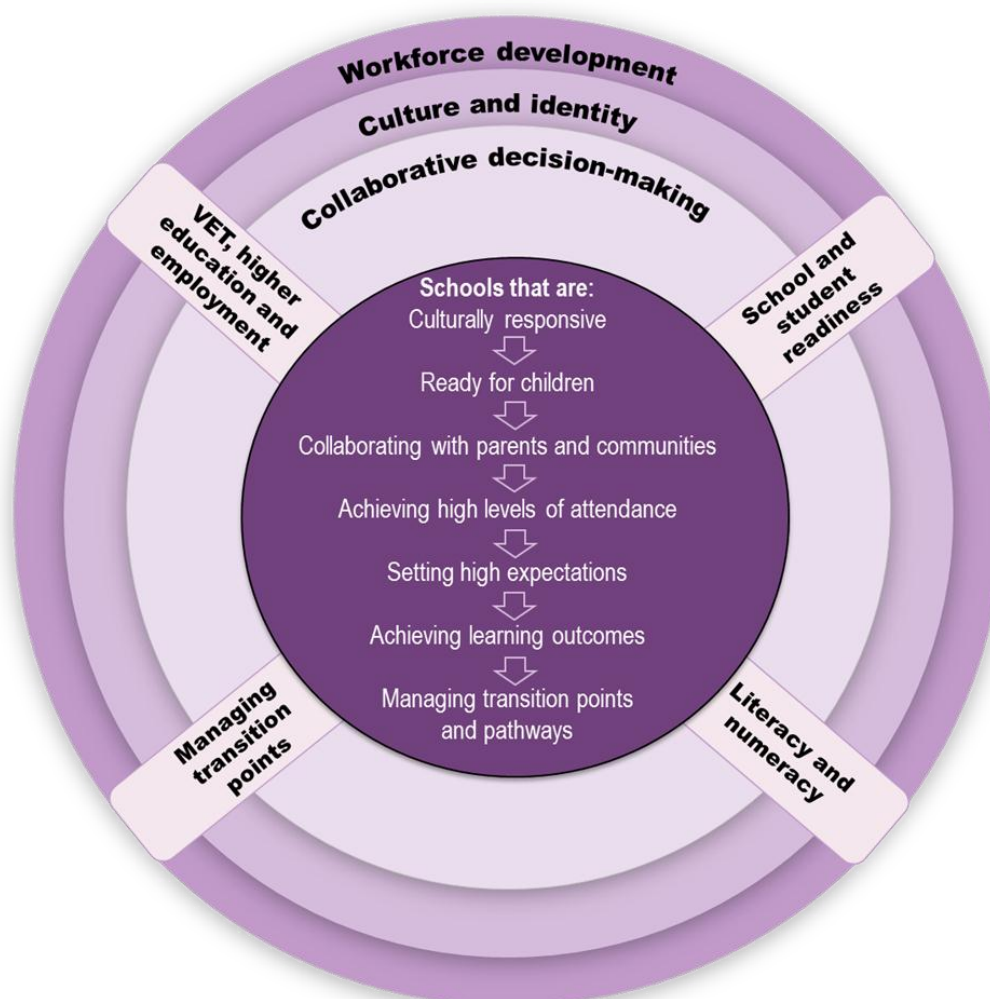
- establish greater accountability for implementation and outcomes to be achieved, with targets to be ambitious to maintain a significant focus on activities and outcomes
- acknowledge the differences between remote and provincial/metropolitan schools and support responses tailored to local contextual needs
- increase the focus on secondary school students
- take a holistic focus from early childhood through to employment to promote the complete education pathway, rather than restricting actions to schools

- establish forums and information resources to better share effective practices across schools
- provide flexibility for school sectors and schools to set their own priorities in the context of national priorities.

The priority domain structure could be further enhanced

The priority domains have provided a useful organising framework for school sectors and schools, but should continue to evolve. Three cross-cutting areas of activity—workforce development, culture and identity, and collaborative decision-making—are needed to support all other domains. Together with the priority domains—school and student readiness, literacy and numeracy, managing transition points, and further education and employment—these will assist schools to be culturally responsive, ready for children, collaborating with parents and communities, achieving high levels of attendance, setting high expectations, achieving learning outcomes and managing transition points and pathways, as shown in Figure ES2.

Figure ES 2 **PROPOSED FUTURE DOMAIN STRUCTURE**



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Consolidated findings

Action Plan structure and design (Chapter 3)

The Action Plan extended prior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy directions and national reform directions in areas of need. Its domain-based structure has provided a conceptual framework for school sectors and schools to identify needs and priorities.

The Action Plan created a common language for activity across Australia, reinforcing the key areas for action.

Stakeholders considered the structure of the Action Plan to be largely appropriate.

During its early phases of implementation, the Action Plan was strongly supported by stakeholders for its action-based structure, though over time, various actions were considered to be overly prescriptive, unclear in intent or of limited priority.

The Action Plan may have benefited from greater focus on pre- and post-school education, rather than focusing only on school education.

During the early implementation of the Action Plan, there was limited awareness among school sectors and schools about the responsibilities, expectations and benefits for focus schools. This affected the focus school selection process in some school sectors, with a number of suitable schools opting out.

Most focus schools were primary schools, despite there being recognised needs across secondary schools.

Some school sectors supported all schools to implement the Action Plan equally, while others directed attention primarily towards focus schools.

Action Plan funding (Chapter 4)

Schools that received FSNS or IFS initiative funding appear to have implemented some Action Plan actions more extensively than schools that did not receive FSNS or IFS initiative funding.

There are concerns about the sustainability of activities introduced using time-limited FSNS and IFS initiative funding, with many schools employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education staff.

Governance, monitoring and evaluation (Chapter 5)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group (ATSIEWG) played an active leadership role in planning and decision-making activities to support the rollout of the Action Plan. The Catholic and independent school sectors had limited representation on the ATSIEWG, relative to the government sector.

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies provided valuable support for the rollout of the Action Plan within each jurisdiction, building on networks across school sectors and knowledge of practical approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The delayed agreement to the Action Plan impacted on the collection of baseline data in both 2010 and 2011.

The Action Plan's performance measures provided a basis for monitoring, but were impacted by data collection issues, a lack of clarity provided to schools and an inability to disaggregate findings between focus and non-focus schools.

The longitudinal evaluation has itself contributed to supporting the rollout of the Action Plan among schools and school sectors by gauging implementation progress, assessing outcomes and advising on future national directions.

National and systemic coordination (Chapter 6)

The national collaborative actions helped to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in national education reform directions and progress areas where limitations in evidence or action existed.

Adoption and promotion of the Action Plan's priority domains and actions in systemic policies was critical to supporting schools to implement the Action Plan's directions.

There was a lag effect in implementation of the Action Plan's directions in many school sectors, resulting from the variable timeframes for policy development and implementation.

Whole-of-school implementation (Chapter 7)

Action at the school level is driven primarily by local contextual needs, in combination with systemic policies, rather than as a direct result of national plans.

While a strong acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is critical to creating a welcoming school environment that encourages students to attend and engage, the influence of the Action Plan in explicitly promoting cultural recognition was limited.

The challenges facing remote schools differ significantly from metropolitan and provincial schools. However, the Action Plan promoted a largely uniform response to its local actions, only including a small number of national collaborative and systemic actions targeted toward remote schools.

Schools with high levels of capability in data literacy were better able to gauge student progress, tailor teaching practices to drive improved results and engage teachers in achieving student outcomes.

Many focus schools expressed a desire for greater practice sharing to learn from peers, including in other school sectors and jurisdictions.

School implementation by domain (Chapter 8)

Domain One: Readiness for school

The Action Plan's readiness for school domain prompted schools to identify suitable strategies to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Survey results suggest that some schools increased their involvement in activities to support students prior to formal schooling during the course of the Action Plan's rollout.

Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) data from 2012 indicated a gradually closing gap in developmental vulnerability between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children.

The importance of forming relationships with parents and to establishing a welcoming school environment to attract, enrol, engage and retain students was emphasised by schools.

Domain Two: Engagement and connections

Engagement and connections activities were critical to the achievement of all Action Plan domains. While the local actions in the Action Plan prompted targeted activity, they were often considered overly prescriptive and schools tended to be involved in a broader range of engagement activities.

Personalised learning plans helped schools to better understand student and family circumstances.

Aboriginal Education Workers or equivalents are critical to community engagement activities. In many cases, their tenure is uncertain beyond the expiry of National Partnership Agreement and additional Action Plan funding.

Domain Three: Attendance

Challenges facing schools in relation to enrolment, attendance, engagement and retention varied based on their local context and student composition. Typical responses involved building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities, engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff, providing logistical support to families, delivering an engaging curriculum, providing quality teaching, offering personalised learning support, and rewarding positive behaviours.

There remain gaps in attendance rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students across all jurisdictions and school sectors, particularly at the secondary school level. However, retention rates and grade progression ratios have demonstrated improvement over the past three years.

Domain 4: Literacy and numeracy

Many schools considered that the Action Plan helped to establish the foundations for literacy and numeracy improvement. However more needs to be done to support students through intensive support, literacy and numeracy coaching for teachers, implementation of whole-of-school approaches, and establishment and monitoring of high expectations for students.

At a national level, only three of eight literacy and numeracy progress points were met in 2013, fewer than 2011 or 2012.

Domain 5: Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development

Many schools faced difficulties attracting and retaining appropriately qualified staff, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Sustainability of school practices was impacted by teacher turnover. Stability of leadership and teaching staff was important for implementation of approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over time.

Domain 6: Pathways to real post-school options

The post-school pathways domain is critical to support students to complete Year 12 and to provide skills for lifelong learning. The focus on trade training over recent years was considered positive in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this regard.

Mobility study (Chapter 9)

A study of mobility in the Far North Queensland region identified significant negative impacts on rates of attendance and student learning. Mobility is a recognised challenge across many other regions of Australia, impacting on metropolitan, provincial and remote schools.

While mobility is acknowledged as a serious issue within school systems, advanced systemic responses involving government, Catholic and independent schools were considered by stakeholders to be essential to supporting students and school staff.

1 Background

This chapter provides an overview of the Action Plan, the evaluation process and the report structure.

1.1 The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* (Action Plan) outlined national directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It drew together a range of actions that sought to close the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students.

It focused on six priority domains that evidence shows contribute to improved outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These are:

- *Readiness for school*: participation in culturally inclusive, high quality education programs and care
- *Engagement and connections*: school and early childhood partnerships with families and communities to establish a collective commitment to education
- *Attendance*: increasing the levels of enrolment and participation in schooling
- *Literacy and numeracy*: moving beyond the basics of English and mathematics
- *Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development*: improving cultural competency, supporting school staff and building an Indigenous school workforce
- *Pathways to real post-school options*: promoting year 12 completion and transitioning students from school to further study or employment.

The Action Plan included 55 actions at the national, systemic and local levels. It also outlined desired outcomes linked to targets and performance indicators.

1.2 Evaluation overview

Objectives

The Action Plan documented the need for a longitudinal evaluation to assess its effectiveness and to consider the extent to which improved educational outcomes could be achieved through coordinated actions across six priority domains. The evaluation objectives outlined in the Action Plan seek:

- an overall assessment of the effectiveness of the Action Plan on policies and process in terms of lessons learnt for the improvement of educational outcomes and service delivery
- an in-depth analysis of student outcomes in focus schools, tracking progress prior to school and through school to develop a greater understanding about successes and challenges in achieving the closing the gap targets.

The evaluation process and orientation

ACIL Allen Consulting, in collaboration with PhillipsKPA and Professor Mark Rose from La Trobe University, was engaged by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group (ATSIEWG) of the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) to lead a longitudinal evaluation of the Action Plan. The evaluation began in November 2011 and concluded in November 2014.

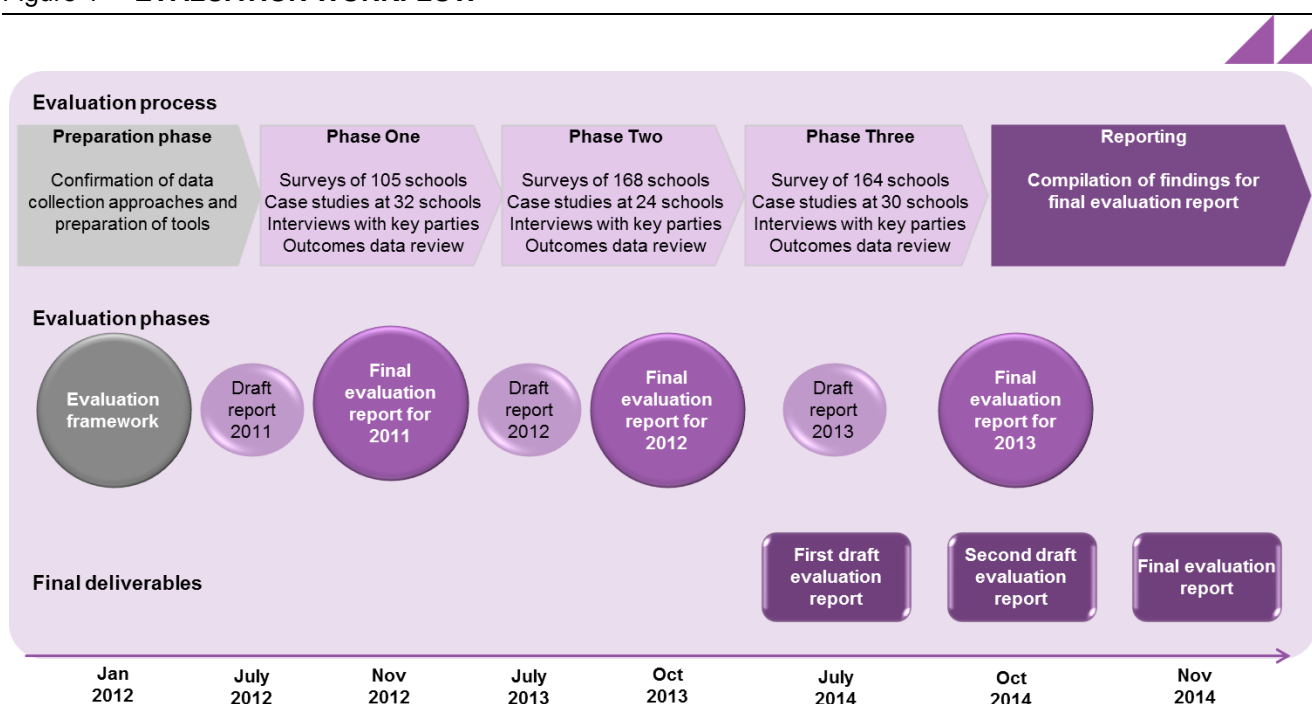
Final evaluation reports were provided to the newly formed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group (ATSIEAG) of the Education Council, which is responsible for leading the development of a future national strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students on behalf of the Education Council, which replaced SCSEEC in 2014.

The evaluation focused particularly on changes evident over time, based on information collected across three years, including 2011 (phase one), 2012 (phase two) and 2013 (phase three). Each evaluation phase involved a survey of school leaders, case studies in schools, interviews with key stakeholders and review of available outcomes data.

The evaluation was largely summative in focus, assessing the achievements resulting from the Action Plan, however it also sought to play a formative role in supporting the development of future national directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Three summative reports were provided to the ATSIEAG reflecting findings for 2011, 2012 and 2013. Longitudinal findings from these three years of study form the basis of this report.

The evaluation workflow is demonstrated in Figure 1. This includes the approval of the evaluation framework, which established the data collection methods and was endorsed by the ATSIEWG in January 2012, along with draft and final reports for each evaluation phase. The final evaluation report incorporates the longitudinal findings from the three phases of study, and provides recommendations regarding future national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education needs.

Figure 1 **EVALUATION WORKFLOW**



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Overview of evaluation method

Each phase of the data collection process involved:

- School case studies, with 32 focus school visits in phase one, 24 in phase two and 30 in phase three. A total of 48 unique focus schools were visited throughout the evaluation, noting that several schools were visited multiple times to gauge implementation progress and outcomes achieved over time. Phase three also included a deeper study of student mobility, summarised in Chapter 9. The compendium of all case studies was provided to the ATSIEAG members, but will not be publicly released. A summary of findings is available in Appendix E of the data appendix.
- A survey of focus school leaders, with 105 responses received in phase one, 168 responses in phase two and 164 responses in phase three, although only 130 of the phase three responses had been completed in full.
- Interviews in each jurisdiction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education representatives from the government, Catholic and independent school sectors, along with Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs). Interviews were also held with national representatives, including the Australian Government and other key education bodies.
- Outcomes data review in relation to the Action Plan's 14 performance indicators.

Appendix A outlines the approach to each of these evaluation methods in greater detail.

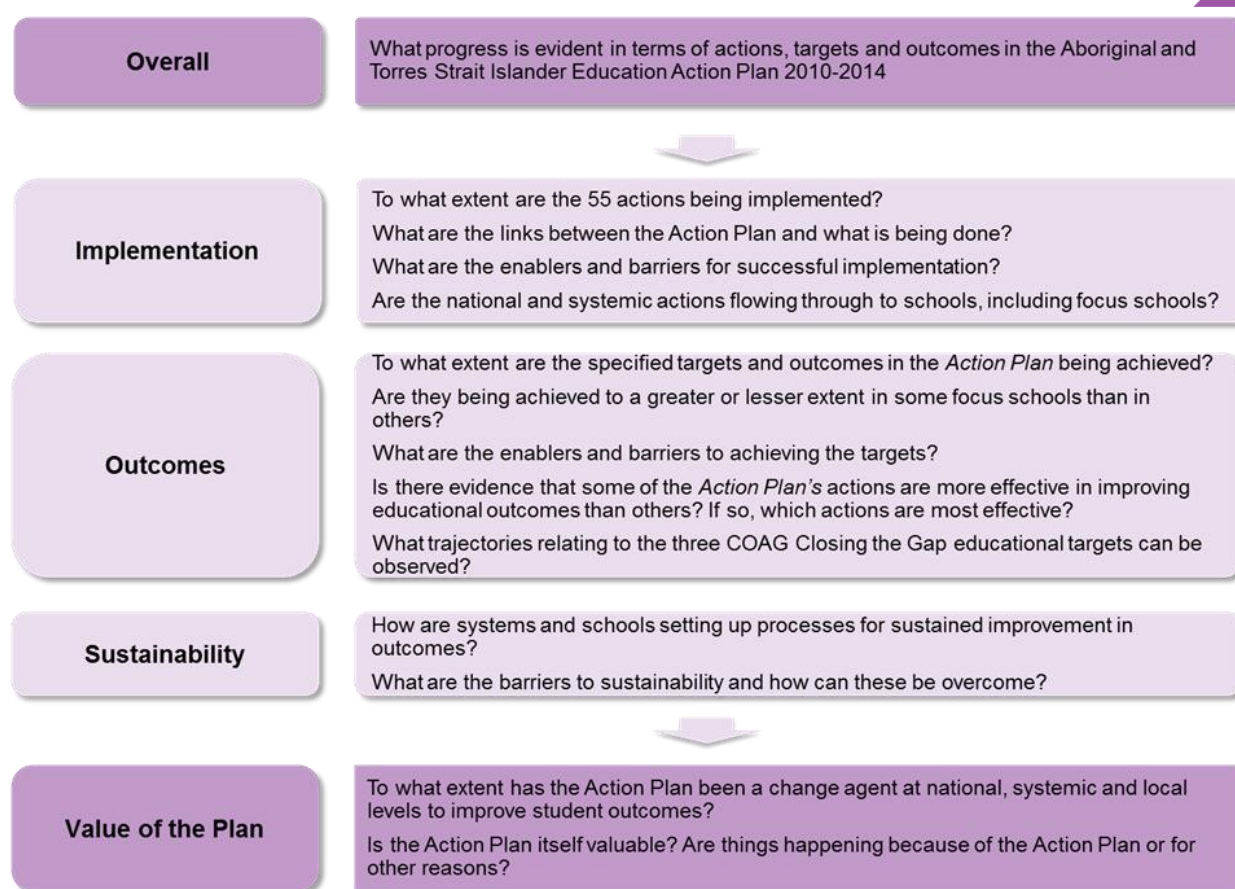
The evaluation considered implementation progress and outcomes across the government, Catholic and independent school sectors. Collectively, these are referred to as 'school sectors' throughout the evaluation and include:

- eight government school systems (one in each state and territory)
- 28 Catholic Dioceses
- independent schools, which are largely autonomous, but represented by associations of independent schools in each jurisdiction.

Key evaluation questions

The key questions for the evaluation are detailed in Figure 2, as agreed by the ATSIEWG. These sought to assess the overall value of the Action Plan, along with the effectiveness of implementation and support for the achievement of sustained outcomes.

Figure 2 KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The evaluation scope

The evaluation provides considerable insight into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education practices across Australia, drawn from extensive consultation and analysis of data. At the same time, there are limitations to the scope of the evaluation and these are noted below.

Attribution to the Action Plan

The Action Plan was repeatedly identified as one of a number of influences on schooling practices and activities. Schools and school sectors received a range of funding and specific program support that varied from school to school, with priorities often set on the basis of major funding streams, along with systemic priorities. In addition, some activities that fit within the six Action Plan domains were to varying degrees in train prior to the introduction of the Action Plan.

As such, the evaluation acknowledges a range of competing priorities in schools and therefore does not assume that observed changes in outcomes are attributable to the Action Plan.

Analysis of primary data

The primary data collection tools used through the evaluation—the survey of schools and the case study process—sought to gauge changes over time at the school level in relation to the six Action Plan domains. A total of approximately 300 unique schools responded over the course of the evaluation. Of these, 26 schools completed surveys in phase one and three, while 59 completed surveys in phase two and three.

These are relatively small longitudinal samples in comparison to the approximately 940 focus schools, so findings regarding longitudinal change should be considered in this context.

Case studies provided a further longitudinal comparison, with 30 schools revisited in phase three after also being studied in phase one, two or both. The availability of data, however, varies by school in format and depth, with results unable to be compared across schools.

Data associated with performance indicators

Issues were encountered in measuring changes in relation to the Action Plan's 14 performance indicators due to:

- different data collection approaches across jurisdictions and between different school sectors
- inability to compare results between designated Action Plan 'focus schools' and non-focus schools
- several measures against which only qualitative, rather than quantitative, data was able to be collected.

Absence of a control group

The evaluation assessed implementation activities and local outcomes at Action Plan focus schools through surveys and case studies. The evaluation scope did not seek associated consideration of schools that were not focus schools. Variability in practices between focus and non-focus schools cannot be compared.

Good practices in context only

Good practices identified through case studies and surveys are shared in evaluation reports as a means of raising awareness of the range of implementation approaches by schools. These practices are drawn from different contexts and, as such, care is required when considering translation of practices into other school settings.

The student perspective

Engagement with school students was not within the scope of the evaluation. Instead, school case study visits involved engagement with parents and community members to discuss family satisfaction with school practices.

Limited pedagogical analysis

The evaluation scope did not involve review of different pedagogical approaches in supporting students, in particular for literacy and numeracy. Evidence of improved outcomes is therefore not able to be assessed in relation to specific learning approaches adopted.

Program analysis

The evaluation does not seek to undertake detailed assessment of the effectiveness of specific programs referenced through the Action Plan's 55 actions. While the evaluation notes programs that some schools consider to be effective, the evaluation does not seek to judge or prioritise particular approaches as being the most effective - to do so would require deeper evaluation of program-specific outcomes.

1.3 Report structure

Broadly, this report provides background to the policy settings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the Action Plan's structure and design, coordination approaches, national collaborative actions and implementation and outcomes achieved by schools. Findings are provided throughout the document, with consolidated findings included in Chapter 10. This is followed by formative considerations in Chapter 11, including an environment scan of the changing education context. The need for a future plan is discussed, with design principles and options presented for further consideration and discussion by the ATSIEAG and the Education Council.

The evaluation refers to findings from the review of the previous national education policy—*Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008* (Australian Directions)—as a means of documenting the needs identified by leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts in 2009. This also provides a touch-point for gauging whether identified needs were addressed through the implementation of the Action Plan.

Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: the educational context for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Chapter 3: the Action Plan structure and design, including the domains, focus schools and funding
- Chapter 4: the Focus Schools Next Steps (FSNS) and Investing in Focus Schools (IFS) initiatives
- Chapter 5: governance of the Action Plan, including the role of key organisations, performance monitoring processes and the evaluation
- Chapter 6: influence of national collaborative actions and systemic coordination activities
- Chapter 7: lessons from the rollout of the Action Plan at the whole-of-school level
- Chapter 8: domain-by-domain summary of activities and outcomes
- Chapter 9: findings from a study of student mobility undertaken as part of phase three
- Chapter 10: summary of report findings and changes in the education context
- Chapter 11: options for future nationally coordinated activity.

Appendices are provided separately:

- Appendix A: further details about the evaluation methodology
- Appendix B: longitudinal findings from the school surveys
- Appendix C: summary of data findings for the 14 Action Plan performance indicators
- Appendix D: an overview of progress in implementing national collaborative actions
- Appendix E: findings from case studies in schools.

A case study compendium and evaluation reports in 2011 (phase one), 2012 (phase two) and 2013 (phase three) were provided to the ATSIEAG. These will not be publicly released.

2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education context

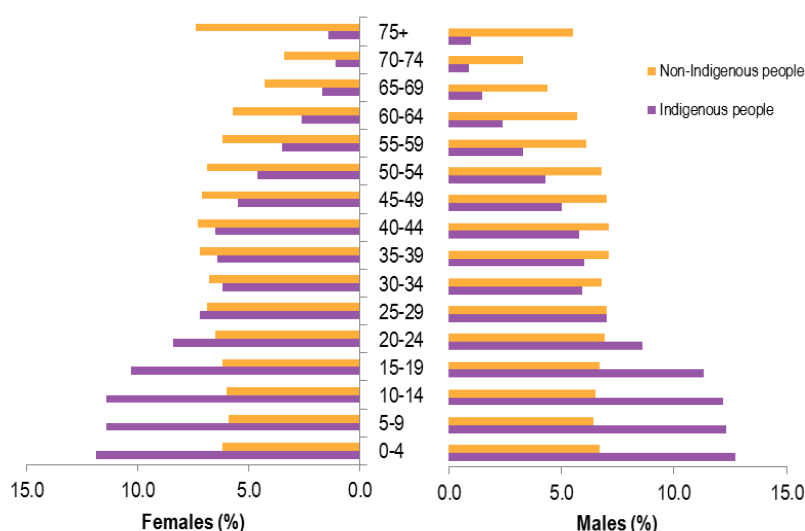
This chapter details the demographic characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, factors that impact on student learning, education policy responses over time and the process for agreeing the Action Plan.

2.1 Demographics and student enrolments

According to 2011 Census data, there were 548,370 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, comprising approximately 2.5 per cent of the population. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population had a median age of 21 years, compared with 38 years for non-Indigenous people. This reflects both higher than average birth rates, along with lower life expectancy. In the 2011 Census, 36 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were under the age of 15, compared with 19 per cent of the non-Indigenous population.

Differences in the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people by age bracket are shown in Figure 3. This highlights the younger demographic profile of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population relative to the non-Indigenous population.

Figure 3 **DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES, INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, 2011**



Note: Usual residence Census counts. Excludes overseas visitors. Includes other Territories.

Source: ABS Cat. 2076.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2011.

In 2013, there were 144,977 full and part time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in Years 1 to 10 in Australia, an increase of 4.2 per cent from 2012. Of these,

122,347 (84.4 per cent) were enrolled in government schools, 14,947 (10.3 per cent) were enrolled in Catholic schools and 7,683 (5.3 per cent) were enrolled in independent schools. Student numbers by jurisdiction are shown in Table 1.

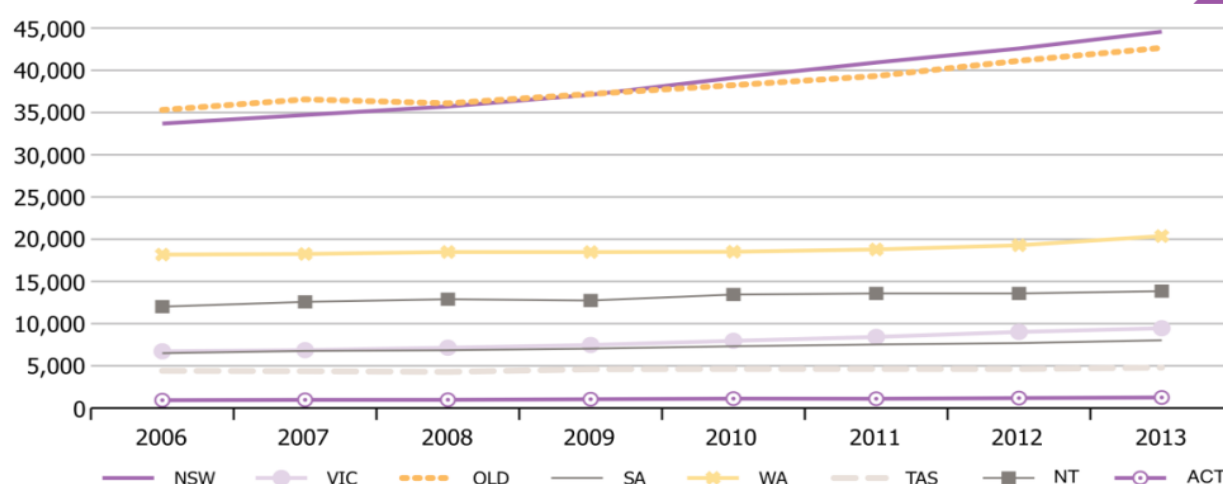
Table 1 **FULL TIME AND PART TIME ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS ENROLLED IN YEARS 1 TO 10, 2013**

| Jurisdiction | Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students | Proportion of national total (%) |
|--------------|--|----------------------------------|
| NSW | 44,570 | 30.7 |
| VIC | 9,455 | 6.5 |
| QLD | 42,654 | 29.4 |
| WA | 20,365 | 14.0 |
| SA | 8,031 | 5.5 |
| TAS | 4,796 | 3.3 |
| ACT | 1,256 | 0.9 |
| NT | 13,850 | 9.6 |
| AUST | 144,977 | 100.0 |

Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0 (Schools, Australia, 2013) – NSSC Table 42b: Full-time and part-time students 2006-2012 (released February 2014)

Between 2006 and 2013, the number of full and part time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in Years 1 to 10 increased across all jurisdictions, as shown in Figure 4. During this time, New South Wales and Queensland experienced the largest increases, with 10,879 (32.3 per cent) and 7,351 students (20.8 per cent) respectively. On a proportional basis, the greatest increases in enrolments were in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, with enrolments growing by 40.7 per cent (2,733 students) and 34.6 per cent (323 students) respectively.

Figure 4 **NUMBER OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS ENROLLED IN YEAR 1 TO 10, ALL JURISDICTIONS, 2006 TO 2013**



Source: ABS Cat. No. 4221.0 (Schools, Australia, 2013) – NSSC Table 42b: Full-time and part-time students 2006-2012 (released February 2014)

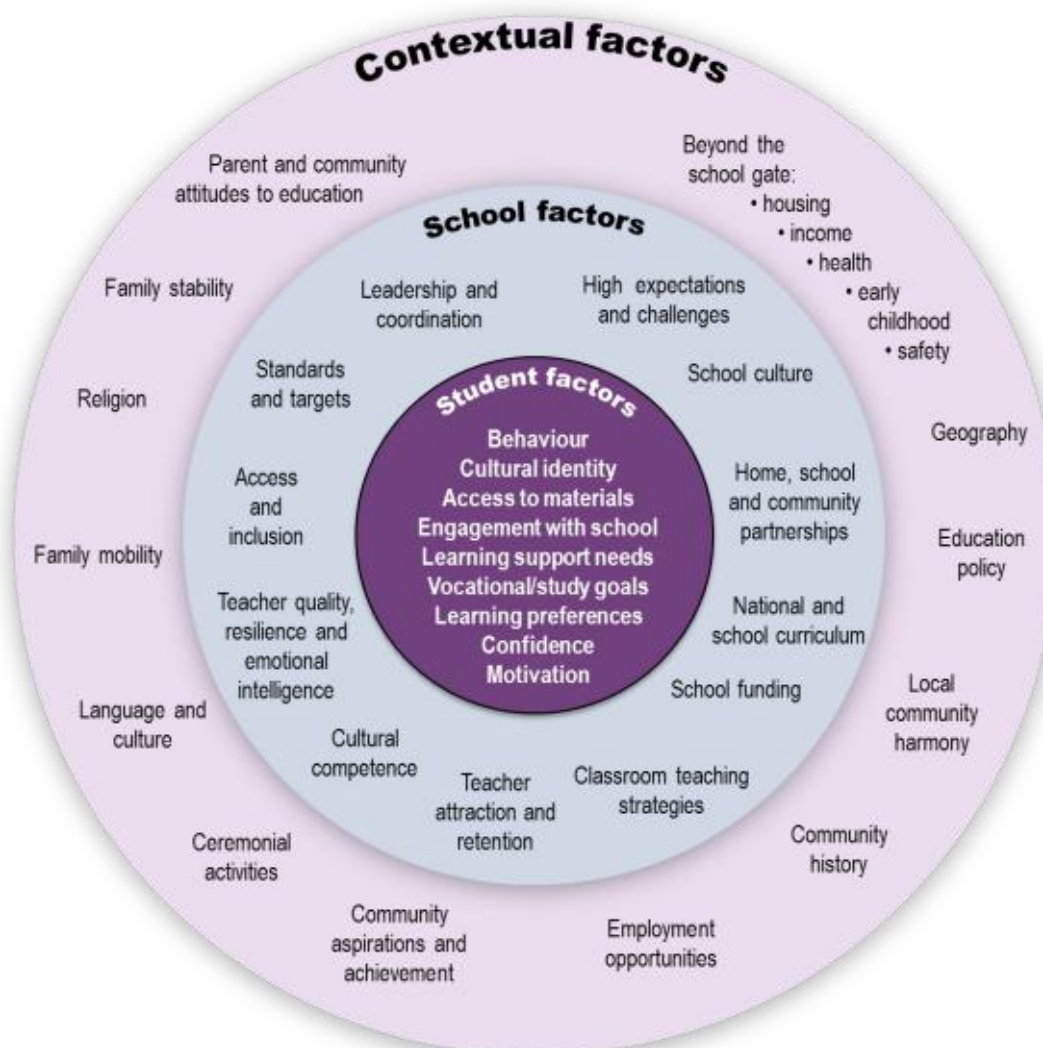
2.2 Educational challenges and considerations

The student learning framework

Case studies undertaken as part of the evaluation highlighted a range of educational and social challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, many of which have been long acknowledged and well documented. These vary by location and school setting, and require schools to tailor their responses to address regional and local needs as far as possible.

Accordingly, a student learning framework was developed to encapsulate the contextual, school and student factors impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (see Figure 5). The framework was used in case study discussions with schools in order to better understand their local challenges, along with the interplay and relationship between various factors. Some of the major challenges are detailed further in the sections that follow.

Figure 5 STUDENT LEARNING FRAMEWORK



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Contextual factors

There is widespread acknowledgment that educational challenges are exacerbated by social disadvantage, and that a key indicator of disadvantage is the socio-economic status of families or whole communities. Among low socio-economic communities, lower levels of prior educational achievement by parents and community members have intergenerational effects. Families in low socio-economic communities are more likely to have lower average incomes and higher rates of welfare dependency. In turn, poorer families are more likely to find the associated costs of education, such as school fees, subject levies and co-curricular activities, more difficult to meet. Schools may find it more difficult to provide the full range of materials, equipment and services required to support student learning, given the multiplicity of additional needs. There can be consequent impacts on participation in school-based activities (Doyle and Hill, 2009, p.39).

Health is also acknowledged as a critical prerequisite for education. Poor health and nutrition have been found to impact heavily on students' abilities to learn. Hunger, malnutrition and chronic health conditions, such as otitis media (middle ear infection), undermine students' capacities to concentrate in the classroom and to hear what is being taught. In a study conducted for the Australian Primary Principal's Association, fifteen per cent of participants—principals, community members and Indigenous education workers—identified poor student health as an obstacle to learning, compounded by difficulties in accessing medical diagnosis and treatment (O'Keefe *et. al.*, 2012).

Other contextual challenges may arise due to factors beyond the school gate relating to family and community circumstances (housing, experiences of early childhood and general community safety). In addition, student learning outcomes are influenced by: levels of family stability; parental and community attitudes to education; religious beliefs and influences; mobility; language and culture; ceremonial activities; community aspirations and past family history of achievement; local employment opportunities; and levels of community harmony. Education policy settings and geography are also acknowledged as factors that may impact on educational priorities and outcomes.

School factors

Once at school, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may face further challenges through their experience of education. The lack of a culturally inclusive curriculum, pedagogy or supportive teaching and learning strategies can impede students' full engagement in learning, with consequent impacts on education outcomes. There is a need for teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to have an understanding of Indigenous culture so that curriculum and pedagogy are adapted successfully to student needs and interests. In some locations, this requires sensitivity to Aboriginal English while also supporting language development in Standard Australian English (Anderson, 2011, p. 96-7; Doyle & Hill, 2009, p.43; O'Keefe, 2012, p. 42).

The school environment as a whole is crucial to supporting student and family engagement in education. An environment that affirms culture and identity and seeks to engage positively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families is more likely to develop student and family relationships that support education engagement (Campbell, Kelly & Harrison, 2012, p.14-15). The negative impact of low teacher expectations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is also revealed through the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Behrendt Review) (Australian Government, 2012). The Behrendt Review identified that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been influenced by teachers purveying negative views of their academic ability, with subsequent impact on their educational

achievements. There was also evidence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are advised not to select 'academic' subjects at secondary levels, thereby limiting their post-school education and training options (Australian Government, 2012, p. 17-18).

Student factors

Emotional and behavioural difficulties, regardless of their origin, affect a student's capacity to learn. They can reduce students' capacity to concentrate, or to interact with peers and staff in a positive manner, or to regulate their behaviour (Doyle & Hill, 2009, p. 40).

There is a significant correlation between students exhibiting high risks of emotional and behavioural difficulties and low academic performance. The causes may include life stress, family and household factors and physiological conditions. For example, the *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey* found that the number of life stress events was one of the strongest predictors of emotional or behavioural difficulties in Aboriginal children:

Family strife and fear, illness and death, and problems with employment and money were examples of the most common stresses... Just over one in five children (22 per cent) were living in families where seven to 14 of these major life stress events had occurred in the preceding 12 months. These children were five and a half times more likely to be at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties than children in families where two or less life stress events had occurred.

Zubrick et. al. 2006, p. 303.

Family and household factors are strongly associated with emotional and behavioural difficulties among students, stemming from parenting practices, family/community dysfunction, sole parenting and high household occupancy. Levels of relative isolation are also a factor, with children living in remote areas at higher risk of emotional or behavioural problems than children living in the metropolitan areas (Zubrick et al, 2006, p.303-304). Physiological conditions, such as foetal alcohol syndrome, have a significant impact on student health and wellbeing and require interventions to support education achievement and attainment (O'Keefe, 2012, p.45).

2.3 Policy responses over time

There has been a long history of national and systemic policies, declarations and agreements to support education delivery, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve equitable outcomes. This section discusses these national and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander directions, setting the scene for the introduction of the Action Plan.

National declarations

Over recent years, major declarations about directions for education have been made approximately once each decade to establish longer term focus and directions. In 1989, the Australian Education Council agreed to the Hobart Declaration on Schooling, which described ten agreed national goals for schooling in Australia. One goal focused on student participation, and promoted an understanding and respect for Australia's cultural heritage, including the background of Aboriginal and ethnic groups (MCEECDYA, 2014).

In 1999, the Hobart Declaration was superseded by the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century. This focused on ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes would improve and, over time, match those of other students. It also promoted awareness among all students about the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and sought to build the knowledge, skills

and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) extended the Hobart and Adelaide declarations by providing a stronger focus and commitment to action to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. It identified that:

Educational outcomes for Indigenous children and young people are substantially behind those of other students in key areas of enrolment, attendance, participation, literacy, numeracy, retention and completion.

Meeting the needs of young Indigenous Australians and promoting high expectations for their educational performance requires strategic investment.

Australian schooling needs to engage Indigenous students, their families and communities in all aspects of schooling; increase Indigenous participation in the education workforce at all levels; and support coordination community services for students and their families that can increase productive participation in schooling.

Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008

It was agreed that Australian Governments would work with all school sectors to close the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students, providing targeted support for school improvement in low socioeconomic communities (MCEETYA 2008).

The Melbourne Declaration was supported by a series of action plans, which outlined the strategies and initiatives that Australian governments would undertake, in collaboration with all school sectors, to support the achievement of education goals outlined in the Declaration.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2009)

More recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy directions, including the Action Plan, have supported the Closing the Gap targets endorsed through the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA). The NIRA is a bipartisan commitment by all Australian governments to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by:

- closing the life expectancy gap within a generation
- halving the gap in mortality rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under five within a decade
- ensuring access to early childhood education for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four year olds in remote communities by 2013
- halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement by 2018
- at least halving the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020
- halving the gap in employment outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

The commitments in the NIRA are pursued through a number of National Partnership Agreements (NPA) aimed at overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. Under the NIRA, COAG sought to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through various NPAs, including:

- Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes
- Remote Indigenous Housing
- Indigenous Early Childhood Development

- Indigenous Economic Participation
- Remote Service Delivery
- Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access
- Closing the Gap in Northern Territory (FaHCSIA 2012).

The National Education Agreement (2009, revised 2012)

The National Education Agreement, established under the Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations, outlines the goals, responsibilities and accountabilities of the Australian Government and all states and territories regarding education. It details:

- Australia's shared objective and outcomes for schooling
- a broad outline of the outputs performed in schooling
- roles and responsibilities of each level of government
- performance indicators and performance benchmarks, which outline a number of outcomes-focussed targets, and progress measures
- policy and reform directions to achieve progress towards the shared objective.

Importantly, it established the reporting requirements for each jurisdiction through the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia, including key performance measures, the annual assessment and reporting cycle to support the National Report on Schooling in Australia.

The Australian Education Act

The *Australian Education Act* 2013 sets out the funding arrangements and expectations for approved authorities to ensure funding accountability to the Commonwealth and school communities. The Australian Education Regulation 2013 outlines the financial accountability and other conditions that are required in order to receive funding under the *Australian Education Act* 2013.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policies, strategies, directions and plans

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989

In 1989, the Australian Education Council introduced in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), which came into effect in January 1990. The objective of the NATSIEP was to work towards achieving education equality by the year 2000 through the establishment of 21 long term goals from preschool through to technical and further education. The four key areas addressed were:

- the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making
- achievement of equality of access to educational services
- achievement of equality of educational participation
- achievement of equitable and appropriate educational outcomes (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2000).

In 1995, a national review was undertaken on the progress of the NATSIEP in achieving its goals. This found that access and participation rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had improved, but that significant inequalities remained. In response, MCEETYA reaffirmed its commitment to the NATSIEP, established a number of priority

areas and agreed to an outcomes focus for this work. These priorities included literacy and numeracy and the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in their children's education.

The NATSIEP has been the only statement of 'policy' released for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The National Strategy for Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002

In response to the recommendations of the national review of the NATSIEP, a national strategy was developed, focusing on strategies to reform the implementation and monitoring of the NATSIEP goals. In particular, the strategy described eight priority areas, including increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples employed in education and training, ensuring equitable access and participation for students, and supporting the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, cultures and languages.

Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008

Subsequent national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education activities were driven through Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 (Australian Directions). Through this document, jurisdictional responses were pursued through the mechanism of Ministerial agreements that were made in relation to a series of recommendations across five priority domains. Non-government school sectors were encouraged to support the strategies outlined.

A review of Australian Directions was undertaken as a means of informing future policy directions (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009). Key findings from the review are referenced throughout this evaluation report.

2.4 Development and approval of the Action Plan

Development of the Action Plan

The Action Plan sought to extend the NATSIEP, progress the goals of the Melbourne Declaration, co-ordinate commitments through NPAs developed following endorsement of NIRA, and to extend Australian Directions.

Australian Directions concluded in 2008, following a change in national government in November 2007. During 2008, a series of major national policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in development. Primary among these was the NIRA, supported by numerous NPAs.

In the context of major intergovernmental policy formulation activities, the development of the Action Plan was delayed by approximately one year following the completion of Australian Directions. This did, however, provide an opportunity for a review of Australian Directions by eminent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts, which provided valuable input into future national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education directions and needs (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009).

The intensive phase of Action Plan development began in September 2009, with the review of Australian Directions completed in October 2009. The drafting process was led by a small

group comprising representatives from the ATSIEWG. Through this process, the Action Plan domains were agreed, key stakeholders were consulted and a draft plan was developed.

An invited submission process was then undertaken to seek feedback regarding the draft plan. Over 100 submissions were received, with changes being made to the draft plan where required. Discussions were also held with several key stakeholder groups to work through elements of the plan in greater detail. The Action Plan was endorsed by MCEECDYA in April 2010, with final approval by COAG in May 2011.

3 Action Plan structure and design

This chapter details the Action Plan's structure and design, priority domains and the focus schools concept.

3.1 The Action Plan document

The Action Plan includes the following sections:

- *Introduction*: the context and overview of the Action Plan.
- *National collaboration*: outline of outcomes, targets and performance indicators for 55 national, systemic and local actions across six priority domains.
- *Jurisdictional priorities*: statement linking the Action Plan to each jurisdiction's implementation priorities.
- *Tracking progress and building on what works*: outline of national trajectories regarding the closing the gap targets.

The effectiveness of these sections of the Action Plan are described further below.

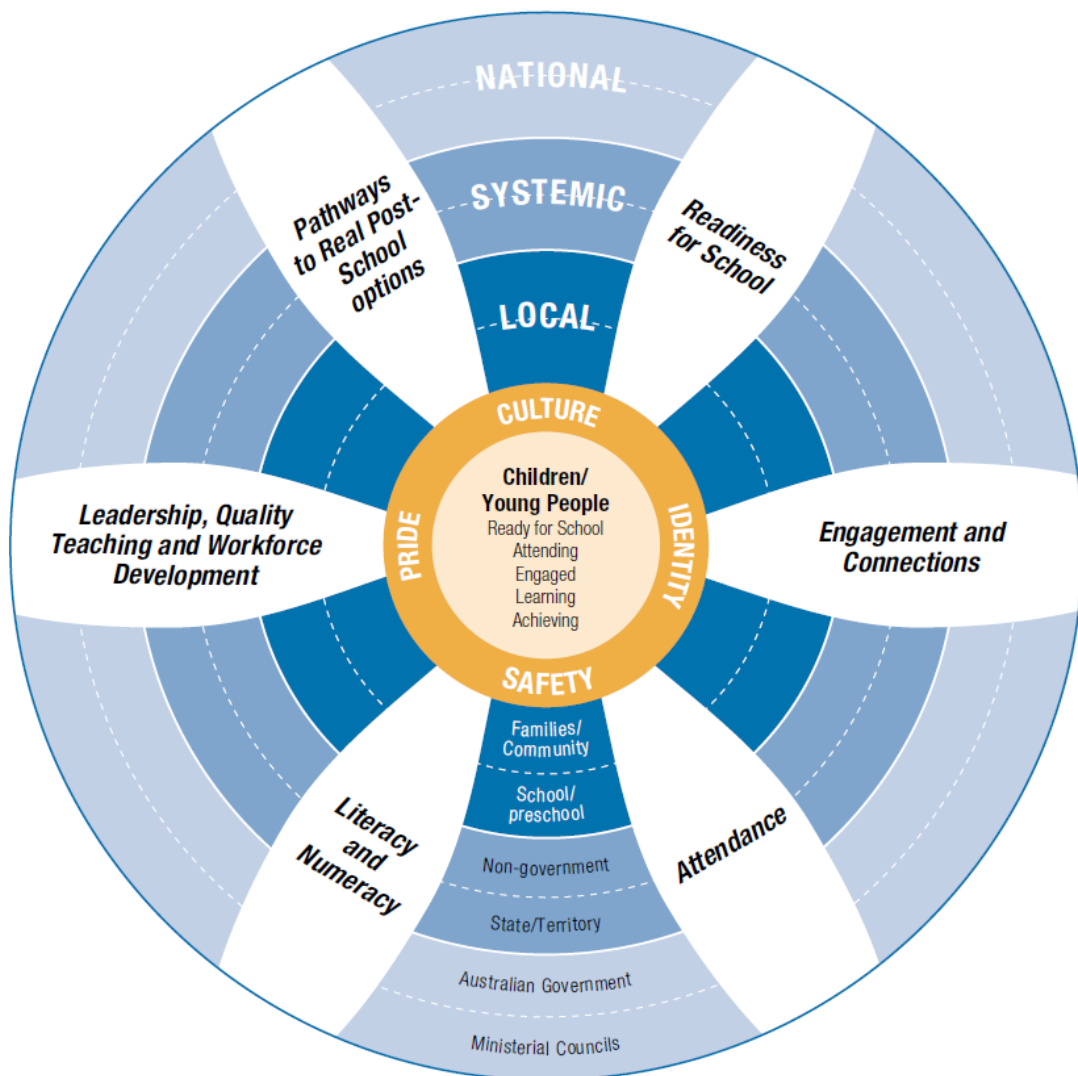
Introduction

The preface to the Action Plan sets the scene for the document, affirming the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to sustain their languages and cultures and acknowledging associations with land and water. It restates governments' commitment to closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people.

The purpose of the Action Plan is stated: "to assist education providers to accelerate improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people". It details commitment by non-government education providers to join with governments to achieve the targets and progress actions outlined in the Action Plan. A series of NPAs introduced prior to the Action Plan are referenced, noting that "commitments made in these national partnerships and agreements are brought together in the Plan with a number of new and continuing complementary measures". This acknowledges that the Action Plan was not itself intended to be an entirely new direction, but one that compiled and supported existing and emerging initiatives through a consolidated national picture.

The overview introduces the conceptual overview of the Action Plan structure, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6 **CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION PLAN**



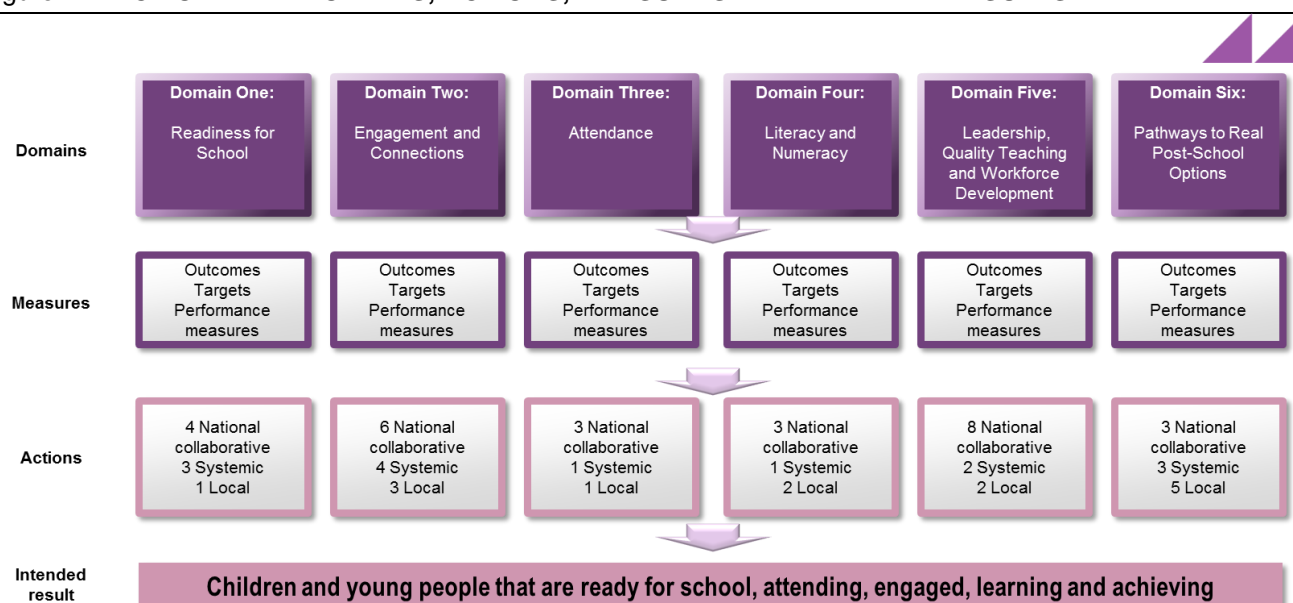
Source: MCEECDYA (2010), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014

The policy environment element of the Action Plan reflects the demographic and educational status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, introducing challenges associated with home languages other than Standard Australian English, literacy and numeracy achievement and post-school pathways. It also notes issues associated with remoteness: 'the more remote the community the poorer the student outcomes'.

National collaboration

This section of the Action Plan details the rationale for action within each of the six domains, along with outcomes, targets and performance indicators. It describes 55 actions across six domains for national collaborative, systemic and local level action, as shown in Figure 7.

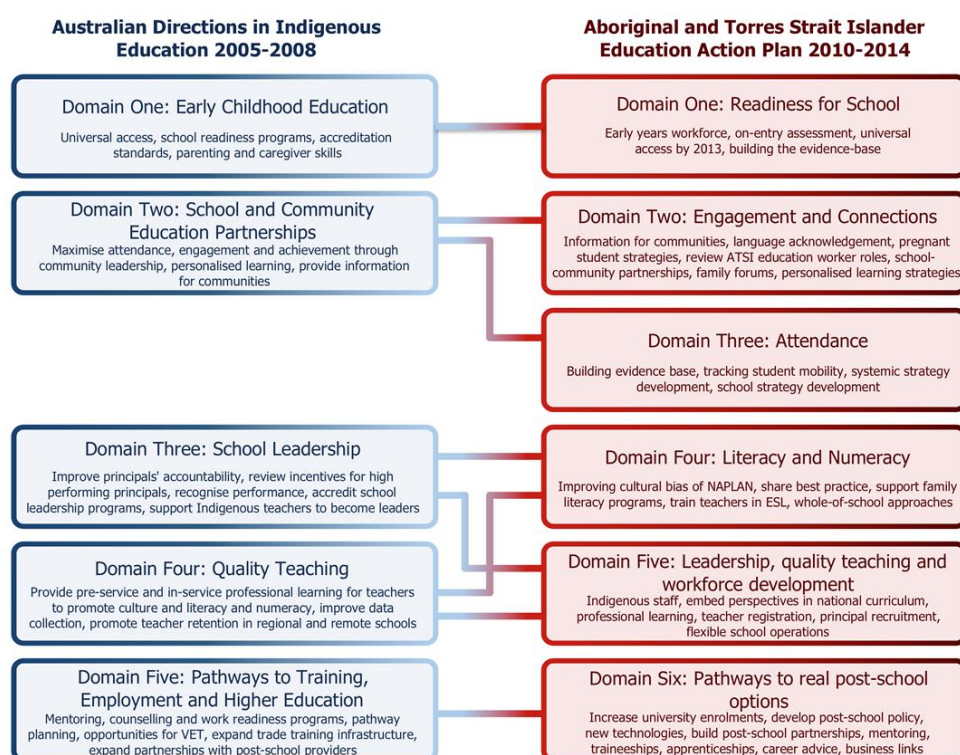
Figure 7 ACTION PLAN DOMAINS, ACTIONS, MEASURES AND INTENDED RESULTS



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The Action Plan's six priority domains provided an organising framework for those involved in implementing the Action Plan and were widely known by school sectors, and in some cases, by schools themselves. The domains included in the Action Plan build on five domains in Australian Directions under a revised framework, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8 LINKS BETWEEN DOMAINS IN AUSTRALIAN DIRECTIONS AND THE ACTION PLAN



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The rationale and context for each domain is described below. To help understand the context for each of the domains, reference is made to commitments in Australian Directions, along with findings from the review of Australian Directions.

Domain One: Readiness for school

Australian Directions prioritised early childhood education as a critical prerequisite for school readiness and successful participation in primary school. It urged universal access to high quality early childhood education services and greater focus on revising accreditation and quality assurance processes to ensure programs for Indigenous children respect and value Indigenous cultures, languages (including Aboriginal English) and contexts, and provided opportunities for parents and caregivers to become active participants in their children's education.

The review of Australian Directions noted that efforts focused on making sure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were school ready by the time they commenced formal schooling were fragmented, with responsibility shared across many agencies, both government and non-government (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009). The review noted the need for early education specialists to work with parents of 0-4 year old children to identify and respond to needs and to involve parents in playgroup learning processes. The review also urged schools to be ready for children.

The Action Plan domain cites evidence that children who attend preschool for more than a year show a statistically significant performance advantage in later school achievement than those that do not. It notes evidence from Australia (via the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)) that almost 50 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students perform poorly on one or more AEDI domains, in contrast to less than 25 per cent of non-Indigenous students. The domain notes that the involvement of families is critical.

Domain Two: Engagement and connections

The school and community education partnerships domain of Australian Directions hypothesised that "formalised partnerships between schools and communities provide the opportunity to maximise the attendance, engagement and achievement of Indigenous students". Actions in Australian Directions essentially sought development of school-community partnerships to involve communities more heavily in direction setting and delivery by schools. In addition, it also promoted personalised learning for all Indigenous students. It sought to improve community capacity for leadership and for information campaigns to promote the cross-cultural value of formal education among parents/caregivers, supporting high expectations and involvement by parents in their children's learning.

The review of Australian Directions called for greater focus on parental partnerships with a primary purpose of encouraging attendance, given the prevalence of non-attendance as an ongoing problem (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009). In addition, the review called for greater involvement and upskilling of Indigenous staff members to better engage with students, parents and teaching/learning processes. This recommendation was subsequently adopted as a systemic level action in the Action Plan to review the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers.

Recommendations from the review of Australian Directions supported the establishment of parent forums in the Action Plan, along with other engagement mechanisms, including personalised learning strategies and school-community partnership agreements (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009).

Domain Three: Attendance

Attendance was included in the school and community education partnerships domain of Australian Directions. Of note, Australian Directions did not specifically focus on attendance as an action area, considering it to be an outcome measure that reflected positive partnerships between schools and communities.

The review of Australian Directions emphasised parents' widespread desire for their children to achieve educational outcomes, but noted that the parental responsibility to support students to attend school had not been equally supported (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009). The process of developing formal school-community partnership agreements was considered to be a key step in clarifying responsibilities and expectations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and the school.

The Action Plan took a stronger focus on attendance, including it as an explicit domain. It referenced evidence to suggest that a correlation exists between regular attendance and increased success in learning. The Action Plan accepted that there are gaps in understanding about the complex factors influencing attendance, with a critical need to gather improved data. This domain also acknowledged the need for schools to promote a culturally safe environment where languages and cultures are valued. The role of curriculum and pedagogy to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives was highlighted as critical to supporting attendance and retention.

Domain Four: Literacy and numeracy

The focus on literacy and numeracy in the Action Plan built on the school leadership and quality teaching domains in Australian Directions. Like attendance, literacy and numeracy is considered to be an outcome measure, rather than a specific domain in its own right. This may be in part due to the introduction of the NAPLAN testing regime in 2008, and the consequent ability to monitor and focus upon the outcomes being achieved more closely. Rather than focusing specifically on literacy and numeracy, Australian Directions used the more broad and generic term 'outcomes', with schools encouraged to monitor and report on student outcomes.

The review of Australian Directions drew a link between careful teacher screening for schools with predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, noting also that a commitment to quality teaching needed to focus on curriculum that is accessible and with which students can connect. In relation to quality teaching, the review noted that "quality teaching pedagogies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is clearly quality teaching for any child" (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009).

The review of Australian Directions identified conditions that may drive learning outcomes:

Fundamental for high expectations in classrooms and teacher/student relationships is quality teaching, quality curriculum and accountability for quality student outcomes. While some collective assumptions can be made about what might stimulate an Indigenous student's intellect, it invariably demands the teacher has a good understanding of the child as an individual, including the cultural context in which the child has been raised.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research,
Review of Australian Directions, 2009.*

The review also noted the importance of teaching strategies that help connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including in literacy and numeracy approaches that take into account languages other than Standard Australian English. It

placed particular focus around teaching English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD):

Specifically within the Northern Territory, but also relevant to other jurisdictions, there is an increased focus on approaches to teaching Indigenous students for whom English is a foreign language. The recruitment and location of teachers in such schools must incorporate specialist training in sound English as a Second Language principles either as undergraduate training, or focussed professional development during their appointment. Beginning teachers must be mentored in their first years of appointment.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research
 Review of Australian Directions, 2009.*

The Action Plan reaffirmed these directions and embedded them in a new domain focusing on literacy and numeracy learning. It emphasised the challenges associated with language learning and linked improvement with the development of a world-class curriculum, teaching approaches for Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy, pedagogies that engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' languages and cultures, and implementation of national partnership funding aiming to specifically boost literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Domain Five: Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development

Australian Directions placed a large focus on teaching and leadership, evidenced by the two domains on school leadership and quality teaching. These domains emphasised the important roles played by school principals at the whole-of-school level and by teachers within classrooms.

In relation to leadership, Australian Directions sought to improve the incentives for principals to attract and retain high performing principals, identify results achieved by leading principals, actively develop school leadership programs and provide greater opportunities for Indigenous teachers to transition to the role of principal and other leadership positions.

In relation to quality teaching, Australian Directions sought to bolster pre-service and in-service professional learning as a prerequisite for contract renewal, explicit teaching of literacy for those with Standard Australian English as a second language or dialect, and to promote pedagogical approaches resulting in high levels of expectation and achievement. It also pursued improvements to data and assessment of literacy to support evidence-based planning. Finally, it sought to attract and retain high quality teachers, especially in regional and remote communities with high Indigenous student enrolments.

The review of Australian Directions placed a large focus on teaching, and in particular, the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff:

The evidence is that Indigenous staff members do make a positive difference, especially if they are trained in aspects of how English literacy and numeracy are taught and are able to interpret those aspects to parents, community, students and other staff. Students in schools with Indigenous support staff will do worse without them. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers need to be much more engaged with parents re teaching and learning processes.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research,
 Review of Australian Directions, 2009.*

The review also emphasised the need for high expectations to be built into teaching, curriculum and accountability for student outcomes.

The Action Plan linked the domains of quality teaching and leadership, introducing a focus on workforce development. In doing so, it addressed gaps identified by teachers in relation to their levels of professional development and cultural awareness and pedagogical approaches to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It also emphasised

the need to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working across the school community, including as teachers and school leaders.

Domain Six: Pathways to real post-school options

Australian Directions included a domain focusing on pathways to training, employment and higher education. This sought to ensure that partnerships existed between secondary schools, post-school education institutions and Indigenous communities in order to develop strategies to attract, retain and successfully graduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across a range of further education courses.

Commitments through Australian Directions sought to promote mentoring, counselling and work readiness strategies to help students from the beginning of secondary schooling through to post-school pathways, including through individual pathway plans. It focused on promoting trade training, VET and higher education pathways.

The review of Australian Directions endorsed the approach taken, but promoted greater use of data to illustrate attainment, focusing on completion rates, types of qualifications, post-education destinations (employment types), and negative engagements with juvenile justice. It also highlighted an issue regarding early streaming of students to VET, which could result in fewer completions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander than non-Indigenous students, serving to defer unemployment rather than achieving real employment outcomes for many learners (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009).

The Action Plan maintained an emphasis on the completion of Year 12 or equivalent through a specific domain for pathways to real-post school options. The stated rationale was that “successful education can lead to employment and economic independence and form the basis of intergenerational change by providing individuals with the skills to participate fully in society and work and determine their own futures”. The Action Plan emphasised that pathways require students to have the capabilities, opportunities, resources and responsibilities to move beyond schooling into positive post-school activities.

Local actions continued to promote targeted case management, mentoring, school-based training, career services and learning beyond the classroom in collaboration with businesses to deepen learning experiences.

Jurisdictional priorities

The following section of the Action Plan outlines the jurisdictional priorities identified by government and non-government providers in each state and territory at the time the Action Plan was developed. It also includes web links to further sources of information.

Tracking progress and building on what works

This section of the Action Plan provides an indication of agreed national trajectories in relation to Closing the Gap targets to support monitoring during the rollout of the Action Plan. Trajectories are presented for early learning achievement (to 2012-13), National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) targets for writing, reading and numeracy (to 2018), and the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 20-24 year olds attaining at least Year 12 or equivalent or Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate II.

It also establishes some of the operational elements associated with the Action Plan. A process for annual national reporting is outlined, with major features including:

- release of a public report within 12 months of the end of each calendar year to present a national picture of progress, including closing the gap targets and Action Plan performance indicators
- information regarding implementation of national collaborative actions and a report on Australian Government activities in supporting the Action Plan
- reports from each education provider, including implementation of actions and outcomes achieved
- feedback from IECBs on progress of the plan
- sharing of good practices and relevant research, including evaluation findings.

The need for a longitudinal evaluation is established in this section to gauge the extent to which improved educational outcomes could be achieved through coordinated actions across the priority domains.

Other national collaborative initiatives are outlined to improve the quality of national datasets and to develop a single online repository of evidence (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse) on topics relating to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Appendices

Appendix 1 of the Action Plan provides a glossary of key terms and outlines the process for selection of focus schools. Appendix 2 provides a list of selected references.

3.2 Stakeholder views regarding the Action Plan

Acceptance of the Action Plan

The Action Plan was largely accepted by education sector stakeholders as an appropriate response to needs. As a result, the Action Plan has benefitted from goodwill across the education sector over the three years of the evaluation.

Given agreement to major national Indigenous policy agreements throughout 2009 and 2010, the Action Plan did not seek to introduce new educational directions. Instead, it focused on tying existing policy directions into a single document to promote focused action. As such, its intention was largely to promote continuation of existing work, or initiation of new work in areas where it was required. The close links to past priorities has helped school sectors and schools themselves to build on existing approaches to sustain and embed effective practices.

The Action Plan also responded to areas that were raised through the review of Australian Directions (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009) for further focus and introduced new domains in areas requiring specific attention, including attendance and literacy and numeracy. By embedding initiatives that were either explicitly or implicitly included in Australian Directions, the Action Plan's directions were consistent with other national priorities.

Stakeholders consistently reported that the Action Plan has helped to create a common language and understanding across school sectors about needs and activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It has supported cross-sectoral sharing between government, Catholic and independent schools, and within schools themselves, with a way to understand and discuss challenges clearly, which itself helps to reinforce the major messages included in the Action Plan. The common language has also aided the sharing of practice within and across school sectors in each of the domains.

Overall, the Action Plan has neatly tied national education goals into a single document and oriented it around a clear domain-based conceptual framework for implementation. A number of stakeholders at the systemic and school levels have since used the Action Plan domains as a conceptual framework to drive sectoral or school-wide action. The domains also provided a clear and valuable framework for discussing school practices through the evaluation case study and survey processes.

Key Findings

The Action Plan extended prior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy directions and national reform directions in areas of need. Its domain-based structure has provided a conceptual framework for school sectors and schools to identify needs and priorities.

The Action Plan created a common language for activity across Australia, reinforcing the key areas for action.

The Action Plan's structure

The structure of the Action Plan promoted ready understanding of directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The conceptual overview graphic outlining the domain structure was widely recognised by school sectors and schools, while the format of national, systemic and local actions was accepted as suitable.

The jurisdictional priorities section was considered by some as the least useful or necessary section of the Action Plan. Concerns included that:

- the process of identifying of priorities gives the impression that jurisdictions are not seeking to implement directions equally across all domains
- that priorities agreed during the policy formulation phase (2009/10) became dated over time and are not current during the policy implementation period
- priorities focused only on government schools, rather than Catholic and independent sectors.

In any case, the evaluation found little evidence that these documented priorities linked to implementation actions in the government school sector, with most seeking to implement all six Action Plan domains.

The tracking progress section was useful in providing a snapshot of national trajectories that had been agreed by COAG prior to the introduction of the Action Plan. Notably, the writing trajectory needed to be changed in the early phase of the Action Plan's implementation as a result of alterations to testing practices. In addition, the Action Plan's initial performance measure for 20-24 year olds to achieve at least Year 12 or equivalent or AQF Certificate II (Domain 6) was adapted to Year 12 or equivalent school completion rates, which schools could more closely influence. The original targets were nonetheless maintained by COAG. Generally, however, this section was considered useful in outlining national intentions and illustrating the ambition contained within the national targets.

Key Finding

Stakeholders considered the structure of the Action Plan to be appropriate.

Action-based plan

The Action Plan by its design was intended to promote an action-orientation across school sectors and schools. Phase one interviews suggested that implementation activity in response to the Action Plan was much more intensive and effective than for Australian Directions. The mechanism for implementation of Australian Directions was through ministerial agreement and commitment across five domains. Stakeholder feedback indicated that Australian Directions, though rich in content and clear in ambition, did not promote the level of consistent drive that was needed across all jurisdictions and, as a result, many of the national directions failed to be embedded in school practices.

Positive early responses in relation to the Action Plan were largely attributable to its clear set of actions for stakeholders at the national collaborative, systemic and local levels. However, despite early acceptance to the action-based structure, stakeholders were less positive over time. At the school sector level, many stakeholders expressed concern at the large number of actions, and the lack of guidance regarding implementation of many of the systemic actions. For example, Action 50 ('education providers will develop innovative uses of interactive technologies with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students') troubled many school sectors and lacked implementation clarity, timeframes for implementation or defined outcomes. One further example is Action 42 ('education providers will give priority to focus schools when attracting or placing high performing leaders and teachers'), which many jurisdictions struggled to conceptualise or deliver. Actions such as these were unable to be addressed by school sectors and could have been omitted from the Action Plan to aid simplicity.

Many schools considered the actions to be overly prescriptive, serving to direct activity to areas that may not have been most needed, with little regard for local circumstances. Some school sectors considered that universally imposed requirements only achieved responses for the sake of compliance rather than to meet a genuine local need. It was acknowledged, however, that the national emphasis on personalised learning strategies and school-community partnership agreements would not have occurred with the same intensity without the Action Plan.

There is therefore a valid question for future consideration regarding the need for specific actions to form part of national planning, particularly local actions. Many involved in education delivery consider that greater value emerges from allowing school sectors and schools to tailor their approaches to their needs, particularly given geographical and sectoral differences across Australia.

Key Finding

During its early phases of implementation, the Action Plan was strongly supported by stakeholders for its action-based structure, though over time, various actions were considered to be overly prescriptive, unclear in intent or of limited priority.

Schools orientation

The Action Plan aimed to influence school sectors, rather than early childhood or post-school education providers. School education is acknowledged as only part, albeit a major part, of a broader education continuum that begins before primary school and may continue into adulthood.

While targeting the Action Plan to schools supported activity across school sectors, broader influence may have been achieved had the plan sought to more directly influence related

education sectors in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across the full education continuum. Consideration may be given to engaging the early childhood education, school, VET and higher education sectors in future strategies.

Key Finding

The Action Plan may have benefited from greater focus on pre- and post-school education, rather than focusing only on school education.

3.3 Focus schools

The Action Plan sought to promote activity across a selection of schools with a large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Known as 'focus schools', these would be the target for implementation of the Action Plan's actions. Specific references to focus schools are contained in the performance indicators/targets for domain two (engagement and connections), along with three systemic actions and seven local actions. Focus schools were selected from across all school sectors.

Selection of focus schools

The selection process for schools was outlined in Appendix 1 of the Action Plan, based on a three tier process:

- *Tier 1*: selecting schools within each jurisdiction until 75 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in each state or territory are included in focus schools.
- *Tier 2*: identifying potential focus schools with 25 per cent or more of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students falling below the minimum national standard in any one of the reading, writing and numeracy domains.
- *Tier 3*: adding or removing schools from the proposed lists, based on reconciliation between the Australian Government and jurisdictions.

The selection process sought to prioritise those schools with the greatest potential to make a positive difference to student outcomes in the longer term. Most focus schools were therefore intended to be primary schools, as outlined in the Action Plan:

In the first instance, primary schools are to be targeted as 'focus schools' so that effort is concentrated in the early years of learning. However, education providers in all jurisdictions and sectors could extend activities at their own discretion to include secondary schools, particularly those that have focus primary schools in their feeder areas and are identified under the Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National Partnership and/or the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14.

Notably, the Action Plan sought to involve the Catholic and independent school sectors more heavily than Australian Directions. Commitment to Catholic and independent schools is evidenced through selection of over 100 Catholic sector focus schools and approximately 30 independent focus schools. However, there were no independent focus schools in Victoria or the Australian Capital Territory, while few Catholic sector focus schools were selected in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and South Australia.

The initial breakdown of focus schools by jurisdiction and geo-location is shown in Table 2, based on 2010 data provided by each jurisdiction as part of the Action Plan Annual Report 2010.

Table 2 **TOTAL STATE AND TERRITORY FOCUS SCHOOLS BY GEO-LOCATION, 2010**

| | NSW | VIC | SA | TAS | ACT | WA | QLD | NT | TOTAL | Proportion |
|---|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Metropolitan focus schools | 21 | 39 | 51 | 29 | 30 | 10 | 124 | 0 | 304 | 35.9 % |
| Provincial focus schools | 60 | 86 | 26 | 41 | 0 | 13 | 103 | 12 | 341 | 40.2 % |
| Remote focus schools | 11 | 0 | 20 | 2 | 0 | 75 | 41 | 51 | 200 | 23.6 % |
| Total number of focus schools | 92 | 125 | 97 | 72 | 30 | 98 | 268 | 63 | 845 | 100% |
| Proportion of all focus schools by jurisdiction | 10.9% | 14.8% | 11.5% | 8.5% | 3.6% | 11.6% | 31.7% | 7.5% | | |

Source: 2010 Action Plan Annual Report.

Initial selection of focus schools

The number of focus schools was disproportionate across jurisdictions relative to student numbers, as evident in Table 2. While Queensland and New South Wales had similar numbers of students enrolled (between 40,000 and 45,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2013), Queensland had 176 more focus schools than New South Wales. To illustrate the contrast in proportions in 2010, Victoria, with 9,400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2013, had 33 more focus schools than New South Wales and 27 more schools than Western Australia (20,365 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2013).

Some candidate schools decided not to become focus schools, due to concerns by principals that this would involve additional reporting and an expectation that the Action Plan would be delivered within existing school resources, rather than having additional funding attached. For schools already under pressure to deliver on existing priorities, the Action Plan appeared to present additional responsibilities with limited direct benefit or support.

Primary or secondary schools

By design, focus schools were largely primary schools in order to influence early learning student outcomes. Secondary education is offered by a number of focus schools, but this is most often in addition to primary school classes. Through the evaluation, a number of specific needs and issues were identified at the secondary school level, including:

- challenges in transition from the primary to secondary school environment
- poorer literacy and numeracy outcomes
- limited retention between Years 7/8 and 10/12
- limited achievement of Year 12 or equivalent
- variable quality and access to mentoring, coaching and careers support.

With the emphasis on primary schools, many considered that the focus on many of these critical secondary school issues had been reduced. Numerous case study comments identified the difference between personalised approaches at the primary school and more impersonal approaches at high schools being a major cause of non-attendance. Further attention and investigation is required at the secondary school level to support Year 12 or equivalent completion and to improve life choices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Addition of further focus schools

Later phases of the evaluation indicated that some school sectors had added more focus schools over time. One of the main reasons for doing so was to enable schools to access additional Australian Government funding that had been made available to selected focus schools. Most recent available focus school data, as at August 2012, indicated that there were approximately 940 focus schools.

The process for adding new focus schools was not well understood by many stakeholders with a role in implementing the Action Plan. For instance, many independent and Catholic sector representatives were unaware of the opportunity to add further focus schools during the course of the Action Plan's rollout.

Clarity regarding focus school responsibilities

During phase one interviews, many school sectors reported being unclear about the expectations, responsibilities and reporting requirements involved for focus schools at the time that selections needed to be made. In the government sector, schools were generally selected centrally, while in the non-government sectors, decisions about whether to nominate as focus schools were more likely to be made by Dioceses or principals. Some systemic stakeholders reported having a very short time (less than two days) to select and submit their list of focus schools after learning of the concept.

Views regarding the focus school concept

Overall, some school sectors found the focus schools concept to be helpful in directing resources and attention. In larger jurisdictions and school sectors with more schools, the concept was considered valuable to contain implementation efforts to a distinct set of schools. In smaller sectors, a universal approach to rollout among focus and non-focus schools was more practical and therefore preferred.

Many school sectors took a universal approach to implementation of the Action Plan and therefore sought to involve all schools, regardless of their status as focus schools or non-focus schools. Others prioritised additional activities within focus schools, with the aim of later extending the reach of activities to include non-focus schools. For example, some school sectors provided additional funding support to focus schools or offered additional access to training for principals and staff.

Through later review phases, most stakeholders considered that the focus school concept was not required in future. The principle that all students should benefit from nationally agreed directions, rather than a select number of schools, was widely supported, with the aim of promoting improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools with both high and low numbers and proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Key Findings

During the early implementation of the Action Plan, there was limited awareness among school sectors and schools about the responsibilities, expectations and benefits for focus schools. This affected the focus school selection process in some school sectors, with a number of suitable schools opting out.

Most focus schools were primary schools, despite there being recognised needs across secondary schools.

Some school sectors supported all schools to implement the Action Plan equally, while others directed attention primarily towards focus schools.



4 Action Plan funding

This section details the implications of funding associated with the Action Plan, including impacts of the Focus Schools Next Steps and Investing in Focus Schools initiatives.

4.1 Building in or bolting on funding

Various reviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education programs over time have found that many interventions seek to prescribe local action, rather than supporting schools to apply funding flexibly. Timeframes for implementation are often not long-term in nature, which impacts on schools' abilities to sustain activity beyond the duration of funding provided. As an example, the review of Australian Directions found that:

...over time there have been a myriad of schemes introduced to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. However, their application and success are uneven and spasmodic with funding limited to short-term solutions. In a complex area like Indigenous education such factors are problematic. All indicators from our review confirm that success would be achieved if longevity in program funding and monitoring of implementation occurs. In absence of these strategies it is almost impossible to know what works and to put in place long term programs.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research,
 Review of Australian Directions, 2009.*

The need for funding to be 'built-in' to mainstream practice rather than being 'bolted-on', as outlined in Australian Directions, is detailed in Box 1.

Box 1 INDIGENOUS EDUCATION: 'BUILT IN' OR 'BOLTED ON'

Gains in educational outcomes achieved by Indigenous students over recent decades are largely attributed to Indigenous specific intervention programs (including strategies, pilot projects and trials) that supplement mainstream effort to meet the specific learning needs of students. While some of these programs have been highly successful, only a small proportion of the total population of Indigenous students is able to access them.

Although invaluable, these programs have had unintended consequences. Indigenous education has come to be seen as peripheral rather than integral to core business. In addition, the funding of Indigenous education through special programs has led to dependence on short-term solutions. In other words, Indigenous education has been 'bolted on' rather than 'built in' to mainstream effort, becoming the province of specialists and committed individuals instead of systems as a whole.

Historically, the policies and practices of Australian governments were predicated on the supposed 'inferiority' of Indigenous Australians. This has contributed to a tendency for systems and schools to devalue the educational potential of Indigenous students and to overlook the cultural, linguistic and social capital they bring to the classroom. While this 'deficit' view is now contested, the perception that Indigenous students are to blame for their poor educational outcomes lingers on. Disparity in educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has come to be viewed as 'normal' and incremental change seen as acceptable.

The recommendations in this paper are systemic to ensure that Indigenous education and the lessons learnt from strategic intervention programs are 'built in' to core business to become everyone's business: departmental staff, principals, teachers, school staff, Indigenous students, parents/caregivers, families and communities.

Source: Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008

4.2 Action Plan funding

Preliminary approach: no Action Plan funding

The initial decision not to provide additional funding for the Action Plan encouraged school sectors and schools to build action into mainstream practice. The Action Plan's activities were considered by the Australian Government to be relatively low cost to implement and part of school sector and schools' core business. Given that NPA funding was already being allocated to many focus schools, additional funding was not considered necessary.

Further, the Action Plan sought to compile the national and systemic reform commitments into a single document for school sectors and schools to implement. Many significant national school reforms, including the NPA on Literacy and Numeracy, the NPA on Low Socio-Economic Status and the NPA on Remote Service Delivery, identified and targeted specific schools needing additional funding and support.

However, in the process of implementing the Action Plan, many schools identified that local actions often required additional time and expertise. Several actions were found to be resource intensive, particularly establishing personalised learning strategies for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This required deep collaboration between classroom teachers, students and their parents/communities to organise, conduct, document and maintain plans. The implementation burden was expressed particularly by schools with large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with an equally large number of personalised learning strategies to implement.

Interviews, surveys and case studies during the first phase of the evaluation identified several issues stemming from the decision not to fund the Action Plan, including that:

- the lack of funding for the Action Plan dissuaded some schools from agreeing to become focus schools from the outset
- a share of focus schools were not funded under NPAs, so did not benefit from additional funding for major national education reforms
- those schools that were receiving additional NPA funding had already targeted their funding towards specific interventions tied to their NPA contracts, and did not link this funding to implementation of the Action Plan, which was considered to be an additional pressure on schools.

In response, during the early phases of the Action Plan's implementation, some school sectors had responded to these needs by providing small amounts of additional funding for focus schools to support implementation. Despite this, many school sectors felt underfunded to adequately support coordination, implementation and reporting on the Action Plan across focus schools.

Funding allocation: Focus Schools Next Steps initiative

In response to schools' concerns, the Australian Government sought to accelerate implementation of key Action Plan directions through the provision of additional funding to a select number of schools through the FSNS initiative. This distributed \$30 million to support 101 focus schools across Australia over a period of two years (2012-13 and 2013-14), with no less than \$200,000 per school. Funding distribution and support for the FSNS initiative was coordinated by the Stronger Smarter Institute (SSI) at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) until 2012, at which point SSI and QUT demerged. From this point forward, QUT led the FSNS initiative until its completion in mid-2014.

The FSNS initiative focused on the Action Plan domains of attendance, engagement and connections, and literacy and numeracy. Schools were required to allocate funding towards new strategies, accompanied by local plans for rollout and monitoring.

Funding allocation: Investing in Focus Schools initiative

In May 2012, the then Minister for School Education and state and territory education ministers agreed to distribute an additional \$40 million to at least 200 focus schools, or clusters of schools. Funding was provided to school sectors in early 2012, for allocation to schools over a two year period.

Like the FSNS initiative, the IFS initiative promoted action in engagement and connections, attendance, and literacy and numeracy. Rather than directing money through a third party, as had been done via QUT for the FSNS initiative, school sectors were responsible for the selection and distribution of funds to participating schools or clusters. Schools involved were obligated to produce local activity plans to detail and report on implementation activities and goals.

The IFS initiative prompted some jurisdictions to nominate additional focus schools in order to receive IFS funding. NSW received funding for 60 schools, Queensland received funding for 59 schools, while allocations to other jurisdictions were more limited (29 in Western Australia; 20 in the Northern Territory; 12 in Victoria; 12 in South Australia; 7 in Tasmania; and 1 in the Australian Capital Territory).

4.3 Implications of funding the Action Plan

Allocation of additional funding

The intentions of the FSNS and IFS initiatives was to support focus schools that were receiving little or no additional funding from the Australian Government. For example, as stated in COAG's *Project Agreement - Investing in Focus Schools*, which outlines intentions for the IFS initiative:

the Australian Government seeks to support government and non-government education providers to implement agreed activities under the Action Plan in some 200 selected focus schools that have previously received relatively little or no benefit through other Australian Government funded initiatives and reforms such as the Smarter Schools National Partnerships, the Closing the Gap: Expansion of Intensive Literacy and Numeracy Programs or the Focus School Next Steps Initiative.

COAG, 2012

Evidence regarding the allocation of funding suggests, however, that the selection of schools for the FSNS and IFS initiatives resulted, in some cases, in additional funding being directed to focus schools that were already receiving NPA funding. A number of focus schools did not receive FSNS, IFS or NPA funding.

The phase three survey results demonstrate that of 130 responses:

- 65 schools received FSNS (22) or IFS (43) funding, while 65 did not.
- Of the school 22 schools that received FSNS funding, 13 received NPA on Literacy and Numeracy funding and four received NPA on Low Socio-economic Status funding. Of these, one school received funding from all three sources.
- Of the 43 schools that received IFS funding, eight received NPA on Literacy and Numeracy funding and 19 received NPA on Low Socio-economic Status funding. Of these, two schools received funding from all three sources.
- Of the 65 schools that did not receive FSNS or IFS funding:

- › 16 received funding through the NPA on Literacy and Numeracy, 44 received NPA on Low Socio-economic Status funding, and of these, six schools received funding for both
- › 12 received no additional funding through NPAs or the FSNS or IFS initiatives.

The FSNS and IFS programs therefore fell short of their design intentions to allocate funding to schools that were receiving little or no additional funding from the Australian Government. While the quantum of funding received through these NPAs is unknown, the fact that some schools received no NPA, FSNS or IFS funding while others received multiple streams is significant.

Impact of additional funding

The impact of the additional funding allocated has been considered by comparing the phase three survey responses for FSNS schools, IFS schools and schools that were not part of the FSNS/IFS programs. Major findings indicated that:

- NSFS schools had a larger average school size than IFS and other schools, evidenced by larger numbers of teaching staff
- schools that did not receive FSNS or IFS funding had greater average numbers of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and non-teaching staff
- awareness of the action plan was higher among FSNS respondents than for IFS or other schools
- FSNS schools demonstrated higher levels of progress than IFS and other schools in the implementing school-community partnership agreements, running family forums and agreeing personalised learning plans for all/most students.

Analysis of phase three responses by FSNS, IFS or non-FSNS/IFS status are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3 **COMPARISON OF SURVEY RESPONSES FOR FSNS, IFS AND OTHER FOCUS SCHOOLS**

| | Focus Schools Next Steps | Investing in Focus Schools | Other focus schools (non-FSNS/IFS) |
|--|--|--|---|
| Sample size | 22 | 43 | 65 |
| Schools receiving NPA on Literacy and Numeracy | 13 (59%) | 8 (18.6%) | 16 (24.6%) |
| Schools receiving NPA on Low Socio-economic Status | 4 (18%) | 19 (44%) | 44 (67%) |
| Geographic spread | 8 metropolitan 8 provincial 6 remote | 18 metropolitan 13 provincial 12 remote | 21 metropolitan 24 provincial 21 remote |
| Teaching staff (average full time equivalents) | 37.5 | 27.0 | 25.5 |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching staff (average full time equivalents) | 1.2 | 0.9 | 1.7 |
| Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (average full time equivalents) | 3.7 | 3.2 | 4.9 |
| Level of awareness of the Action Plan | 7 (32%) high 13 (59%) moderate 2 (9%) minimal 0 (0%) none | 14 (34%) high 20 (49%) moderate 6 (15%) minimal 1 (2%) none | 22 (33%) high 32 (48.5%) moderate 11 (16.5%) minimal 1 (1.5%) none |
| Presence of a school-community partnership agreement | 17 (77%) Yes 3 (14%) No 2 (9%) In development | 19 (46.3%) Yes 10 (24.4%) No 12 (29.3%) In development | 19 (30%) Yes 21 (33%) No 23 (37%) In development |
| Family forums run in 2013 | 17 (77%) Yes 4 (18%) No 1 (5%) Other similar forum | 18 (44%) Yes 15 (36.5%) No 8 (19.5%) Other similar forum | 25 (39%) Yes 26 (41%) No 13 (20%) Other similar forum |
| Personalised learning plans in place | 14 (66.5%) All 6 (28.5%) Most 1 (4.5%) Few 0 (0%) None | 27 (67.5%) All 8 (20%) Most 4 (10%) Few 1 (2.5%) None | 32 (50%) All 18 (28%) Most 13 (20%) Few 1 (2%) None |

Note: not all schools answered each question.

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

These survey responses suggest that FSNS initiative drove school action in response to key areas of the engagement and connections domain (school-community partnership agreements, family forums and personalised learning plans) relative to IFS and other schools. While this may be partially attributable to FSNS initiative's earlier implementation than the IFS initiative, it nonetheless resulted in a noticeable improvement in adoption of the Action Plan's implementation activities when compared to other non-FSNS/IFS schools.

A surprising aspect is that FSNS and IFS schools have significantly lower numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching and other staff. This cannot be explained by geo-location, given the relatively equal proportions among the school groupings considered.

While FSNS schools were most advanced, the levels of awareness of the Action Plan were similar among IFS and other schools. However, IFS schools, relative to non-FSNS/IFS schools, showed a greater focus on completion of school-community partnership agreements and personalised learning strategies--two specific areas of focus for the IFS initiative. This suggests that additional funding provided directly for implementation through the IFS program did result in some actions progressing faster than may otherwise have occurred without additional funding.

The extent to which these outcomes can be sustained in the absence of further future funding is unknown. Concerns were expressed through the case study process and through interviews that strategies introduced through these programs would not be able to be sustained. Often, interventions involved additional staff, such as Aboriginal Education

Workers or literacy and numeracy coaches, who may not be able to be retained with the same intensity, or at all, without specific FSNS or IFS funding.

Key Finding

Schools that received FSNS or IFS initiative funding appear to have implemented some Action Plan actions more extensively than schools that did not receive FSNS or IFS initiative funding.

4.4 Reflections regarding the FSNS initiative

Findings and recommendations from QUT, as provided to the Australian Government Department of Education, about the FSNS initiative are outlined in Box 2. These note elements that were effective but also indicate that there were some difficulties faced in introducing the initiative and measuring progress. The recommendations emphasise the need for capacity development and supportive systems to accompany major change programs, and call for longer timeframes than the two-year initiative afforded.

Box 2 FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FSNS INITIATIVE

Finding 1: Administrative difficulties in the early stages of the project led to delays in schools receiving both funds and appropriate direction and support in designing and implementing Next Steps Plans. The short timeline of the Focus Schools Next Steps Initiative meant that the effects of this rolled on throughout the project for both individual schools and the Initiative and had implications for the success of the project.

Finding 2: That some principals had difficulty with the requirements to set targets, identify relevant and reliable data for specific purposes, and plan and review approaches to achieving targets using formats such as the Next Steps Plan.

Finding 3: That for some principals the Initiative provided important opportunities to develop capacity to manage and analyse data for use in action planning and decision-making of selection of strategies for improvement.

Finding 4: That school leaders found the inclusion of community members in planning and implementation of strategies invaluable to their local contexts. Some reported this being a new approach which had resulted from their participation in the Initiative, others reported this was usual practice for their school contexts.

Finding 5: Understanding and selection of criteria for evaluating success varied for schools dependent on the chosen priority area.

Finding 6: The restrictions placed on the Initiative Provider in regards to data collection methods and contact with schools hindered analysis and reporting of the complexities of the change process of the Initiative.

Finding 7: Initiative schools were required to collect data and report achievement according to constraining timeframes, and this was not conducive to setting sustainable processes in place.

Finding 8: For schools that were proactive in collection and analysis of data from both traditional and non-traditional means (such as capturing student voice through student perception surveys and focus groups), imparted a richer and more data informed approach to action planning was possible.

Finding 9: The management of educational reform such as this Initiative involves the development of structures and procedures as well as the development of a cultural sensitivity and insight. An ability to understand the meaning of change from a range of perspectives other than one's own is also necessary.

Finding 10: Connections with community to build up cultural connectedness between parents, AEWs, teachers and students via enhanced training for all relevant school staff is necessary but insufficient as the capacity-building of skills and understandings are also an essential requirement.

Finding 11: The dominant strategies adopted through the Initiative were employment of extra staff, professional development and coaching of teachers, and training and development of school AEWs in new approaches and programs designed to improve the literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Finding 12: At the completion of the Initiative 78 schools had signed School Community Partnership Agreements with the remaining 23 schools indicating that they were still in the process of formalising such agreements.

Finding 13: Despite the differing locations and sizes of the schools, the employment of additional staff was considered by the majority as enabling for the development of school capacity to address the number of given priority areas while also attending to the identified success factors.

Finding 14: Improvements in educational achievement were reported where there was significant investment in capacity

building and infrastructure for professional development in curriculum and pedagogy. There are signs that in some cases this might lead to more sustainable change.

Finding 15: To invest in strategies to improve attendance and increase accountability does not in itself lead to systematic improvement in conventionally-measured achievement and the purchase of particular resources and tools alone will also not lead to improvement.

Finding 16: Success was defined differently in each context.

Finding 17: Teaching and assessment strategies that recognise and value the cultural variations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students illustrate teacher understanding of how these differences mediate the students' learning and achievement outcomes.

Finding 18: The employment of additional staff was a successful strategy to build capacity only when a key person with the required experience, knowledge and background was employed to fulfil the position.

Finding 19: Factors beyond the control of the school such as accountability demands, frequent monitoring of data and testing regimes may have a greater and unquantifiable impact and on reform success and this would benefit from a more longitudinal study.

Finding 20: The use of assessment for learning strategies and supportive teaching that engage students in challenging learning experiences were the most productive and successful pedagogies employed.

Recommendation 1: That future projects with the purpose of reforming school practices to improve student outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students take account of time required to negotiate with key stakeholders and set processes in place, and that they take heed of the school reform literature that has established periods of 5-7 years for school reform to demonstrate results.

Recommendation 2: That the Department and Education Providers implement capacity building measures that support principals, leaders in data management and analysis for successful planning and monitoring of school practices and student outcomes.

Recommendation 3: That the Department and Education Providers develop supportive policies and resources for sustainability of identified productive teaching and learning improvement practices and improved teacher classroom interactions with the students which is fundamental to improvement of learning.

Recommendation 4: That future approaches to reform employ methodologies that allow collaboration between the Initiative Provider and the teachers and leaders in schools, and that they use methods that are more interactive and iterative, with greater collaborative efforts to understand and explain action. That is, the teacher would be both informant and judge.

Recommendation 5: A dedicated website be established as a useful resource together with networked schools to disseminate exemplars of practice via staged implementation using school narratives of reform, detailed observations, video recordings of exemplary classroom practices, professional development and training, together with learning opportunities such as coaching, reflection and refinement of practice including activities to stimulate important processes of evaluation and exchange of ideas.

Recommendation 6: The employment of additional staff in the initial stages of an Initiative should result in capacity building at the local level and involve restructuring of school staffing to accommodate the extra position post Initiative if proven to be a successful strategy.

Recommendation 7: Professional development and training at the pre-service level of teacher education and in-service level are required to address the identified need of how to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students, with complex needs and varying levels of literacy and numeracy.

Recommendation 8: There is an urgent need for the provision of quality training and professional development, especially for leadership teams in smaller primary schools, on 'changing perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of principals and senior teachers'. School leaders, particularly in schools, need to develop greater competencies in project management and financial management to meet increased accountability requirements.

Source: QUT (2014 unpublished), *Final Report Focus Schools Next Steps Initiative*.

4.1 Reflections regarding the IFS initiative

At the conclusion of the IFS initiative, states and territories were required to provide reports to the Australian Government detailing the conduct, benefits and outcomes of the initiative. Major reflections from these reports by jurisdiction are summarised below (States and Territories, 2014 unpublished).

Australian Capital Territory

- A network of focus schools was established to share lessons, meeting once each term. IFS schools also participated in a yearlong Action Inquiry process, with associated professional learning to support schools in developing improved approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- PLPs provided a strong avenue to build meaningful partnerships with parents and carers. They need to be based on student input and ongoing review and feedback processes to make these plans living documents focussed on improved outcomes.

New South Wales

- Prioritised development of school-community partnership agreements, personalised learning plans, locally developed attendance strategies, whole-of-school literacy and numeracy strategies and professional learning for teachers and school leaders.
- The home-school gap could be bridged through the shared experience and understanding of Aboriginal education staff, which were critical to establishing relationships with parents and families.
- Improved measures of attendance were put in place at the same time as the IFS initiative was being implemented, so changes have been difficult to gauge.
- Literacy and numeracy performance has been a major focus of the Connected Communities initiative in the NSW government school sector, with IFS supporting these directions.

Northern Territory

- Schools focused on developing school-community partnership agreements through conducting family forums. The aim was to develop shared vision, goals and actions for children.
- The focus on introducing PLPs for students continued, with a marked increase in the number of students with PLPs in place over time.
- Many schools involved in IFS initiative used the funds for professional development to support teachers to improve students' literacy and numeracy performance.
- Challenges associated with the IFS initiative included:
 - › high student mobility
 - › teacher turnover
 - › low student attendance
 - › varied ability of schools to respond to student needs, noting that many challenges extended beyond the role of the school alone, in particular associated with health issues, limited language skills, and other impacts associated with remoteness and poverty.

Queensland

- It was widely recognised that establishing genuine relationships with the community takes time and it is important not to rush formal arrangements. However, some schools noted that it was difficult to engage with the local community, particularly in regions where there was not an existing Indigenous governance arrangement. Other barriers included past histories (i.e. previous generations' experiences at school), physical access, and mobility of families.
- Attendance improved during the IFS program rollout.

- Literacy and numeracy achievement was a major focus during the IFS initiative rollout.
- Professional learning ranged from ongoing programs, intensive face-to-face training sessions, peer to peer support, online programs and advice from experts (such as a school literacy coach or external consultant), appointing one teacher with the relevant skills to drive initiatives, and the acquisition of new literacy and numeracy resources.
- Reflections on areas for improvement were that:
 - › there was no central coordination to help schools develop strategies for implementation, drawing on activities at other schools.
 - › a stronger strategic alignment could have been achieved for funding provided, tying together IFS, FSNS and other targeted funding for literacy and numeracy. A comparative assessment of these major initiatives may help to understand which worked best.
 - › reporting for the IFS initiative was onerous and seemed to be for compliance only, rather than program improvement. The Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Committee (QIECC) noted that “in any future funding initiative, continued funding for a school, or project, must be based on outcomes, or at the very least, outputs, and not be purely ‘compliance’ based”.
 - › funding is required for a longer timeframe to ensure adequate time to build relationships with community members.

South Australia

- Implementation trends that were common across the three school sectors (government, Catholic and independent) were:
 - › the local school context was critical in improving engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities
 - › the development of school-community partnership agreements enabled schools to develop authentic relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
 - › the development of professional learning communities demonstrated how leaders and teachers could invest in whole of school strategies for building teacher capacity and pedagogical change for student literacy achievement.
- Understanding culture, developing cultural competency awareness and ensuring that cultural sensitivity and respect are embedded into the leadership structures and everyday practices of school communities and classrooms provides a way forward towards reconciliation and the improvement of student outcomes.
- The Department of Education and Child Development developed a cluster approach to working in partnership across schools. This proved not to be a successful approach to achieve the project outcomes, as schools had already defined their local context improvement plans and many schools had already established their school-community partnership agreements.

Tasmania

- Fifty per cent of the focus schools had formal and active school and community partnership agreements in place in 2014. The remaining schools were in the process of establishing partnership agreements. A number of barriers were encountered, based on the low percentage of Aboriginal people in the population and the dispersed nature of Aboriginal people. It has therefore been difficult to encourage Aboriginal parents and other community members to engage with the schools and attend forums.

- PLPs were considered to be powerful tools for improving Aboriginal students' educational outcomes by better understanding each student.
- All focus schools were provided with professional learning for teachers and education workers supporting the delivery of English literacy and numeracy strategies.

Victoria

- A cluster model was selected to promote sharing of resources, lessons and advice across schools. While successful in many cases, it added a travel and meeting burden where clusters were dispersed
- Development of school and community partnerships took significant time and required additional staff to support, but was very beneficial to connect schools to families
- Development of personalised learning plans (PLPs) for each child was a major strategy, with an online system introduced to upload and monitor PLPs
- Teacher professional learning in literacy and numeracy approaches is essential to improve learning outcomes for students, but requires considerable time. It works best when it is a shared and collaborative endeavour, sharing lessons across schools
- The timing of the initiative was not ideal, with funding being released after annual planning activities. The short-term nature of funding was of concern to schools, particularly to sustain the change efforts.
- Data collection and reporting activities were highly time consuming

Western Australia

- Under the IFS initiative, 78 per cent of targeted schools in the government school sector were able to complete formal school-community partnership agreements.
- 87 per cent of schools involved in IFS increased the number of PLPs in place since the commencement of IFS initiative, while half of the schools indicated that PLPs were in place for every eligible Aboriginal student.
- All government schools that participated in the IFS initiative developed and implemented whole of school attendance strategies.
- A survey of 14 participating principals found that the provision of professional learning for teachers and education workers supported the delivery of literacy and numeracy goals. In addition, the development of a whole school literacy and numeracy strategies were seen as having the greatest level of impact on the academic performance of Aboriginal students.

Key Finding

There are concerns about the sustainability of activities introduced using time-limited FSNS and IFS initiative funding, with many schools employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education staff. Funding provided to schools needs to be better planned and longer-term in nature to support sustained, systemic responses and outcomes that are 'built in' rather than being 'bolted on'.

5 Governance, monitoring and evaluation

This chapter details the governance structures, performance measurement challenges and role of the evaluation in supporting the Action Plan.

5.1 Governance structures

National governance structures

Implementation of the Action Plan required leadership and coordination by various school sectors across Australia. The major groups involved in coordinating implementation of the Action Plan were:

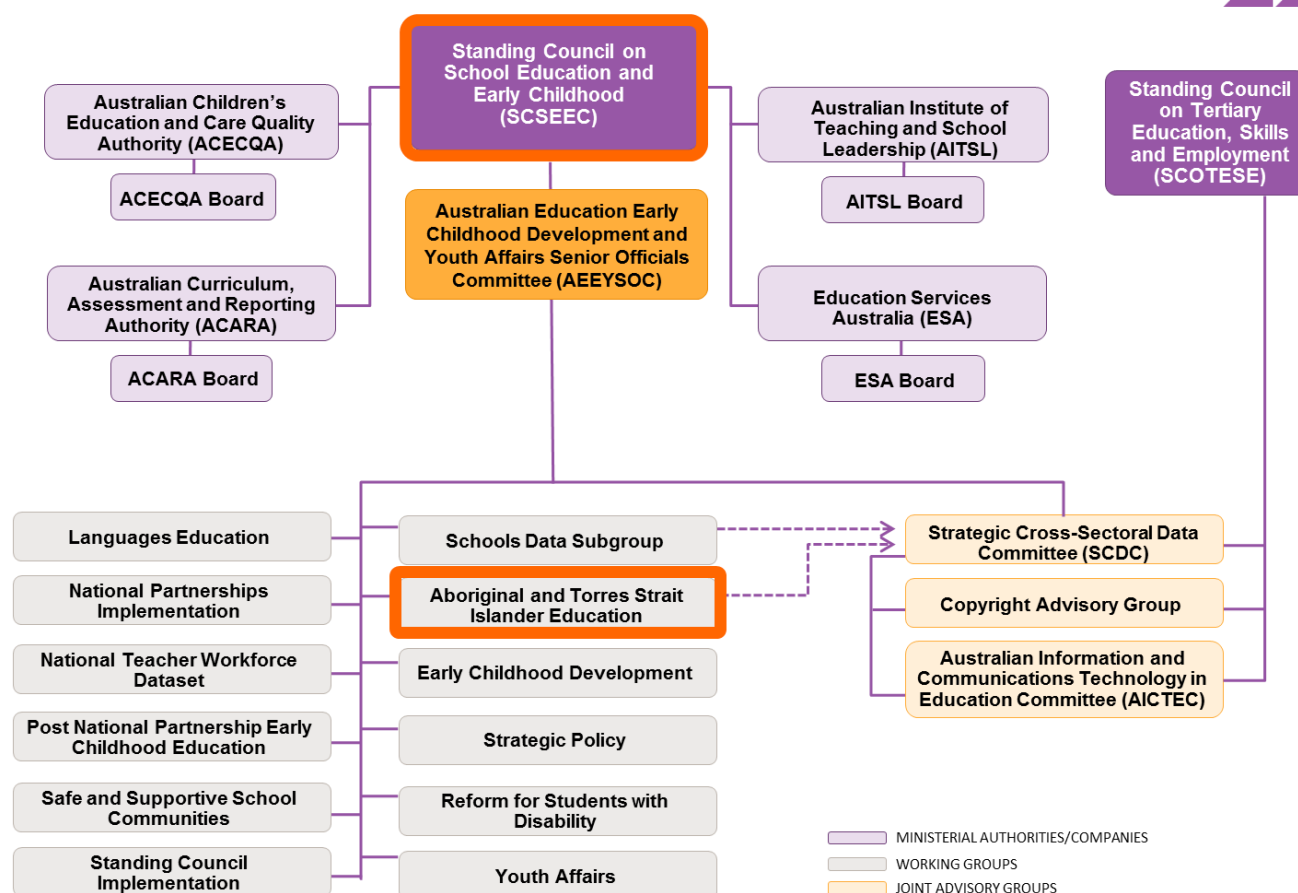
- the Australian Government, which provided national leadership and funding support, while progressing several national collaborative actions
- government school systems within each state and territory, which were responsible for delivering the Action Plan through public schools
- Catholic Dioceses, which were responsible for coordination and delivery across numerous Dioceses around Australia
- Independent Schools Associations within each jurisdiction, which were able to share information and encourage adoption of Action Plan directions by independent school principals
- IECBs in each jurisdiction, which engaged with parents and community members to build the profile of the Action Plan and support implementation activities.

Rather than these bodies implementing the Action Plan unilaterally, several coordination structures supported coordinated activity:

- SCSEEC (formerly MCEECDYA, now the Education Council), which was the peak body for Ministers with responsibility for school education and early childhood, played an authorising role for the Action Plan
- the Australian Education, Early Childhood and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC), which was responsible for the execution of SCSEEC decisions
- the ATSIEWG (now the ATSIEAG) of SCSEEC, which reports through AEEYSOC and took carriage of the Action Plan.

This structure established a network of staff at the national and systemic levels, in particular through the ATSIEWG to lead coordination of the Action Plan. The broader structure based on arrangements that supported the Action Plan's rollout is shown in Figure 9, though this has since been adapted.

Figure 9 SCSEEC AND ATSIEWG COORDINATION STRUCTURES, 2013



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014, adapted from SCSEEC, 2013, available at <<http://www.scseec.edu.au/SCSEEC/Advisory-and-Support-Structure.aspx>>.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group

The ATSIEWG brought together those with a key role in coordination of national implementation efforts during the rollout of the Action Plan. Key aspects of the ATSIEWG and its operation were that:

- the Queensland Department of Education, Employment, Training (DETE) served as Chair between 2010-2014, providing Action Plan secretariat support, leading the annual reporting processes and coordinating evaluation activities
- each state and territory government was represented
- the Australian Government was represented by Department of Education (formerly the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations)
- the Catholic schools sector had one representative
- the independent school sectors had one representative
- Each state and territory IECB was represented from mid-2013 onward, with only one IECB representative attending meetings before this time.

The ATSIEWG itself was not responsible for implementing any actions — rather it provided a forum for jurisdictions and school sectors to share information and to make decisions regarding the implementation of the Action Plan.

The ATSIEWG met approximately three times annually, with some meetings lasting two days. These provided an opportunity for discussion regarding implementation activities and issues within particular domains. Additional representatives were invited to attend the meetings on an as-needed basis to provide updates and discuss arising issues.

The role of Chair involved leadership of the ATSIEWG by the Queensland Director-General for Education, who was the only working group member that also sat on AEEYSOC. Several ATSIEWG sub-groups were established to address arising issues outside the working group meetings. These sub-groups involved representatives of the ATSIEWG and comprised jurisdictions that were best placed to progress specific actions and directions.

Role and coordination support by the Secretariat

The ATSIEWG Secretariat played a significant role in supporting the rollout of the Action Plan over the past five years. The Queensland Government provided Secretariat support, involving:

- coordination of working group papers and meetings
- coordination and preparation of the national annual report on Action Plan outcomes
- information provision to ATSIEWG members
- handling general inquiries regarding the Action Plan
- other matters to coordinate and support the implementation of the Action Plan and the work of the ATSIEWG.

However, resourcing for the Secretariat was limited, with only one full time staff member supporting the delivery of the Action Plan. In the context of a large workload compiling annual reports, the Secretariat had limited time to undertake broader activities to support the rollout of actions.

Decision-making authority in relation to the Action Plan rested with the ATSIEWG, which met infrequently. This meant that the Secretariat was occasionally unable to provide timely responses or advice.

Involvement of Catholic and independent school sectors

Each of the Catholic and independent school sectors had only one representative on the ATSIEWG to participate in discussions and share agreed directions following meetings. While these representatives played a significant role across their sectors, interviews indicated that expectations and directions about how to coordinate implementation activities among Dioceses or schools were not explicit.

Outside ATSIEWG meetings, little evidence was observed of close engagement between government, Catholic and independent school sectors in routinely sharing practices and lessons learnt. Interviews and case studies identified instances where more than one proximate school had spent time developing tools and practices similar to those being developed in another school sector in the same jurisdiction.

Stakeholder views

Over the course of the evaluation, the ATSIEWG was viewed by those involved as a dedicated and appropriate body to coordinate and promote education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the national and school sector levels. It provided a vital communications forum for raising and addressing issues arising through the

implementation process and for analysing and discussing outcomes achieved. It also provided informed feedback and review of evaluation findings.

ATSIEWG representatives had both a level of seniority that enabled them to promote action within their school sectors, but also a deep knowledge and commitment to achieving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The involvement of IECBs through the ATSIEWG supported the sharing of the community and school perspectives.

Key Finding

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group (ATSIEWG) played an active leadership role in planning and decision-making activities to support the rollout of the Action Plan. The Catholic and independent school sectors had limited representation on the ATSIEWG, relative to the government sector.



Role of Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies

Through interviews with IECBs in phase one and phase three, it was clear that the implementation support role they played varied by jurisdiction, largely mirroring the extent of IECB resourcing, coverage and engagement with local school networks. Beyond attendance at ATSIEWG meetings from 2013 onwards, IECBs also played a role in supporting communication and reporting activities, including:

- leading community engagement and communication processes at a local level both to provide information about the Action Plan to communities and to gauge community feedback regarding schools' implementation efforts
- disseminating the Action Plan to communities, particularly during the early stages of the implementation
- writing responses to state and territory annual implementation reports.

Through interviews, one IECB reflected that the Action Plan domains had been adopted within its own strategic plan to maintain its focus around the six domains.

The IECBs provide a valuable perspective on education directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. IECBs involve education specialists with networks across school sectors and keep knowledge of practical approaches to support students. Their leadership and advice across sectors was found to be useful by many in the government, Catholic and independent sectors.

Additional funding for the IECBs was provided by the Australian Government until the end of 2014. While a small number of the eight IECBs may have sufficient resources to sustain their activity should future funding be restricted, many would struggle to play a strong coordination role for any future strategy.

Key Finding

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies provided valuable support for the rollout of the Action Plan within each jurisdiction, building on networks across school sectors and knowledge of practical approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.



5.2 Performance measurement and reporting

Background to Action Plan's performance measurement

There is a strong desire among the media, school professionals, governments, school sectors and the public to gauge improvements in school and student performance across Australia, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The collection and reporting of data against agreed performance measures is the primary mechanism for monitoring student, school and system-wide performance, supporting both public transparency and performance improvement.

The Action Plan's performance measurement and monitoring framework assesses progress across 14 performance indicators linked to the six Action Plan domains. Each performance indicator has an associated target, which outlines desired achievements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Each state and territory provides a report to the ATSIEWG annually to detail implementation progress, drawing on Catholic and independent school sector data, where available. These are compiled into an annual report for the Action Plan as a whole, which is published through the SCSEEC website.

Further details about the Action Plan's 14 performance indicators, data issues and findings may be found in Appendix C.

Lessons from the review of Australian Directions

The review of Australian Directions encountered difficulty gauging the direct impact of the document on student outcomes, due to both short term monitoring and difficulty assigning causality:

Data sets cannot confirm the impact Australian Directions may have had on Indigenous outcomes in education, less so causality. The time span is too short. Australian Directions was not signed into effect until 2006. The latest data sets are for 2008. Comparable outcome data, where they exist, show little change over five years, and more research is needed.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research,
Review of Australian Directions, 2009*

Further, it outlined the challenges identifying effective practices due to data collection issues:

Principals and teachers cannot be informed by systems of what is best if it is not known. It is not known because the data is not collected in ways that permit regular evaluation of the efficiency and effectiveness of any program based on studies involving individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children over time to assess the impact. Much time and energy has gone into short-term program delivery and general data gathering. The evidence is clear that it is difficult to disaggregate the data, for example, by Indigeneity, various measures of geo-location, language background and economic status. Small but significant changes in the way data could be linked with programs, locations, backgrounds and their impact on individuals will go a long way to resolving key questions of effect and efficiency.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research
Review of Australian Directions, 2009*

Design of the Action Plan's performance indicators

In response to these issues, the Action Plan sought to make a contribution to improved performance measurement, introducing monitoring in some areas where jurisdictions had not reported in the past. In other areas, the Action Plan sought to embed targets and performance indicators based on previously agreed policies, such as the NIRA. This aimed to align the Action Plan with other policies and reduce the need for jurisdictions to collect and report on new sets of information for existing indicators.

Performance monitoring challenges

Establishing a baseline dataset

Data collection was impacted by the delay in national approval of the Action Plan, with approval granted by MCEECDYA in April 2010 and COAG in May 2011. During this period, there was uncertainty among school sectors regarding whether to implement the Action Plan, with many awaiting final approval.

As a result, many jurisdictions did not start collecting data in relation to the Action Plan's performance indicators until mid-2011. This had flow-on impacts in establishing baseline data for the purposes of progress monitoring and evaluation, with incomplete data collection in both 2010 and 2011.

General data collection challenges

Much data collected and reported by school sectors is not comparable due to different data collection methods. The only truly national education dataset that exists is NAPLAN, which gauges literacy and numeracy achievement through consistent testing methods. The implication of the different data collection methods is that a statewide, or even national, picture of progress cannot be established in many cases, making it very difficult to track changes over time.

Nine of 55 actions were directed specifically to focus schools, though the performance measures seek to gauge changes achieved by all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The national and jurisdictional datasets are largely unable to disaggregate the focus school cohort for deeper analysis.

In some cases, the Action Plan's performance indicators, as initially drafted, were unable to be used due to data limitations. This resulted in the need to introduce proximate (proxy) measures. For example, for Indicator 2 (student readiness), AEDI was adopted as the proxy measure given the inability of school sectors to measure on-entry performance consistently.

In addition, some of the performance indicators were not being measured by school sectors prior to the introduction of the Action Plan. Where jurisdictions began measuring data against new indicators, time was required to establish data collection processes, often compromising the adequacy of data collected. In some cases, school sectors chose not to report on performance indicators. Numerous gaps in data across sectors are outlined in Appendix C.

Action Plan targets

The targets in the Action Plan outlined the desired results, but in many cases were not specific or able to be easily measured:

- The Action Plan's targets regularly sought to 'increase' performance, but did not specify a magnitude of change to be achieved.
- The baseline year for use in gauging change was not defined.
- Where dates for achievement of targets were specified, in some cases they fell outside the time period of the Action Plan. For example, the targets for performance indicators 9 (NAPLAN achievement) and 14 (Year 12 attainment) seek to 'halve the gap' by 2018 and 2020 respectively. The evaluation team acknowledges that these two targets were drawn from pre-existing national agreements, but note that this restricted the ability to measure whether the targets were being achieved during the course of the Action Plan's implementation, although the NAPLAN trajectories provided a guide in this regard.

- The evaluation team encountered issues associated with the availability of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. Even where nationally consistent data were available, the ability to interpret whether a target had been achieved was limited by data analysis issues. Particular issues, included:
 - *Data reliability*: For Indicator 1 (pre-school enrolment and attendance), the ABS reported that estimated enrolment and attendance rates exceed 100 per cent in several jurisdictions due to double-counting and Indigenous population projections being based on Census data collected every five years. A similar situation emerged for Indicator 6 (enrolment to population ratios).
 - *Varying methodology and definitions*: For Indicator 5 (attendance rates), different methodologies and definitions are used to calculate the student attendance across school sectors and jurisdictions, making comparisons difficult.
 - *Data limitations*: Incomplete datasets limited accurate calculation of results. For example, calculations of results for indicator 7 (retention rates) and indicator 8 (grade progression ratios) were not able to gauge:
 - › students progressing at a faster or slower pace than expected
 - › students changing between full-time and part-time study
 - › intra-state migration and inter-sector transfer
 - › enrolment policies contributing to different age/grade structure between states and territories
 - › variation in the number of students leaving school for alternative education and training pathways.

Reporting challenges

In seeking to report on each performance indicator through annual progress reports, school sectors have encountered a range of additional challenges:

- Several of the performance indicators were amended after agreement to the Action Plan, creating confusion amongst school sectors during the early phases in relation to data collection expectations.
- There was a lack of guidance provided to school sectors and schools regarding data collection requirements, which impacted on consistency of data collection approaches.
- Catholic and independent sectors had less access to data than government school sectors, with much information reported by Catholic and independent schools held either nationally or by state and territory governments.
- Annual reporting documents were compiled by the government sector, often with limited input from Catholic and independent school representatives, with results largely reflecting the practices within the government systems but not providing avenues for Catholic and independent sectors to share practices.
- The reporting burden was particularly heavy for the government school sector. Each jurisdiction was required to prepare an annual report detailing progress against the 14 performance indicators, along with implementation activities in relation to the systemic actions. The 2012 reports also required also jurisdictions to outline progress in implementing local actions.
- The reporting timeframes often afforded limited time for IECBs to comment on jurisdictional progress.

The state and territory reports were compiled into an annual report and placed on the SCSEEC website. However, by the time results were published (December of the following

year), they reflected findings from a year prior, reducing their impact relative to various other data releases throughout the year. In addition, the positioning of reports on the SCSEEC website was not prominent.

Key Findings

The delayed agreement to the Action Plan impacted on the collection of baseline data in both 2010 and 2011.

The Action Plan's performance measures provided a basis for monitoring, but were impacted by early data collection issues, lack of clarity provided to schools and an inability to disaggregate findings between focus and non-focus schools.



5.3 Role of the evaluation

The evaluation itself has played a role in supporting the Action Plan and demonstrates the value of including a longitudinal evaluation to coincide with national policy directions.

The decision to establish an evaluation alongside the Action Plan responded in part to the identified gap in longitudinal evaluation during the rollout of Australian Directions. The review of Australian Directions was undertaken in 2009, following the official completion of the plan. By contrast, the evaluation of the Action Plan was intended to play a role in gauging implementation progress, raising issues and providing a feedback loop to school sectors and schools regarding outcomes.

The evaluation has played a role in implementation and monitoring by:

- gauging differences in the implementation of the Action Plan in all school sectors across Australia and reflecting these in reports to the ATSIEWG
- visiting 48 focus schools for case studies, preparing reports for each school regarding implementation progress and sharing these with schools
- raising awareness of the Action Plan through circulation of survey invitations to school leaders annually, and analysing responses from over 300 distinct focus schools that participated over three years
- gauging implementation activity, needs and outcomes through interviews with government, Catholic and independent school sectors in each jurisdiction, along with IECBs
- compiling annual evaluation reports regarding implementation progress at the national, systemic and local levels, along with outcomes achieved in response to the 14 performance indicators. These reports:
 - › shared insights into school practices through a case study compendium for the ATSIEWG
 - › acknowledged the additional outcomes achieved through delivery of the Action Plan that may not have been captured by the 14 indicators
 - › captured lessons for future national planning
 - › gauged change over time related to the Action Plan
- providing recommendations about future directions, based on lessons learned.

In the absence of a longitudinal evaluation of the Action Plan, many insights from the implementation process would not have been captured, nor would many of the lessons learnt. Had an end-point evaluation been conducted, akin to the review of Australian

Directions, insights would have been drawn based on available data at that point in time, but a complete picture of the Action Plan's influence is unlikely to have been drawn.

While there is scope for bias in the evaluation judging its own impact, reflections from ATSI EWG members has identified value in the longitudinal evaluation. It has increased the accountability of school sectors for implementation, provided feedback loops, helped schools involved in case studies to recognise the value of implementation, and highlighted approaches elsewhere. This helped to generate an informed perspective regarding future needs for further consideration by the ATSI EWG and school sectors.

Key Finding

The longitudinal evaluation has itself contributed to supporting the rollout of the Action Plan among schools and school sectors by gauging implementation progress, assessing outcomes and advising on future national directions.



6 National and systemic coordination

This chapter details the implementation of national collaborative and systemic actions.

6.1 National collaborative actions

Context for national action

As stated in the Action Plan, “experience has shown that improvements in the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students arise from collaborative action that is responsive to local needs” (MCEECDYA, 2010). As a result, the Action Plan includes national collaborative actions, which are intended to be supported by various school sectors, along with the Australian Government.

Through the ATSIEWG, arrangements were established to allocate lead responsibility for national collaborative actions in each domain to a single jurisdiction. This jurisdiction was then responsible for monitoring progress across jurisdictions, undertaking additional research where required and leading reports to the ATSIEWG. Collaboration was encouraged, given the limited ability for any single jurisdiction to progress the national collaborative actions unilaterally. The Australian Government often provided leadership for many national collaborative actions.

Role of the Action Plan at the national level

In assessing the role of the Action Plan in the national sphere, it is important to note that it sought largely to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through mainstream programs and practices. By doing so, the Action Plan aimed to avoid programs for Indigenous people being bolted-on, rather than built-in, to practice.

The Action Plan therefore sought to play a role in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and good practices in major educational reforms at the national level. Many of the national collaborative actions within the Action Plan were therefore not new, but by inclusion in the plan, maintained a focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The role played by the national collaborative actions can be framed in two ways:

- *Influencing role*: the Action Plan promoted action in several areas that would likely have progressed regardless of the plan, but strengthened the focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as a result of inclusion in the Action Plan.
- *Direct implementation role*: the Action Plan promoted activity that may otherwise have been unlikely had it not been included in the Action Plan.

Actions in these categories are discussed further below. Progress in implementation each national collaborative actions is outlined further in Appendix D, based on information provided by the Australian Government.

Influencing role

By embedding reform directions that were in development prior to the Action Plan, it sought to ensure that agreed national directions focused attention on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The Action Plan played a role in influencing several actions:

- The development of the National Early Years Workforce Strategy (Action 1)
- The use of the Early Years Learning Framework (Action 2), which included specific chapters on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families
- Maintenance of appropriate advisory arrangements through extension of Australian Government funding to IECBs until the conclusion of 2014 and establishment of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council (Action 10)
- Support for ACARA to establish a panel of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts to support the drafting of the Australian Curriculum: Languages F-10 Draft Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages (Action 12)
- Consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility issues in student tracking from school through to post-school (Action 23)
- Continued support for the cross-border enrolment and attendance project (Action 24)
- Gauging ACARA activity to review the cultural bias of NAPLAN tests (Action 27)
- Aiding development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the National Curriculum (Action 34)
- Supporting core components of good practice for education and teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through the National Professional Standards for Principals and Teachers (Actions 36, 37 & 38)
- Focus on professional learning for principals and teachers, influencing additional funding directed to AITSL to develop programs in this area and resulting in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (Action 40)
- Support for the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes (Action 45)
- Commitment to developing a companion document to the Action Plan in the tertiary education, skills and employment sector (Action 46).

While the precise influence of the Action Plan in these areas is difficult to gauge, by including specific actions in a collaborative national manner, it helped to authorise activity and promote action during the course of the rollout.

Direct implementation role

There are some national collaborative actions that have been directly driven by the ATSIEWG or sub-groups in areas where action was not otherwise occurring. In these areas, the Action Plan has promoted activity, drawing on intergovernmental support and in some cases resulting in the introduction of new initiatives. These actions include:

- Sharing evidence about early education programs (Action 3)
- Drawing links between Ministerial Councils in health, community services and Indigenous affairs to undertake service mapping activities (Action 9)
- Conducting research to assess the benefits of promoting formal education through a marketing campaign to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and families and using this information to promote school attendance and engagement (Action 11)
- The National Alliance of Remote Indigenous Schools (NARIS) started due to connections with the Action Plan, with further work continuing to gauge activities across all jurisdictions (Action 14)

- The assembly of an evidence base regarding attendance strategies (Action 22)
- The assembly of evidence regarding literacy and numeracy strategies (Action 28)
- The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI), which received funding of \$7.5 million to support pathways for teachers (Action 33)
- Consideration of ways that technology can support school based practice, which is being addressed through a sub-group (Action 47).

Implications

Collaborative action at the national level have been valuable for embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in major national reform directions. This supported a number of specific and distinct actions that may not have otherwise occurred. It supported the compilation of evidence to support targeted activities in future.

Despite reporting responsibilities for national collaborative actions being shared by state and territory education systems, these actions have largely been progressed at the Australian Government level. This has provided the Australian Government with a role that extends beyond funding and oversight to actively supporting coordinated action across national education reform areas and through intergovernmental committees. This national coordination has helped to ensure that the Action Plan was implemented consistently across other national forums, and indeed, helped the Action Plan to play a role in shaping national directions.

Key Finding

The national collaborative actions helped to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in national education reform directions and progress areas where limitations in evidence or action existed.



6.2 Systemic coordination

Variability in systemic practice

Support for the Action Plan at the systemic level was found to be crucial for its local implementation. One of the key considerations in assessing the impact of the Action Plan across jurisdictions and schools relates to the way that each school sector adopted the Action Plan directions and embedded them within sectoral policies. Broad approaches by school sectors were:

- *Government school sector:* education policies or strategies drive action across schools, in many cases complemented by specific strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- *Catholic school sector:* Dioceses responsible for their own education strategies, with some producing specific strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- *Independent schools:* while not itself a school sector, principals at each school retain autonomy for school practices, with the Action Plan providing guidance to principals in formulating directions based on local needs.

In general, visibility of the Action Plan at the school level was impacted by the degree to which it was directly communicated to schools. Based on school case studies and surveys, there were variable levels of awareness of the Action Plan at the local level. Given the

different approaches to rolling out the Action Plan systemically, low awareness at the school level may not itself be an issue if actions were embedded in school plans.

Two critical factors appeared to influence the degree of implementation of Action Plan directions by focus schools:

- *degree of systemic adoption*: the degree to which the directions in the Action Plan were adopted by school sectors and communicated to schools
- *lag effect for systemic adoption*: the variable lengths of time taken by school sectors to adopt the directions into systemic plans.

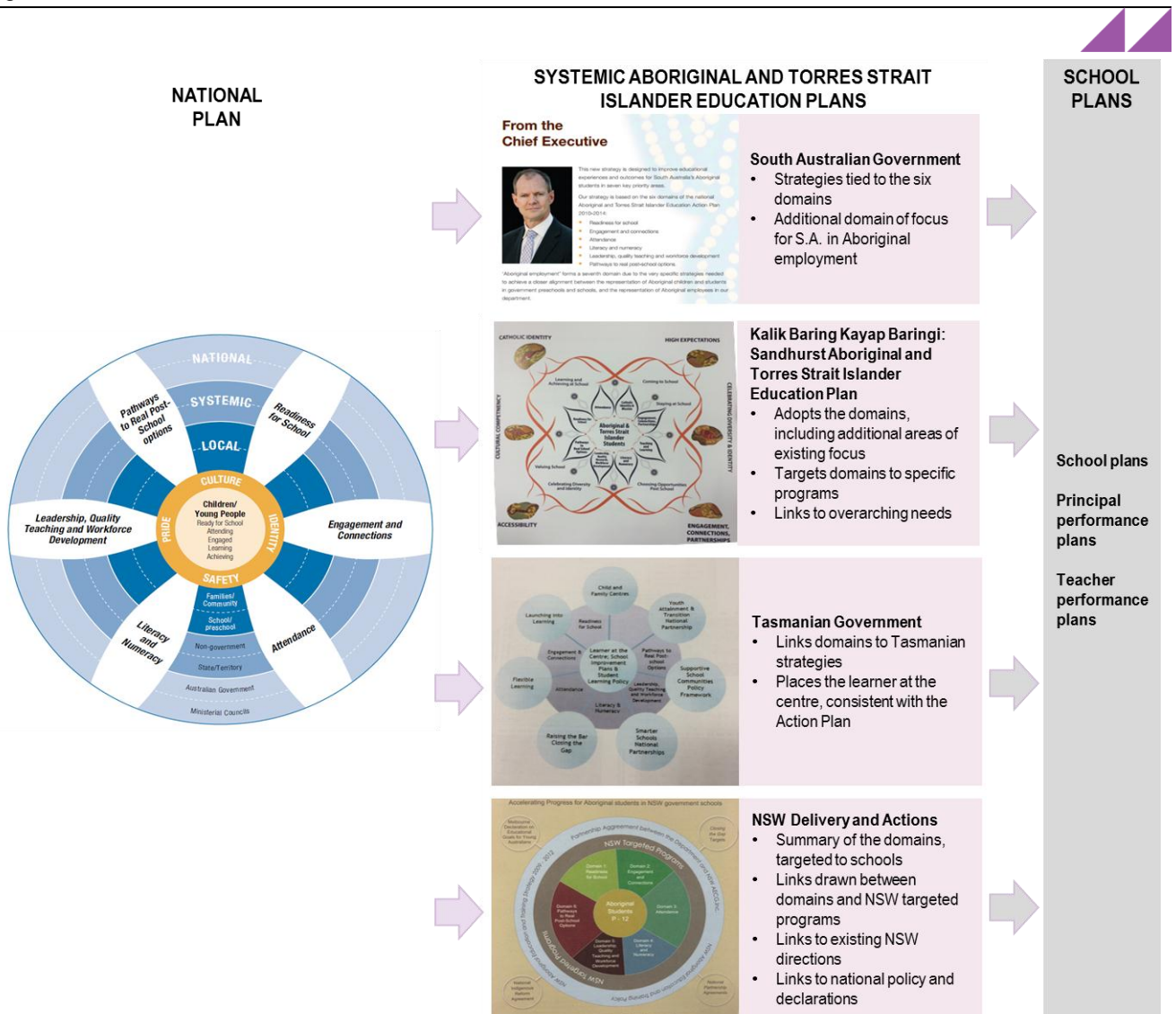
These are discussed further in the sub-sections below.

Degree of systemic adoption

The degree to which national directions were adopted in systemic plans had a large impact on its prioritisation at the school level. Variability was recognised between jurisdictions in this regard, with some closely adopting the domains and actions, while others sought to embed these strategically within a broader suite of activities.

At a high-level, the domain structure was mirrored in many systemic plans, and provided a valuable organising framework for activities to be pursued at the school level. This is demonstrated in Figure 10, based on systemic policy directions, along with the intended flow on impacts from the national to the school level.

Figure 10 ADOPTION OF NATIONAL DOMAINS AT THE SYSTEMIC LEVEL AND FLOW-ON IMPACTS



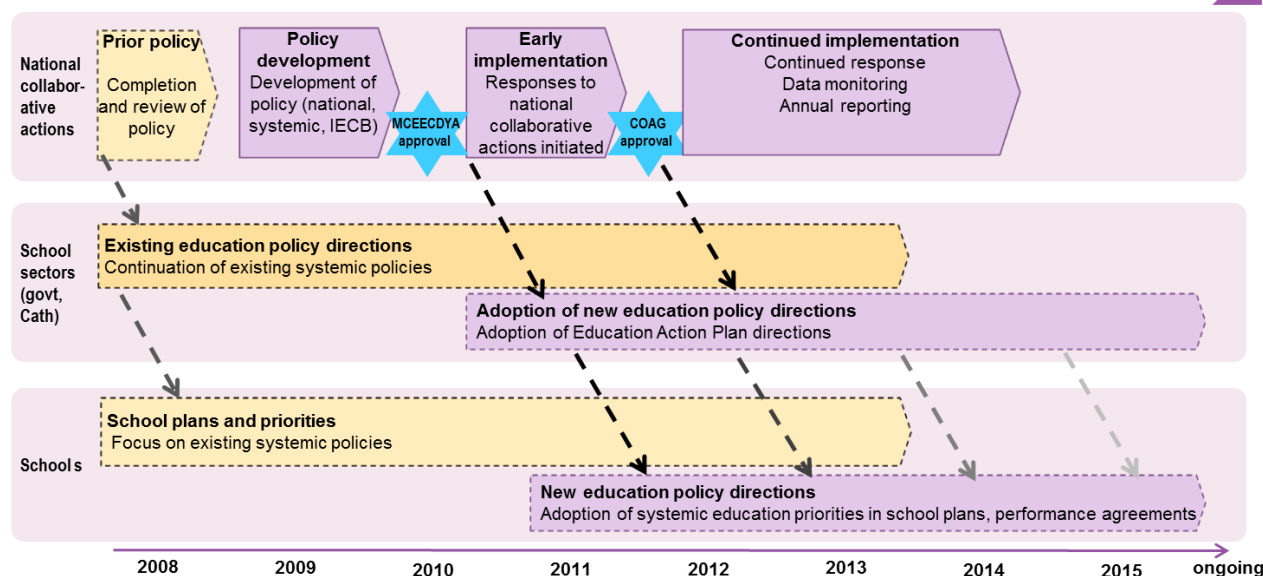
Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014, drawing on systemic plans (various)

Lag effect for systemic adoption

In government and Catholic school systems, a lag effect was evident in adopting the Action Plan's directions into policies. In effect, the Action Plan was implemented at variable paces based not only on the degree of adoption at the systemic level, but also based on the timeframes for systemic policies to be introduced. This flow is shown in Figure 11, demonstrating that:

- *national collaborative rollout*: began following MCEECDYA approval of the Action Plan in April 2010
- *systemic level* directions initially adopted prior national policy directions, with some updating their focus following MCEECDYA approval while others waited for COAG approval before starting implementation action to adopt the Action Plan's directions in systemic policies to in-turn direct school priorities;
- *local level implementation* requires systemic leadership, which given the lag in adopting and systematising actions, often resulted in a lag effect at the local level.

Figure 11 **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACTION PLAN AT THE NATIONAL, SYSTEMIC AND LOCAL LEVELS**



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Examples of the lag effect in practice

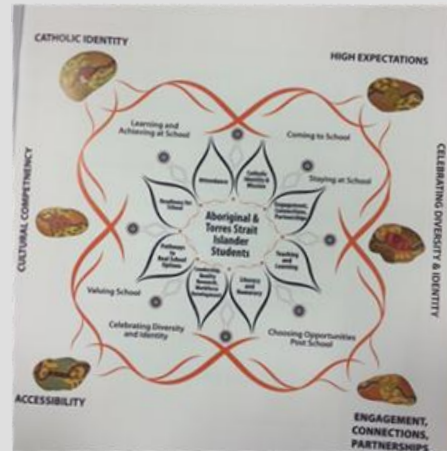
It is possible to illustrate the lag effect using the example of South Australia. The Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) had a systemic education strategy in place at the time that the Action Plan was agreed by both MCEECDYA (2010) and COAG (2011). This was implemented across regional education divisions, which promoted activity by schools.

In 2012, DECD agreed to a new education strategic plan, covering the period 2012 to 2016. Subsequently, an *Aboriginal Strategy 2013-2016* was approved. The *Aboriginal Strategy* adopts the Action Plan's six domains, plus an additional domain for Aboriginal employment. These strategies will be implemented across focus schools until the end of 2016 - two years beyond the stated period of the Action Plan, which concludes in 2014. It is therefore expected that South Australian Government schools will continue implementing actions in response to the six Action Plan domains beyond 2014, with some impacts to be achieved over a longer duration.

This is also the case in other jurisdictions, with actions to be continued at the school level over coming years in accordance with sector plans.

A further illustration is provided by the Sandhurst Diocese in Victoria, which developed *Kalik Baring Kayap Baringi: Many Paths One Destination: the Sandhurst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Plan 2013-2017* building on the Action Plan's directions. A summary of the collaborative development process is outlined in Box 3.

Box 3 **KALIK BARING KAYAP BARINGI: MANY PATHS ONE DESTINATION, THE SANDHURST ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION PLAN 2013-2017**



Catholic Education Sandhurst is committed to Aboriginal Education and the creation of the Sandhurst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Plan (SATIEP) was a way to bring focus to Sandhurst schools and the Sandhurst Catholic Education Office to further inform the strategies, initiatives and projects already apparent in schools.

The values, which underpin the document, grow out of a commitment to Gospel values. The key challenge for each of our schools is to become inclusive hope filled communities that fulfil the purpose of SATIEP.

The Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 and the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework inform SATIEP. The Sandhurst Aboriginal team began writing the SATIEP in 2011. The steering committee met on a regular basis to map out the plan. Research was undertaken to ensure the document produced contained contemporary teaching and learning practice and best practice in Aboriginal education.

Authentic consultation with Aboriginal communities was paramount in the production of the document. As many Aboriginal Traditional Owner countries make up the Diocese representation from each was imperative in all aspects of the plan. The Sandhurst Aboriginal network-representatives from each of our schools in the Diocese-were also engaged in the process. Consultation took place with Traditional Owners, Local Aboriginal Education Consultation Groups, Aboriginal parent groups and the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria.

Permission was sought to name the document in Dja Dja Wurrung language. The main office of Sandhurst Catholic Education is situated in Bendigo on Dja Dja Wurrung country. The Dja Dja Wurrung language group met and considered the request. Permission was granted and the document is called 'Kalik Baring Kayap Baringi – Many Paths One Destination'.

A Wemba Wemba woman, and a graduate of a Sandhurst Catholic College, from Yakuwa Graphic Designs designed the layout and artwork for the booklet. She, coming from one of the countries of the Diocese, included artwork in the design to incorporate the totems and Creator Spirit of all the countries of the Diocese. A Mutthi Mutthi artist from the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry, Mrs. Vicki Clark, produced the artwork on the Foundation stones.

The final draft of SATIEP came about through a process that took place with all the partners in the consultation process gathered at Rumbalara Football Netball Club in Shepparton in November 2012. A Yorta Yorta/Dja Dja Wurrung woman and an experienced facilitator, lead the process using the World Café strategy.

Kalik Baring Kayap Baringi – Many Paths One Destination was launched on March 1st 2013 at the Sandhurst Leaders Gathering in Bendigo. Members of the consultation group played a part in the ritual of the launch. During 2013 the Sandhurst Aboriginal Education Team piloted ways to unpack the document with school staff. They have since created a package for schools to assist them in this task. In February 2014 an e-book version of the document was published and placed on the Sandhurst Catholic Education Office website.

Source: Courtesy of the Sandhurst Diocese

Implications

The degree to which the Action Plan was adopted systemically and timeframes for policy implementation were important considerations in determining the influence of the plan across schools. While some school sectors adopted the Action Plan's domain structure in full during the early stages of the Action Plan's rollout, others did not align directions explicitly around the priority domains, instead focusing on statewide priorities. In essence, variable approaches were evident.

Key Findings

Adoption and promotion of the Action Plan's priority domains and actions in systemic policies was critical to supporting schools to implement the Action Plan's directions.

There was a lag effect in implementation of the Action Plan's directions in many school sectors, resulting from the variable timeframes for policy development and implementation.



7 Whole-of-school implementation

This chapter discusses whole-of-school considerations in relation to implementation of the Action Plan.

7.1 Variability between schools

This chapter examines the rollout of the Action Plan at the local level, based primarily on findings from case studies and surveys of focus schools, and with consideration of student outcomes reflected through the Action Plan performance indicators, as outlined in Appendix C.

Schools' involvement with multiple programs renders it difficult to establish causation. Many actions within the Action Plan were common to Australian Directions, so may have been initiated in the years prior to the Action Plan's introduction. As a result, it is difficult to determine the exact influence of the Action Plan.

In addition, given the variety of contexts, the evaluation does not seek to single out 'best practice'. What works in one location may be unsuitable in another.

School activities have therefore been evaluated at a general level across the six priority domains, rather than seeking to identify the direct influence of the Action Plan amongst schools. This approach allows consideration of activities that are not directly tied to the Action Plan, but have proven to be influential at the school level.

Variable contexts

Schools operate in a broad range of contexts across Australia and face different challenges in promoting student outcomes. Some key factors impacting on the Action Plan's implementation at the school level include:

- the Action Plan's visibility at the school level, which depends in many sectors on the level of adoption of actions by school sectors
- the degree of sectoral communication with schools regarding implementation expectations
- the extent to which local needs match the Action Plan's local actions
- the degree to which actions are embedded in school plans
- school funding, both for the Action Plan and more generally
- composition of the school workforce, including in particular:
 - tenure of school leaders
 - rates of teacher turnover
 - involvement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers
- geographical location
- school infrastructure, including classrooms, technology and transport
- other programs, influences and activities at the school.

Variable priorities

Schools respond to a broad range of programs, policies and funding arrangements that affect their priorities. Of particular significance during the Action Plan's rollout were the Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements (NPAs), which provide targeted support to many schools based on their levels of socio-economic disadvantage or in recognition of literacy and numeracy needs. Some schools also received support through a NPA for schools in Remote Service Delivery (RSD) locations.

A number of non-government agencies also played a role in supporting schools through programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and school professionals. For students, such programs are often in sport, cultural activities, language learning or self-identity. For teachers, additional support is provided for leadership, cultural awareness, pedagogy and school-wide practice support.

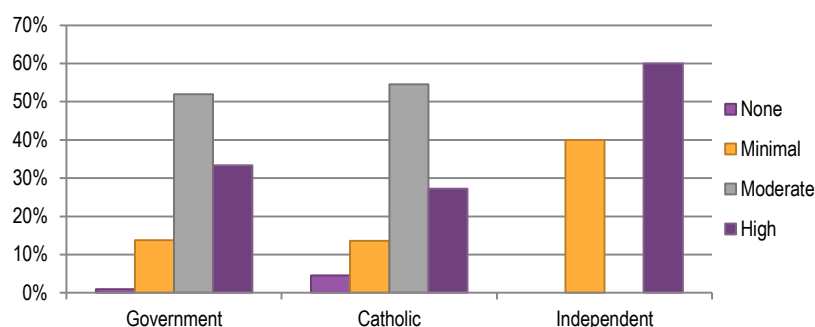
Variable awareness of the Action Plan

To gauge knowledge of the Action Plan at the school level, the evaluation survey asked focus school leaders, many of whom were school principals, to identify their levels of awareness about the Action Plan. Results from phase three of the survey in Figure 12 show that:

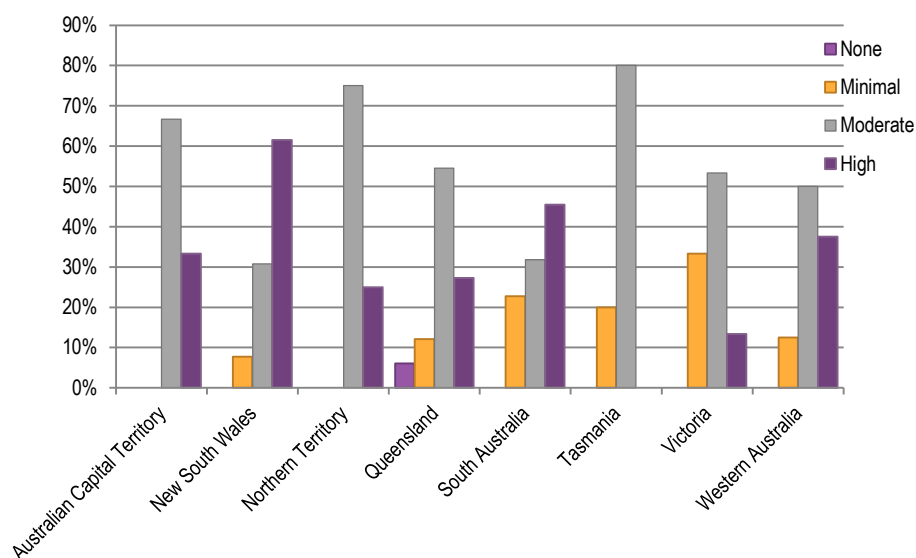
- levels of awareness within government and Catholic sector focus schools are relatively similar in proportion, with a majority being moderately aware
- independent school respondents either have high levels of awareness, implying that they have used the Action Plan directly within the school, or minimal awareness, suggesting that they have not used the Action Plan at the school.
- awareness is highest in New South Wales, where policy embedded the Action Plan's domains into a succinct summary guide for schools, South Australia, where the state strategy reflects the Action Plan's domains, Western Australia, which also adopted the domains in its plan, and the Australian Capital Territory, which provided focus schools with implementation funding and additional support.

Figure 12 **AWARENESS OF THE ACTION PLAN BY JURISDICTION AND SCHOOL SECTOR, 2014**

AWARENESS BY SCHOOL SECTOR



AWARENESS BY JURISDICTION



Note: "Question: What is your level of awareness of the Action Plan?"

Responses were received from 102 government schools, 22 Catholic schools and 5 independent schools.

Responses were received from ACT (9), NSW (13), NT (8), QLD (33), SA (22), TAS (5), VIC (15) and WA (24)

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The influence of the Action Plan

For most schools, the Action Plan was not the primary driver of school activity, as illustrated in this remote school setting:

The school has a planned whole school community approach to ongoing improvement, with the impetus coming from its site improvement plan 2012-2014 and the alignment of this with the Indigenous education committee, district and state priorities. In terms of the Action Plan, there are a wealth of initiatives evident in relation to the six domains, however the Action Plan is not the 'driver'. School operations are firmly grounded within the framework of the site improvement plan and accountability is ensured through the departmental improvement and accountability framework. Staff have mapped areas of focus to the six domains of the Action Plan, all of which are included in the school improvement plan.

Case study report, phase three

Similarly, a survey response reflected the needs within a remote setting and the limited influence of the Action Plan:

As a small remote Indigenous community school we take a lot of direction from regional office. Engagement with early years framework, leadership development, attendance strategies, literacy and numeracy, school readiness etc., are all things we are either doing well or developing. But we aren't necessarily doing it with an understanding that our involvement has been motivated from [the] Action Plan. Maybe the regional office has drawn these ideas from it, but much of this is just good sensible practice.

Survey response, phase three

The Action Plan may be secondary to student achievement data in prioritising action:

Whilst knowledge and awareness of the Action Plan within the school is high, it is not the Action Plan itself that drives activities to improve Aboriginal education. All strategies and programs at [the school] are driven by data on student achievement to determine Aboriginal strategies in consultation with the [IECB] and the [school committee]. The principal has suggested that the Action Plan will be used in the future as a point of reference for forthcoming Aboriginal education strategies.

Case study report, phase three

Responsibilities and expectations as focus schools

Case studies identified that focus schools were often unclear about their responsibilities and expectations. Particularly in the early phases, there was little communication or guidance provided to focus schools. Over time, schools indicated a growing awareness of the specific actions expected of them, including the introduction of personalised learning strategies.

Many schools, particularly in the government school sector, were selected as focus schools based on departmental decisions, rather than local expressions of interest. Catholic and independent schools appeared to have greater discretion to decide whether to become focus schools. Some schools were not aware that they were focus schools for a significant period of the Action Plan's rollout. For example:

[The school] was only made aware in June 2012 that it was a focus school under the Action Plan. While it is yet to receive additional funding, it has since this time acted promptly to develop a local action/activity plan which outlines strategies and actions in each of the six priority areas.

Case study report, phase three

Action Plan domains as an organising framework

The Action Plan's domains provided a valuable organising framework for schools. The six priority areas were considered by many schools to be core business, with various school activities generally able to be mapped to each domain through case study discussions. For some schools, the Action Plan provided a useful checklist and reference for activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. One focus school:

developed its localised action plan for June 2012 to April 2014 through a process of input from staff, parents, board, and community members. The development of the school plan instigated a review of existing strategies and objectives in the priority areas. The Action Plan therefore served as a checklist or organising framework for existing and future strategies and actions. It provided additional impetus for the development of a whole school literacy and numeracy strategy, which was already a requirement of special funding for literacy and numeracy...

Case study report, phase three

Implications

It remains unclear whether and how the Action Plan itself was intended to drive action at the school level. The inclusion of specific local actions suggests that schools were intended to reference the details of the Action Plan and to implement key activities in response, though

in practice, adoption and promotion by school systems was critical to achieving these ambitions. The domains were generally considered useful by schools as an organising framework, and found their way into school plans in some settings or, at the least, provided a reference against which schools could gauge their existing activities.

Key Finding

Action at the school level is driven primarily by local contextual needs, in combination with systemic policies, rather than as a direct result of national plans.

7.2 Importance of culture and identity

Prior directions for education emphasised the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to engagement and learning. For example, the Melbourne Declaration (2008) called for schools to acknowledge culture and to build on Indigenous students' knowledge and experience:

...all Australian governments and all school sectors must...ensure that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning, and work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the schooling process, including to promote high expectations for the learning outcomes of Indigenous students

Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (2008)

The review of Australian Directions echoed similar sentiments about the importance of culture, but found that it had not been a major feature of the 2005-2008 strategy:

Our review of contemporary writings clearly identifies the need to acknowledge, embrace and develop a positive sense of cultural identity. It is worth noting the extent to which this demand exists substantially in the international literature, yet is somewhat absent from current Australian dialogue on Indigenous education.

*David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research
 Review of Australian Directions (2009)*

For many schools, the celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and languages was essential to achieving whole-of-school engagement across other the Action Plan domains. It was particularly critical for successful engagement and connections activities that students' cultural identities were accepted and celebrated, and that parents and communities felt that the school was a safe and supportive environment.

This was emphasised through several case study reports. For example, at one school in Tasmania, the school had become a hub for cultural regeneration and cultural sharing:

Over the past three years, [the school] has sought to learn about and share information about Tasmania's Aboriginal people, with a particular focus on gathering knowledge that can be shared with students and across the wider community. The desire for leadership by the school was identified through engagement with parents of Aboriginal students, many of whom have limited knowledge of local history or connection to culture. As such, the school has taken on the role of building awareness about the local Palawa people and sites.

Engagement with Aboriginal families has therefore been a major focus for the school over the past three years. School staff have taken steps to learn about Tasmanian Indigenous history and cultures. Some parents identified that the school was a significant contributor to rebuilding an understanding of Tasmanian Indigenous history – not only among young people, but more broadly across the community.

...the principal noted that the process of learning about, embracing and sharing information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture had been crucial to enhancing the standing of teachers across the school. The change process had helped shift the culture across the entire school through the passion and commitment of staff. As one staff member noted, the personal and school-wide change process had been "incredibly rewarding" and had helped build knowledge and personal relationships across the community.

School case study, phase three

At its heart, a school-wide commitment to celebrating culture becomes a mechanism for teachers and school staff to learn and to build the cultural capacity of the school workforce, overcoming barriers stemming from knowledge gaps and fear of teachers about inadvertently saying or doing something considered culturally inaccurate or offensive. There are significant needs to support teachers in this area, as explained through a metropolitan school case study:

Teachers also identified that broader cultural awareness training was needed for all teachers within the school, as some teachers are not confident in teaching Aboriginal culture and history and were afraid of getting it wrong.... Many teachers expressed enthusiasm to become more informed and aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and history — so this could be passed on to their students.

School case study, phase three

The roles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers and teachers were critical to achieving these goals in many schools. Staff in these roles played a valuable bridging role in working with students and sharing culture, but this needs to be extended, as illustrated in the mobility study:

...Teachers are often very reliant on Indigenous education workers at the school to engage with students in deeper and more personalised ways. Teachers tend to inhabit the 'technical' worlds of educational policy and curriculum, while Indigenous education workers serve as cultural translators and emotional support staff in the 'relational' world of the student. The challenge for systems and schools is to improve the quality of teacher training and professional development so that these world views can be harmonised and more tailored and that personalised learning, especially in literacy and numeracy, can be used to engage highly-mobile Indigenous students.

Mobility study, phase three

For those schools with a large Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teacher workforce, culture can become a core part of the school ethos, as outlined in one metropolitan school case study:

A sense of cultural identity is embedded in the way the school operates, with close to half of the school's staff being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Indigenous values and a sense of family and community are an important part of the school's ethos. In response to student and parent surveys the school has developed 'Indigenous values, ethics and philosophy' as a new subject to support student learning about Indigenous culture.

School case study, phase three

It is important that culture extends into the curriculum to provide a deeper level of knowledge for students:

The school places great emphasis on language and culture. Teaching of language and culture is integral to student engagement at school and for improving outcomes in literacy and numeracy. However, this emphasis has a broader, societal purpose as well, which is to preserve Indigenous culture for future generations. The school plays a critical role in teaching students both Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture, ensuring that they will have the skills to "walk in both worlds".

School case study, phase three

Cultural engagement has proven challenging in some schools, with limited responsiveness from parents and communities, despite the best efforts of staff. In one location, many cultural groups were represented, with students having only limited interest or involvement in cultural programs:

The school draws from a wide multicultural mix. Indigenous students are not treated any differently to any other students in the school, and do not want to be seen as different. The support services and associated agencies, therefore, apply to all students.

Indigenous students can opt to participate in the weekly 'Deadly Gatherings' meetings. These meetings are one hour per week, and students from Years 4 to 7 and 1 to 3 meet separately with an Elder and an Aboriginal teacher at the school. These sessions are voluntary and their

purpose is to ensure students receive the opportunity to learn more about their cultural heritage and, in a supportive setting, are able to ask questions about the 'stories' of their Elders.

Only a small proportion of Indigenous students attend the program. For them, it is an important opportunity to better understand their Aboriginality. However, many students choose not to attend, as culture is either learned through family connections or the Elders involved do not represent their particular stories.

School case study, phase three

Role of the Action Plan

A consistent message from stakeholders was that the Action Plan did not adequately acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for prioritisation by schools. In the engagement and connections domain in particular, the local actions prescribed specific techniques for engagement, such as personalised learning strategies and school-community partnership agreements, rather than prompting schools to establish programs for cultural development, including languages and curriculum.

Where these activities occurred as a result of individual schools recognising the value of engagement through culture, the beneficiaries were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families and non-Indigenous students, who were more exposed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and languages than they would otherwise have been. Teachers also benefited significantly from engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers or community Elders.

Key Finding

While a strong acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is critical to creating a welcoming school environment that encourages students to attend and engage, the influence of the Action Plan in explicitly promoting cultural recognition was limited.



7.3 Challenges in remote school settings

Differences between remote and metropolitan/provincial schools

Differences between schools in remote settings and those in metropolitan and provincial areas were apparent throughout the evaluation. Relative to metropolitan and provincial schools, remote schools generally had:

- lower socio-economic status
- greater vulnerability in early childhood
- lower levels of student attendance
- poorer levels of student achievement
- higher rates of teacher turnover
- larger proportions of students with English as an additional language
- fewer economic and employment opportunities.

Role of the Action Plan in supporting remote schools

The Action Plan promoted a largely generic response across all focus schools, albeit with several additional actions for remote schools at the national collaborative and systemic levels, namely:

- The Australian Government and education providers will work together to develop options to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in regional and remote areas to access high quality secondary schooling while retaining links with their communities (Action 14, national collaborative)
- The Australian, Western Australian, South Australian and Northern Territory Governments will continue working with non-government providers to develop strategies to better record enrolment and attendance of highly mobile students from remote communities (Action 24, national collaborative)
- That education providers will ensure that teachers working in remote schools with multilingual students are appropriately prepared with English as a Second Language (ESL) strategies, including the means by which to assess student progress in the acquisition of skills in Standard Australian English (Action 30, systemic).

Notwithstanding these actions, the Action Plan did not generally promote a diversified or tailored response by remote schools. Specific challenges in remote schools are outlined further below.

Attendance

Although attendance data (performance indicator 5) does not distinguish by geo-location, remote attendance is acknowledged as being a particular issue. For example, a recently released draft report regarding school outcomes in the Northern Territory acknowledged that attendance across very remote schools had dropped to near 50 per cent (Wilson, 2014). Mobility presents an additional attendance-related challenge, as discussed in Chapter 9, though this also impacts on schools in provincial and metropolitan areas, to which families travel.

School surveys identified a number of activities that may help to keep Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at school. Results for remote schools detailed:

- a change of parental and community attitudes, through:
 - effective engagement strategies
 - developing parents' understanding that to keep country and culture alive it is essential to build literacy skills
 - media campaigns seeking to limit family mobility during the school term
 - welfare interventions and punitive measures for parents who do not send their children to school
- agencies working more closely together across communities
- more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in schools
- greater principal autonomy to manage poor performing or ineffective teachers
- longer-term funding for effective programs
- transport services for students
- extra-curricular activities for students and parents.

Literacy and Numeracy

Poorer outcomes for remote and very remote students in literacy and numeracy achievement are evident in the results for performance indicator 9 (Appendix C). The major finding in relation to school geo-location is that:

Results by geo-location universally demonstrate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in metropolitan and provincial areas perform better across all NAPLAN tests (reading,

writing and numeracy). Achievement results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students relative to non-Indigenous students in remote and very remote locations were mixed, with some test categories showing improvement between 2009 and 2013 (notably Y3 and Y5 reading and Y3 numeracy), while the gap extended in other areas (such as persuasive writing and Y9 numeracy).

Performance indicator 9 (literacy and numeracy), Appendix C

School leaders were surveyed about activities that would help to improve literacy and numeracy achievement among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Results for remote schools outlined the following activities:

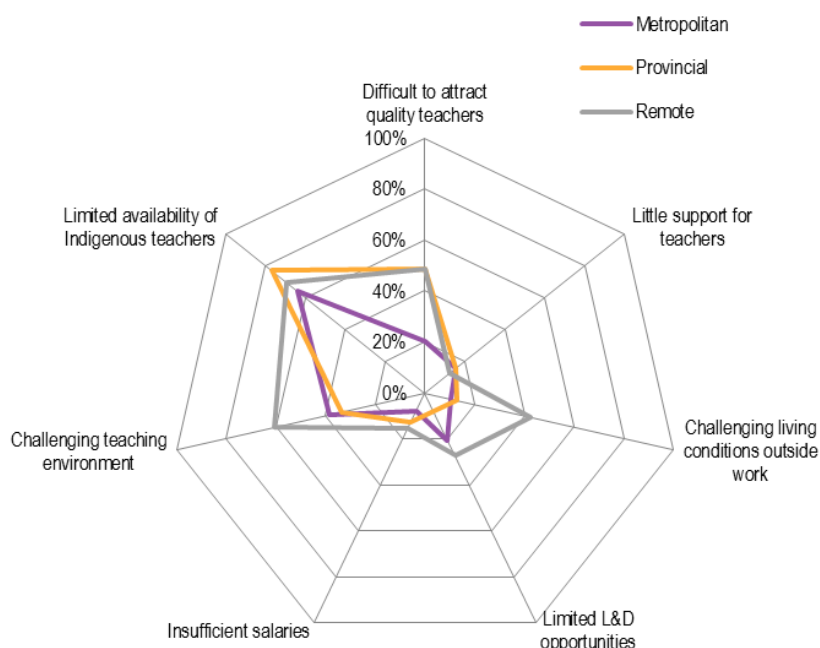
- smaller group or one-on-one tutoring
- use of a literacy coach to deliver blocks of literacy lessons
- home tutoring clinics
- attraction of teachers trained in educating students through English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) approaches
- ensuring children attend school
- more Aboriginal Teaching Assistants or Aboriginal education officers to support teachers
- additional teachers to support a more targeted approach to teaching
- early diagnosis of health problems
- greater acknowledgement that students do not have English immersion in the home environment
- improved lessons for teachers that are engaging and relevant to students
- student continuity at the same school
- more early literacy and numeracy prior to school
- greater focus on literacy and numeracy in the curriculum

These responses demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of literacy and numeracy achievement and the varied areas of focus required to improve student outcomes. Most schools visited through case studies consider that they are doing what they can under the circumstances, but face barriers in relation to home issues, workforce composition, a crowded curriculum and mobility. The enablers of improved performance included hiring more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff at the school and providing more dedicated tutoring and support for students.

Workforce challenges

Workforce challenges for remote schools differed somewhat from metropolitan and provincial schools. The phase three survey responses highlighted these differences (Figure 13), including limited availability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (though the same is true in metropolitan and provincial schools), a teaching environment that is perceived as challenging and difficult living conditions outside work, with overall difficulties in attracting teachers. Teacher salaries or support available were not rated highly as issues, though teacher learning and development is an issue for some schools.

Figure 13 **CHALLENGES ATTRACTING AND MAINTAINING A SKILLED AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT TEACHER WORKFORCE, PHASE THREE**



Notes: Percentages indicate proportion of respondents by geo-location selecting factor.
 Number of responses (multiple selected): Phase three: metropolitan (69), provincial (81), remote (91)
 Question: Which factors are the greatest challenges in attracting and maintaining and skilled and culturally competent teacher workforce?
 Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The phase three focus school survey found that in remote schools, approximately 80 per cent of teachers and 90 per cent of principals had participated in cultural awareness training. Around 76 per cent of principals had also participated in leadership training. In remote schools, on average, principals completed around 20 hours of cultural awareness and leadership training each year. By contrast, principals in provincial and metropolitan schools completed approximately 12 hours and 17 hours respectively.

Survey results indicate that teachers and principals working in remote schools are more likely to undertake cultural awareness or leadership training than their provincial or metropolitan counterparts.

Key Finding

The challenges facing remote schools differ significantly from metropolitan and provincial schools. However, the Action Plan promoted a largely uniform response to its local actions, only including a small number of national collaborative and systemic actions targeted toward remote schools.

7.4 Data literacy

Case studies identified that schools with high levels of data literacy were better able to gauge student progress over time and adapt their teaching practices accordingly. The increasing focus on literacy and numeracy over recent years has sharpened many schools' skills in disaggregating and analysing student and school-wide data.

Nonetheless, varied capabilities in relation to schools' data literacy were found during the case study visits, in particular when asked to share outcomes data regarding the progress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Many schools monitored such data as a matter of standard practice, while others appeared unable to easily gauge or report findings.

The need for data literacy at the school has long been recognised. Australian Directions included a recommendation in its quality teaching domain to "provide support to develop data and assessment literacy in school leaders and teachers to support evidence-based improvement planning" (recommendation 9.3). Where schools are able to access and analyse student data effectively, they may:

- gauge student progress over time and in relation to particular interventions
- link student progress to pedagogy and teaching practices
- host open discussion with students, parent and families, establishing and monitoring achievement of high expectations
- provide a feedback loop for teachers and school staff
- celebrate student successes and address students failing to progress as expected rates
- evaluate the success of specific school-based interventions.

The case study process reaffirmed the value of clear progress markers for teachers. Most often, better data regarding students inspired teachers to focus their activities and enabled them to share in students' progress. For one school, literacy and numeracy data monitoring approaches involved four steps, each building on data and engaging teachers:

- Transparently plotting and monitoring progress for all students throughout the school – the status of students' learning is positioned on a continuum on the staffroom wall using coloured tabs that enable all staff to view the progress of the whole school and of their own class.
- Using this evidence to gauge learning outcomes through moderation within and across teams that use evidence of student learning, retaining confidence in all staff about the validity and reliability of assessment across the school.
- Peer mentoring and planning using designated staff and video footage to support teachers in planning lessons and explicit teaching of key learning strategies to meet student needs.
- Creative timetabling to promote attendance and to foster collaboration and teamwork.

School case study, phase three

Offering a service guarantee

Data literacy had also allowed schools to guarantee parents improved outcomes for their students, through mechanisms such as Service Guarantees. These commit schools to achieving certain benchmarks for students that meet a set of conditions, including minimum attendance benchmarks. Guarantees may cover achievement of national minimum standards for NAPLAN, year 12 completion, or post-school pathways, for example. As illustrated in one case study report for a remote focus school:

In addition to its cradle to employment philosophy, the College has also embedded the Service Guarantee, which commits Year 12 students to receiving a pathway either to university, Vocational Education and Training or employment upon graduation.

Case study report, phase two

The school then tracks its achievement in relation to achieving the service guarantee. Results demonstrate the effectiveness of the service guarantee:

The post-school destinations of those who completed secondary school in 2010 were recorded as follows: 12 per cent at university, 49 per cent at TAFE or in similar VET studies, 30 per cent in employment, and 9 per cent seeking work.

A further example of a service guarantee is illustrated below, based on a remote school visited in the phase two case study process:

The school guarantees that every student, upon graduating Year 12, will:

- have engaged in cultural heritage activities, and
- complete year 12 and be offered university entry, or
- be progressing on a clearly articulated VET pathway, or
- be in quality paid employment, or
- have a clearly defined transition plan for identified students at educational risk.

To achieve the Service Guarantee we expect students to:

- develop an awareness and respect for the culture, history, language and community
- meet the Service Guarantee academic milestones
- meet the School Wide Positive Behaviour Support social and emotional milestones
- reach their full potential through accessing all available services.

Case study report, phase two

The service guarantee is considered by schools to be an effective mechanism to engage parents and students in setting outcomes, with the school then playing a supportive role in their achievement. The value lies in engendering parental and student responsibility, while establishing obligations on the schools to retain high expectations and a focus on results. This promotes a two-way partnership for schooling achievement.

Implications

Case studies demonstrated variable data literacy capability among schools. There would be value in undertaking an assessment of school approaches to monitoring data and gauging future needs, given the importance of understanding student outcomes in order to motivate and celebrate student success, provide a feedback loop for parents and teachers, and to address underperformance.

Key Finding

Schools with high levels of capability in data literacy were better able to gauge student progress, tailor teaching practices to drive improved results and engage teachers in achieving student outcomes.

7.5 Practice sharing

Through school visits and surveys, many focus schools indicated that they had not been extensively involved in activities to share practices with other schools. Where gatherings of school leaders did occur, this was most often within the same jurisdiction and school sector, rather than across sectors or jurisdictions. Web portals for schools were not established to share practices, while central information releases were not established to provide schools with regular information about the Action Plan.

Many schools therefore developed their school-wide responses in collaboration with their school sectors, rather than necessarily learning from peer schools in other school sectors or jurisdictions. Although some focus schools sought external guidance from advisory groups, such as Dare to Lead or the Stronger Smarter Institute, networks of focus schools appear not to have evolved organically. Where opportunities for networking arose, for example through the FSNS National Forums, which were held on at least two occasions during the

rollout of the Action Plan, schools highly valued the opportunity to discuss challenges faced, lessons learned and options with other school leaders.

Given the number of schools simultaneously seeking to improve their practices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the track record of some schools in effectively doing so, there would have been significant value in dedicated peer to peer learning processes.

Key Finding

Many focus schools expressed a desire for greater practice sharing to learn from peers, including in other school sectors and jurisdictions.



8 School implementation by domain

This chapter provides a domain-by-domain examination of school implementation activities and outcomes.

8.1 Introduction

The differing contextual factors facing schools influence their service responses and priorities. Case study and survey data collected through the evaluation are summarised to illustrate approaches taken and evidence of changes over time. These are used selectively, however further information is provided in appendices (survey and outcomes data) and to ATSIEAG members via a case study compendium (full text school case studies).

This chapter outlines activities that schools have highlighted as effective. The evaluation does not attempt to single out 'best practices' that could be adopted by all schools, rather to outline the range of approaches pursued by schools and their impacts. The precise impact of these interventions has not been validated.

8.2 Domain one: readiness for school

The Action Plan has a focus on early childhood education, which is important for lifelong learning outcomes, as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration:

The period from birth through to eight years, especially the first three years, sets the foundation for every child's social, physical, emotional and cognitive development. Early childhood education and care provides a basis for life and learning, both within and beyond the home, and is supported by healthy, safe and stimulating environments.

Children who participate in quality early childhood education are more likely to make a successful transition to school, stay longer in school, continue on to further education and fully participate in employment and community life as adults. Support for Indigenous children in the early years before school is particularly important to ensure a successful transition to schooling, which may involve a culturally different learning environment.

Melbourne Declaration, 2008

The readiness for school domain sought to promote greater school involvement in early childhood learning activities. The Action Plan's local action prompted schools to consider the role they could play in supporting children to be ready for school, rather than prescribing particular actions. The Action Plan's outcomes, targets, performance indicators and local actions are detailed in Table 4.

Table 4 **READINESS FOR SCHOOL: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS**

| Outcomes | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under 5 years of age benefit from interagency actions to improve their social, physical and cognitive development. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are developmentally ready to benefit from schooling (e.g. in their physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge). | |
| Targets | Performance indicators |
| Increased proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children participating in quality early childhood education and development and child care services. | The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are enrolled in and attending (where possible to measure) a preschool program. |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students perform at equivalent or better rates to other students in school on-entry assessment. | The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students assessed as ready for the first year of full-time schooling by State and Territories measures. |
| Local actions | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus schools will in 2011 identify what strategies can be implemented to address readiness for school and commence implementation as early as possible. Strategies and resources will be identified in school plans or other public documents. | |

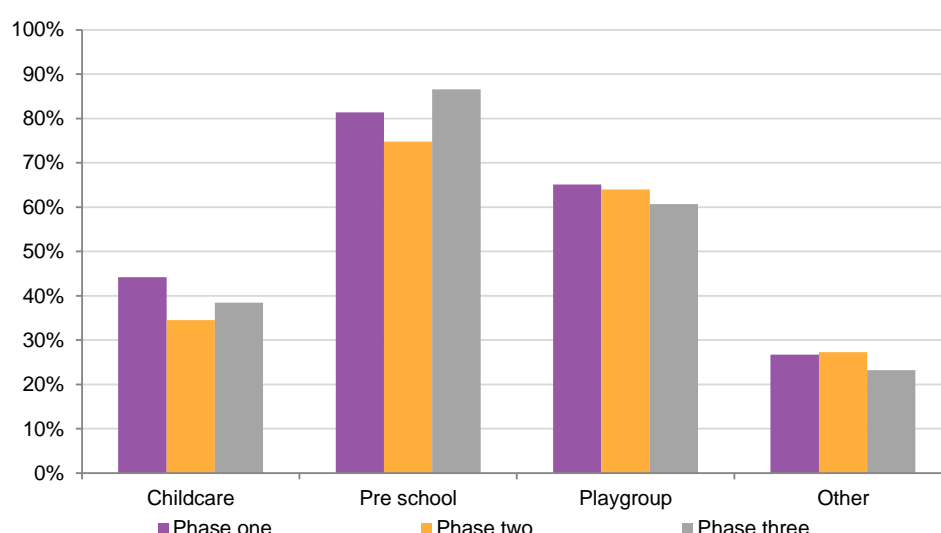
Source: MCEECDYA 2010

Local implementation

Survey results

The role played by schools in collaborating with early childhood, preschool and kindergarten providers varied significantly between schools. In general, schools were variously involved in childcare, pre-school and playgroup, as shown in Figure 14. Other early childhood services included before and after school care, transition programs and the families as first teachers program.

Figure 14 **EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS PRIOR TO FORMAL SCHOOLING**

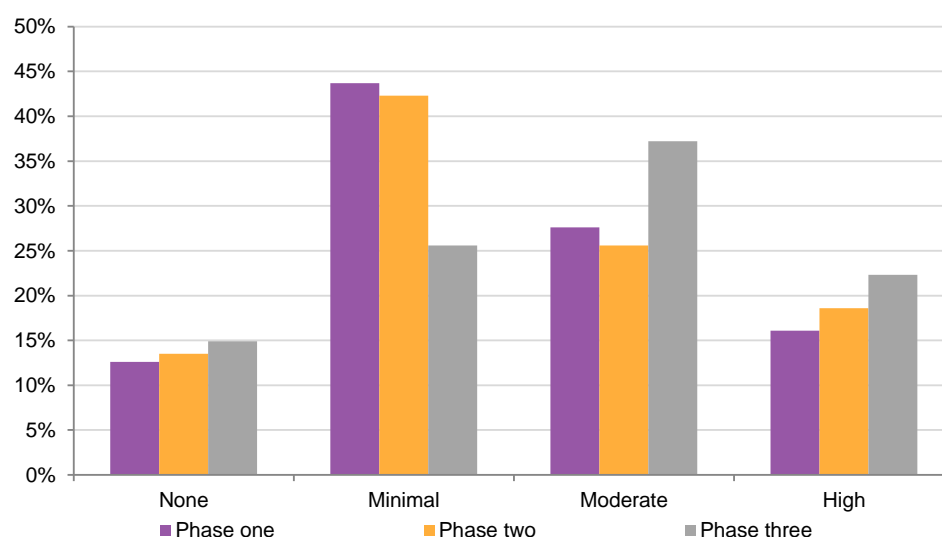


Notes: phase one (n=86), phase two (n=139), phase three (n=112)
Question: Please outline early childhood education services that are accessible to offer early learning opportunities for children prior to formal schooling.
Other responses are detailed in the Appendices
Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

There was a growing involvement in early childhood services among focus schools during the rollout of the Action Plan, based on survey responses. By phase three, 60 per cent of

schools had moderate or high involvement, relative to 44 per cent in both phases one and two, as shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15 **SCHOOLS' INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORTING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN PRIOR TO FORMAL SCHOOLING**



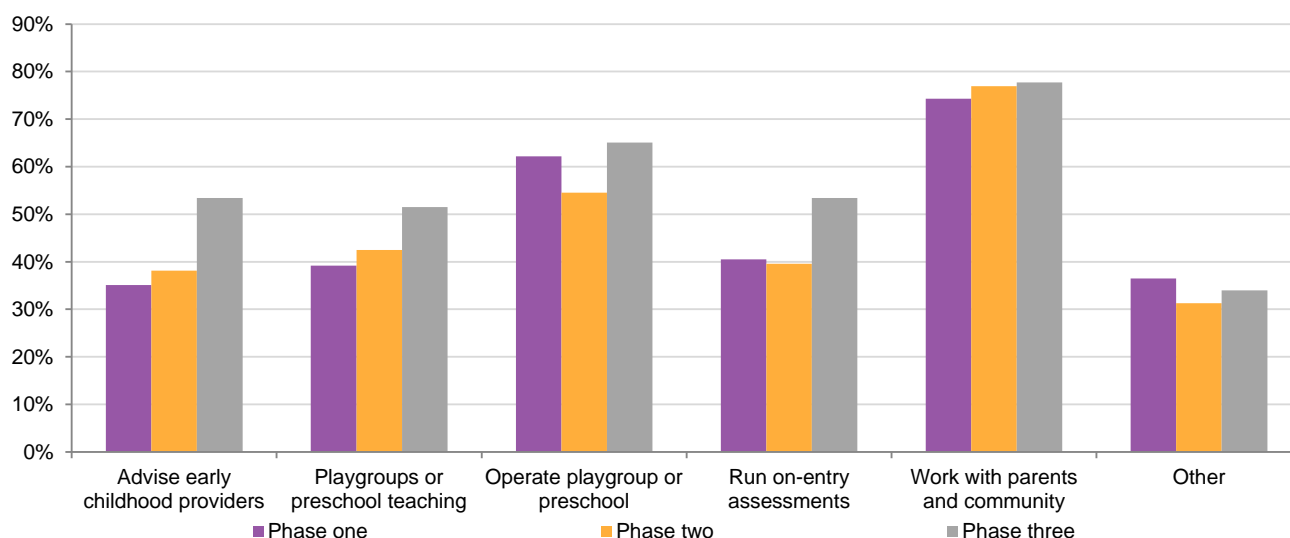
Note: phase one (n=87), phase two (n=15), phase three (n=121)

Question: Please outline your school's level of involvement in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children before they begin formal schooling

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

For schools with minimal/moderate or high involvement in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Figure 15), a follow-up question asked about the types of activities supported, with results shown in Figure 16. Responses identified that they were working with parents and community members to support students, and also operating pre-schools or playgroups.

Figure 16 **ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN TO SUPPORT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN PRIOR TO BEGINNING SCHOOL**



Note: Answerable only by schools answering minimal/moderate/high to prior question.

Question: What activities does the school undertake to support Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander children prior to beginning school?

Other responses included: before and after school care; Koorie paint and play; kindergarten; family day care; pre-prep programs; families as first teachers.

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The survey sought ideas about additional activities that could be undertaken by schools to improve student readiness. Major comments and survey quotations by metropolitan, provincial and remote schools are shown in Table 5. These comments primarily reinforce the need to better engage parents in their child's learning, also highlighting limitations in school funding to promote more in-depth involvement prior to the commencement of school.

Table 5 **FURTHER ACTIVITIES THAT COULD IMPROVE STUDENT READINESS**

| Metropolitan schools | Provincial schools | Remote schools |
|---|---|--|
| Consolidated comments | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding for teachers to run playgroup Three-year old kindergarten School orientation prior to entry in prep Programs to support families to engage with children around oral language, songs etc. from birth to 5 years Non-school ready students provided with support through a learning enrichment team Parent involvement at school needed prior to children commencing schooling Programs to support skilling of Indigenous parents to support student reading | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulties in getting mothers/carers to commit to regularly attending Indigenous playgroups Need to keep building family engagement and links to support services and agencies Continued funding is needed to provide learning opportunities for both parents and children before kindergarten Support for families of school aged children to complete homework programs, such as home reading Kindergarten located on school site | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficult to run a lot of pre-school programs due to a lack of funding Kids and parents have no reading or writing in daily home lives. Behaviour expectations in community relative to school are completely different so students come to school with minimal verbal and writing skills Funding to develop an Indigenous tailored pre-school program Many students who do not attend kinder or playgroup are far behind in school readiness |

| Metropolitan schools | Provincial schools | Remote schools |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Quotations</p> <p><i>"We conduct extensive and rigorous interviews with prospective parents to ensure they are welcomed, supported and invited to be an integral part of their child's individual education plan."</i></p> <p><i>"We are attempting to form an early years network to help all the schools and early childhood providers, including health to work together to assist families in accessing services as early as possible and preparing children for school."</i></p> <p><i>"We are powerless to ensure families attend playgroup and kindergarten"</i></p> | <p><i>"School readiness programs have allowed students to be identified who have additional needs such as speech, occupational therapy, medical problems, health care checks, cognitive and behavioural assessments."</i></p> <p><i>"If only we could get parents to take their child or children to pre-school. Those children that don't have a pre-school experience start behind the other kids who have"</i></p> <p><i>"The need to assist families to negotiate complex health services and access limited publicly available early intervention services is extremely high. This is highly labour and cost intensive but also very effective"</i></p> | <p><i>"I would like to know whether a year in between kindergarten and prep or between prep and year 1 focussed solely on developing oral language and oral code switching would enable students with EAL to do better in national testing"</i></p> <p><i>"Our school offers story time for 3 year olds and is co-ordinating visits to assist kindergarten parents with ideas for positive parenting"</i></p> <p><i>"Workshops with parents are needed in community regularly"</i></p> |

Note: Based on 67 responses in phase three

Question: Please provide further comments regarding readiness for school, including additional activities that could be undertaken at the school level to improve student readiness

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Activities identified through school case studies

Like the surveys, case studies in focus schools observed various practices to support children prior to beginning school. Activities included:

- student transition programs direct from kindergarten into schools
- personalised learning plans for students linked to on-entry assessment activities
- cross-community integrated service responses, including co-location of services on-site at schools to provide students with required health and educational supports
- pre-prep programs for children with special or additional needs
- establishing a pre-school on the school grounds to promote transitions
- structured engagement with parents through Families as First Teachers (FAFT) or the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)
- language and culture programs to work with parents
- linking to the early learning centres.

Catholic and independent school sectors had less involvement in early childhood learning than the government sector, given their limited role in operating pre-schools.

Evidence of outcomes

Performance Indicator 1

This performance indicator sought to gauge the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are enrolled in and attending (where possible to measure) a preschool program. The target aimed to increase the proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children participating in quality early childhood education and development and child care services.

Data regarding preschool enrolments were not able to be compared over time or across years due to collection, output and processing methodologies being inconsistent across years, school sectors and between jurisdictions. Data have therefore not been reported in 2013.

Due to these issues, year to year comparison of findings is not possible. As such, it was not possible to assess progress towards the target.

Performance Indicator 2

This performance indicator was adjusted during the course of the Action Plan due to difficulties in measuring student readiness, both for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and more generally. Challenges stemmed the definition and measurement of 'readiness', resulting in inconsistencies in collection methods across school sectors. Many school sectors did not consider that student readiness should be measured systemically through on-entry assessment processes, rather that assessments should be established locally by schools.

The revised measure sought to gauge the proportion of students assessed as developmentally on track across four or more domains in the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). AEDI results for 2009 and 2012 supported longitudinal comparison, with the next AEDI report due to be released in 2015.

In 2012, AEDI collected information on 289,973 Australian children. It captured information about how children have developed by the time they start school, across five early childhood domains, including: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge.

Data regarding the proportion of students that are developmentally on track across four or more domains of the AEDI demonstrate that on a national basis:

- 47.7 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were on-track in 2012 relative to 42.5 per cent in 2009
- between 69.1 (NSW and Qld only) and 70.3 (other jurisdictions) per cent of non-Indigenous students were on-track in 2012 relative to 68.6 per cent in 2009.

This demonstrates an improving trend in early childhood development among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and a reduction in the gap with non-Indigenous students. However, results also suggests that further effort and attention is required, given that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be at a much greater risk of developmental delay than non-Indigenous students, including across multiple domains.

Findings and future focus

Participation in early childhood activities was emphasised by schools as being critical to promoting a successful start to formal schooling. Some schools extended their outreach activities to support early childhood over the course of the Action Plan. Findings from the sample of survey responses suggest that this is occurring.

In relation to outcomes achieved, based on AEDI data from 2012 relative to 2009, a greater share of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally on-track across four or more domains. However, more than half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain developmentally vulnerable. The 2015 AEDI results will provide important longitudinal data that will help to gauge more recent changes achieved.

Two issues repeatedly emerged as requiring future attention:

- engagement with parents and families prior to school is critical to involve the community in students' learning
- while it is important to focus on student readiness, it is equally important for schools to ensure they are ready to support students, with a welcoming school environment, capable and competent staff, and appropriate systems for integrating students in the school community.

Key Findings

The Action Plan's readiness for school domain prompted schools to identify suitable strategies to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Survey results suggest that some schools increased their involvement in activities to support students prior to formal schooling during the course of the Action Plan's rollout.

Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) data from 2012 indicated a gradually closing gap in developmental vulnerability between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children.

The importance of forming relationships with parents and to establishing a welcoming school environment to attract, enrol, engage and retain students was emphasised by schools.

8.3 Domain two: engagement and connections

Achievement of student educational goals requires involvement by communities and families within and outside schools. The importance of engagement is acknowledged through this Action Plan domain, which notes that students' educational outcomes are influenced by factors both within and outside the school. Accordingly, the Action Plan also promotes focus schools to work with other organisations outside the school that have an impact on the achievement of educational outcomes. The Melbourne Declaration similarly notes that broad support is required to achieve outcomes for students:

Achieving... educational goals is the collective responsibility of governments, school sectors and individual schools as well as parents and carers, young Australians, families, other education and training providers, business and the broader community

Melbourne Declaration, 2008

Engagement itself is a broad area, with various definitions and associated activities, including:

- establishing partnerships with families and communities
- engaging more closely with students themselves to define and tailor learning goals
- promoting high expectations of students
- acknowledging and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity
- supporting student wellbeing through connection to service providers
- establishing a school workforce that promotes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models.

The multi-faceted nature of engagement and connections activities was noted through a school case study:

The school recognises the complexity of factors impacting on community engagement, such as: developing a welcoming school environment, language and culture as the foundation for engagement at school, parents as first teachers, the importance of support for family health and wellbeing, the impact of trauma and chronic loss and grief on families, and the impact of family dysfunction on students.

Case study, phase three

In contrast to these broad conceptions, the Action Plan's local actions are highly specific, focusing on the introduction of school-community partnership agreements, family forums, and personalised learning strategies. The performance indicators seek to measure progress in implementing two of these local actions, excluding family forums. The Action Plan's outcomes, targets, performance indicators and local actions are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6 **ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS**

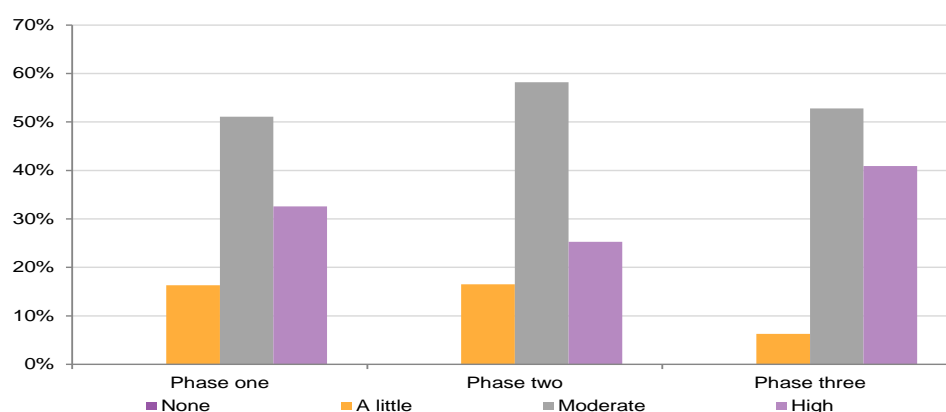
| Outcomes | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are engaged in and benefiting from schooling. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities are empowered through the promotion of their identity, culture and leadership in community partnerships with providers of early childhood and school education. | |
| Targets | Performance indicators |
| Increased number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students involved in personalised learning. | Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with personalised learning strategies in place. |
| Active school – community partnership agreements in place within focus schools. | Proportion of focus schools with a school-community partnership agreement in place. |
| Local Actions | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus schools will commence negotiating a formal school – community partnership agreement between the school, families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in 2011 that sets out the respective responsibilities of each party and the ways in which they will work together to create a culture of high expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and support improvements in their engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes. Focus schools will commence establishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family forums in 2011 through school and community partnership agreements, with terms of reference and operating guidelines jointly developed by schools, staff and families. Schools will involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers in the development of personalised learning strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from the first year of formal schooling to Year 10 to support improved educational outcomes. Issues relating to health and wellbeing that impact on education will be considered in this process through the cooperation of health services with the assistance of education providers. | |

Local implementation

Survey results

The survey results demonstrated general improvement in school relationships between schools and their communities. As shown in Figure 17, a greater proportion of schools had high amounts of contact with parents and families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in phase three, relative to phase one and phase two. Over 90 per cent of respondents in phase three demonstrated moderate or high levels of contact with parents and communities.

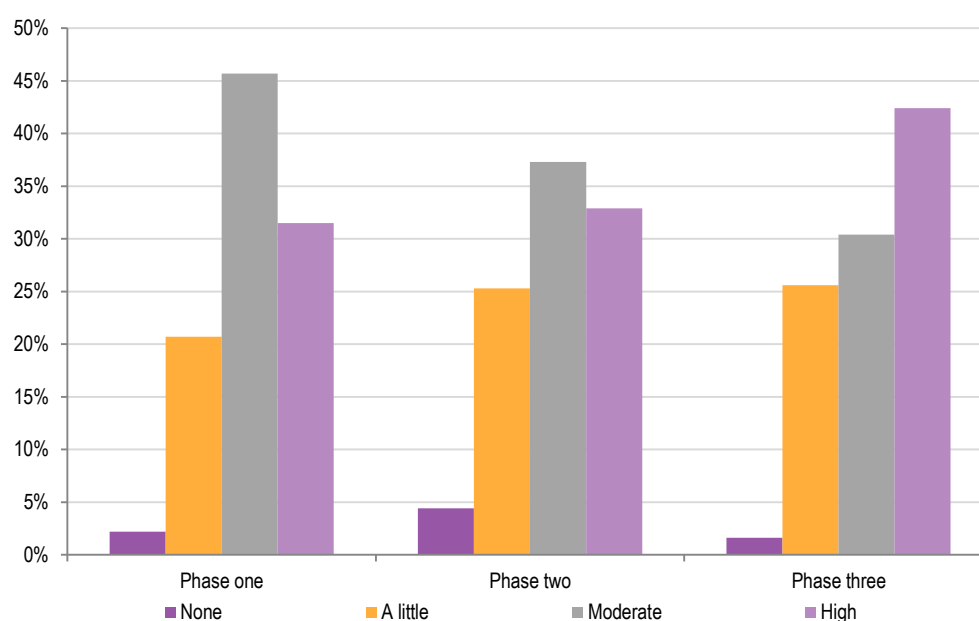
Figure 17 **LEVEL OF CONTACT THE SCHOOL HAS WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS, PHASES ONE TO THREE**



Note: Phase one (92 responses), phase two (158 responses), phase three (127 responses)
 Question: Level of contact that the school currently has with the parents and families of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students
 Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Engagement between schools and other service providers remained relatively constant throughout the period of the Action Plan, though the proportion of schools reflecting high levels of engagement grew marginally in phase three, as shown in Figure 18. This was offset by a reduction in schools identifying moderate levels of contact, with an increase in schools that had a little contact with other service providers.

Figure 18 **SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHER SERVICE PROVIDERS**

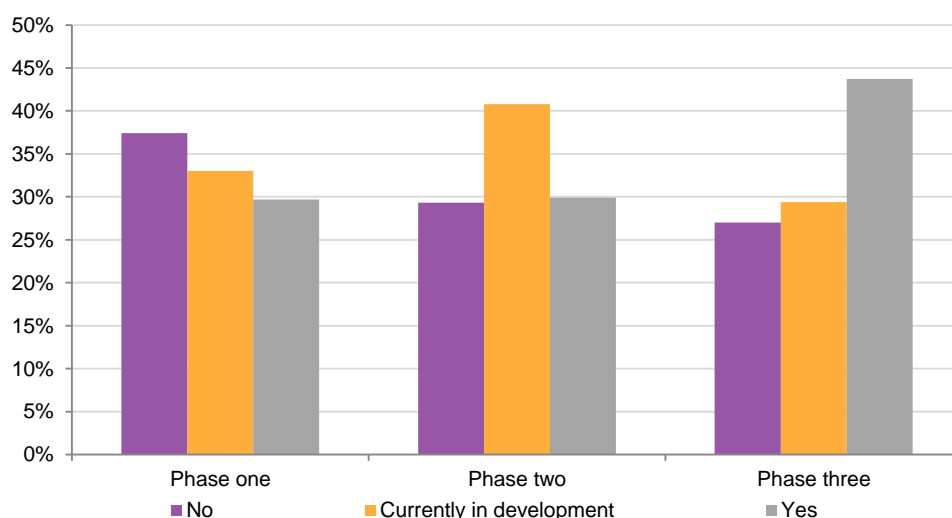


Note: Phase one (92 responses), phase two (158 responses), phase three (125 responses)
 Question: What is the school's level of involvement with other service providers in the community (e.g. health, welfare, justice, housing, employment)?
 Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

In relation to the implementation of local actions, the survey sought to gauge whether schools implemented school-community partnerships, personalised learning plans and family forums.

In relation to school-community partnerships, results demonstrated significant growth in the proportion of schools with partnerships in place over the past three years. As shown in Figure 19, 44 per cent of schools had a school-community partnership agreement in place in phase three, relative to 30 per cent of respondents in phase one.

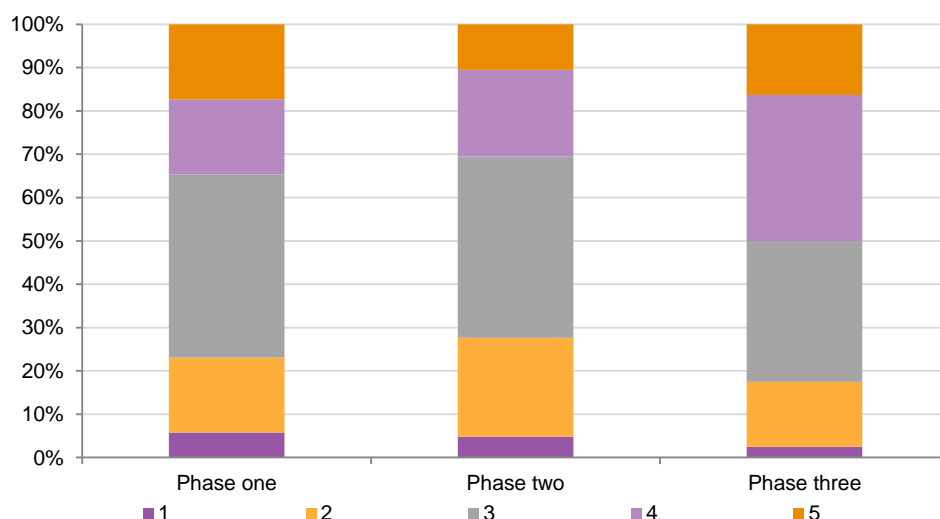
Figure 19 **SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN PLACE**



Note: Phase one (92 responses), phase two (158 responses), phase three (125 responses)
Question: Does the school have a 'school- community partnership agreement' with Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students' parents, families and community members?
Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

In relation to the effectiveness of school-community partnerships, schools that had partnerships in place, or were in the process of developing partnerships, were asked how effective the agreements had been in drawing stronger relationships with families and communities. Results in Figure 20 demonstrated that school-community partnerships were generally considered to have made a positive difference in supporting stronger relationships.

Figure 20 **STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS**

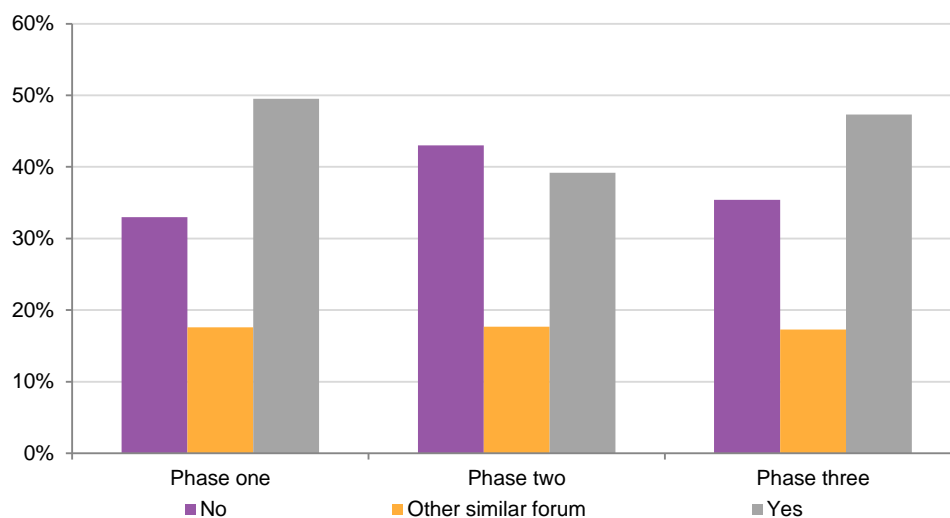


Note: Scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = no relationships developed and 5 = strong relationships developed
Phase one (52 responses), phase two (105 responses), phase three (80 responses)
Question: Did the school-community partnership agreement develop closer relationships between the school and Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander families
Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The survey also asked whether schools had run family forums, and the effectiveness of these in drawing closer relationships with families and communities. Results demonstrated

relatively stable results over three years, with more than two thirds of schools running family forums or similar forums in each phase, as shown in Figure 21.

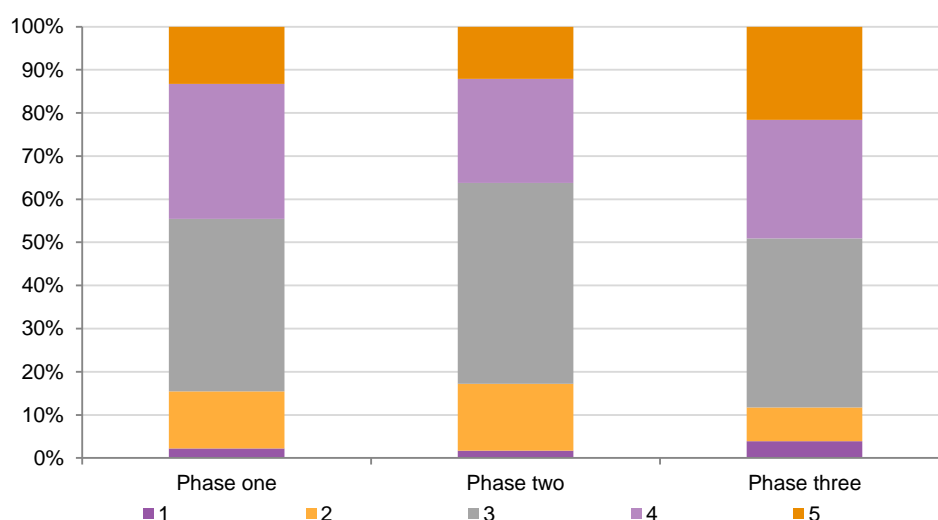
Figure 21 **FAMILY FORUMS RUN OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS**



Note: Phase one (91 responses), phase two (158 responses), phase three (127 responses)
 Question: Have Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander family forums have been run by the school during the past 12 months?
 Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

An associated question indicated that family forums were considered reasonably effective in developing stronger relationships. By phase three, many felt they were a useful mechanism and had helped to develop strong relationships with families and communities, as shown in Figure 22.

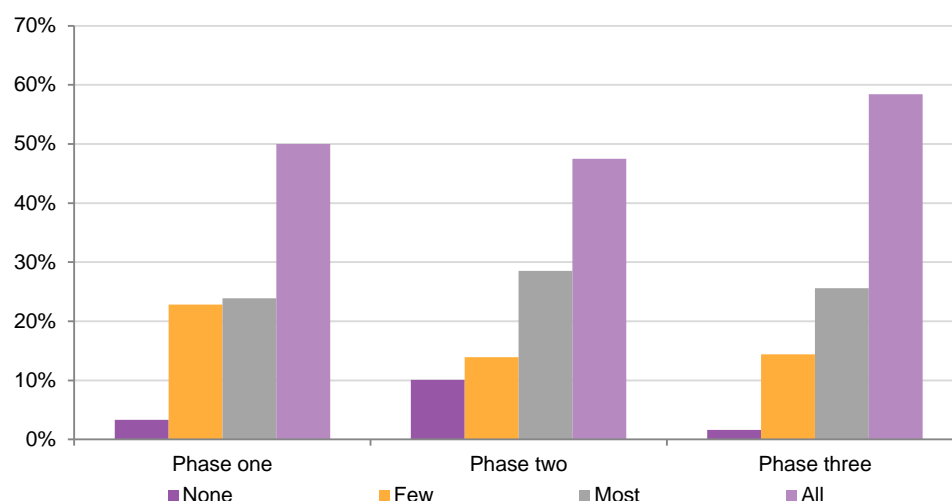
Figure 22 **STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIPS DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF FAMILY FORUMS**



Note: Scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = no relationships developed and 5 = strong relationships developed
 Phase one (45 responses), phase two (58 responses), phase three (51 responses)
 Question: Did family forums develop closer relationships between the school and Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander families
 Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The survey also asked whether personalised learning plans (PLPs) or equivalent strategies had been introduced by schools, and their effectiveness. Results demonstrated a continued emphasis on developing PLPs. By the end of phase three, 84 per cent of schools reported having PLPs in place for all or most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, relative to 74 per cent in phase one, as shown in Figure 23.

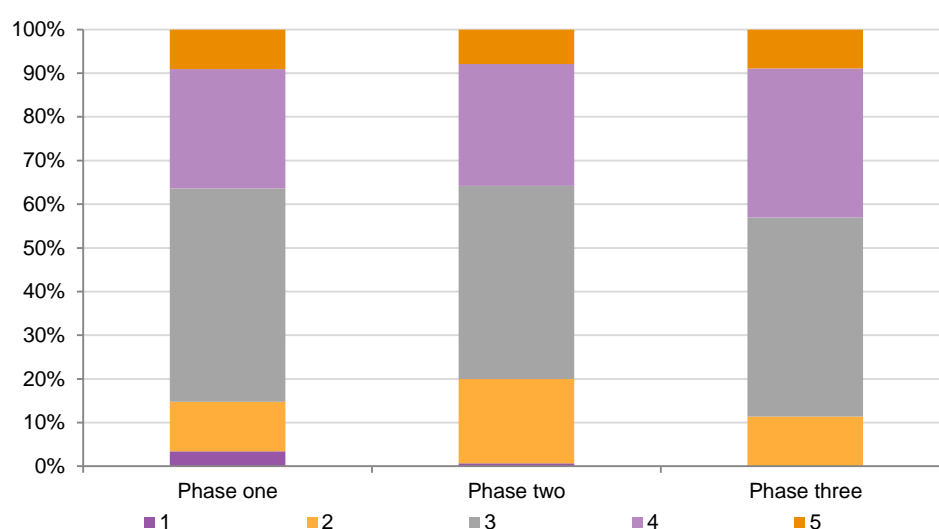
Figure 23 **PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WITH PERSONALISED LEARNING PLANS IN PLACE**



Note: Phase one (92 responses), phase two (158 responses), phase three (125 responses)
 Question: How many Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students have 'personalised learning strategies/plans' (PLPs) in place?
 Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The effectiveness of PLPs was assessed in relation to their impact on students' learning improvement. The survey results demonstrated little change over time, with the impact of PLPs being considered relatively moderate in promoting improvements in educational achievement, as shown in Figure 24.

Figure 24 **EFFECTIVENESS OF PERSONALISED LEARNING PLANS IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' LEARNING OUTCOMES**



Note: Phase one (88 responses), phase two (140 responses), phase three (123 responses)
Question: How effective were personalised learning strategies/plans in helping to improve educational outcomes (scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = no improvement and 5 = significant improvement)
Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Through the survey, schools were provided with the opportunity to comment on other engagement and connection activities they were involved in. The results identified a number of activities in this domain, highlighting challenges associated with promoting parental involvement and engagement, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 **FURTHER COMMENTS REGARDING ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS ACTIVITIES**

| Metropolitan schools | Provincial schools | Remote schools |
|--|---|--|
| Consolidated comments | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homework club for children and parents developed connections Greater access to community needed Relationship building – e.g. informal chats with parents in the school yard, morning teas, parent meetings, celebration of cultural days such as NAIDOC assembly Difficult engaging parents who often lack skills and confidence to be involved PLPs are reviewed in consultation with staff, students and families Indigenous Education Workers engage with families particularly to support health issues such as hearing testing Tutoring programs implemented to up-skill parents/family members to support students with reading at home Schools are involved with a range of service providers in areas including health, training and employment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulties associated with organising meetings with parents/families to discuss PLPs Difficulties faced in engaging parents Issues with community engagement, such as lack of attendance at parent/community meetings Strengthening relationships through the development of Community Partnership Agreements, with a student voice and staff commitment The requirement for PLPs has placed more accountability on teachers who are now more aware of individual needs and how these should be addressed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater involvement of parents in the school is needed, but there are logistical and financial problems due to parents coming from town camps and outstations Due to a small and highly transient group of senior secondary school students, it is very difficult to engage with the continuity or longevity required to complete a Certificate of Education. Difficult to get parents to attend meetings and forums |

| Metropolitan schools | Provincial schools | Remote schools |
|---|---|---|
| Quotations | | |
| <p><i>"We do commit significant funds and resources into providing proactive counselling and are having excellent success with a joint initiative between police liaison officers and our Indigenous students in delivering life skills seminars as part of an ongoing process"</i></p> <p><i>"With any partnership it takes both sides working together to make it strong, vibrant respectful and successful"</i></p> <p><i>"We continually are building relationships through informal chats with parents in the yard, morning teas, parent meetings to sign off on ILPs and celebrations highlighted by our NAIDOC Assembly and special Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultural days for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students."</i></p> <p><i>"We have tried many ways to engage members of the community but still find it difficult to get parents in. We are exploring new strategies this year about how to get more parents involved as they are often reluctant."</i></p> | <p><i>"PLPs have had an enormous positive impact on engaging students and valuing families."</i></p> <p><i>"It takes a long time to develop relationships and requires a lot of coaxing because we have only a 15% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A percentage of these parents are not interested in engaging with the school mainly because they feel it's the school's job to educate the students; and they may not really know the benefits of engaging with their children in learning and raising their level of expectations for their children."</i></p> <p><i>"A great deal of time and effort went into establishing PLPs in the school in 2013. The process used did not seem to meet the needs of parents or teachers, although the children seemed to enjoy the meetings. We are currently examining previous process to identify where we could make effective, positive changes."</i></p> <p><i>"Our school-community partnership agreement is a whole of Moora community/schools partnership agreement. It was finalised at the end of 2013 and so its impact on the community has not been evaluated yet. Having said that, our school hosted most of the parent/community meetings and I was very disappointed by the lack of response to attending the meetings from the Indigenous parents/carers in ours and the other schools. Given the opportunity to have their say and input, very few chose to do so."</i></p> | <p><i>"There needs to be more support for assessing and supporting special needs students, especially in trauma related cases"</i></p> <p><i>"PLPs have to be supported by systems change within the school in order for them to become a vital part of the day to day work of teachers"</i></p> <p><i>"Implementing the National Quality Standards for preschools is also an absolute nightmare for small sites that do not have pre-school directors; this means the workload is falling upon preschool teachers who are not paid for the extra work and Principals who are either primary or secondary trained teachers"</i></p> <p><i>"Our school is in a unique position with the community - we have a great variety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families - some belong to the custodians of the land, few are actual traditional owners and many are here for the work from mining"</i></p> |

Note: Based on 46 phase three responses

Question: Further comments regarding engagement and connections, including PLPs, family forums, school-community partnership agreements or relationships with parents

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Activities identified through case studies

Despite different contexts and practices, engagement and connections activities were identified as a critical priority for all schools, with case studies unanimously identifying a school-wide desire to better engage and communicate with families and community members.

The benefits of engaging with families and communities extend across all other Action Plan domains, with improved child readiness, attendance, learning (measured through literacy and numeracy) and post-school pathways. The process of promoting engagement and connections was also considered critical to building knowledge of teachers, both to understand local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures but equally to better understand the home circumstances and challenges facing students in their classes. As stated in one case study:

Family involvement and community engagement are critical for the school and the community to grow stronger, together. The current process of strengthening the school community through consultation, planning, agreement, action and evaluation, is an important avenue to embed school-community relationships, connections and engagement into the future and to lay the foundations for improving outcomes for students and their families.

Case study, phase three

A broad range of activities have been used to engage parents and communities, with varying levels of success. The focus on engagement and connections activities has been

critical for many schools to improve community perceptions of the school and to embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture within the school environment.

Engagement and connection activities, however, often suffer from limited reciprocal involvement by parents and communities, with some schools facing difficulty engaging parents and community members. At one school case study, the challenge largely stemmed from the historical co-location of multiple Aboriginal communities, with differing cultures, relationships and dynamics. These cultural differences limited the school's ability to engage openly across the school community, given variable cultural practices across each group and sensitivities about which groups to recognise and how to do so even-handedly. At another case study school, attempts had been made to engage, but has not achieved significant levels of reciprocal involvement from parents or community members.

The introduction of PLPs for students has helped schools to better understand the circumstances of students and families. As stated in one school case study:

PLPs proved critical to helping the school better understand the variability in family backgrounds of Aboriginal students, along with the unique challenges facing Aboriginal families within and outside the school

Case study, phase three

An important way that schools are able to reach out to communities is through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members, such as Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) or equivalent, who were frequently highlighted as critical. In many school settings, AEWs support community engagement activities, such as preparation of PLPs, school-community partnership agreements and family forums. They also often play a key role in supporting attendance. Some schools support AEWs to pursue pathways into teaching through further study opportunities. The role of AEWs in one school community is outlined below:

AEWs teach traditional Indigenous culture, language, storytelling and dance. They are strong role models from preschool through to secondary school, active in supporting student engagement and learning in the classroom. They also play an important role in building connections with community and providing teaching staff with cultural knowledge and advice. Almost all local family groups are currently represented by at least one AEW.

Case study, phase three

Similarly, Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) were essential at another case study school:

The two AEOs employed by the school are pivotal to the school in connecting with the Aboriginal community. They are well known and respected within the community and are responsible for performing home visits. Both teachers and the school principal stressed the importance of having AEOs for schools with high Aboriginal enrolments, suggesting that they provide 'not only an extra set of eyes out in the community', but they assist in making the school a less threatening environment for Aboriginal people.

Case study, phase three

A challenge facing AEWs relates to their uncertain tenure, with funding often drawn from NPA or FSNS/IFS initiative funding rather than school appropriations. With funding due to expire in 2014, many schools sought to maintain these critical staff members, but this often resulted in fewer active days per week.

Small and low-cost interventions and programs were often able to make a large difference in promoting engagement and connections with communities. For example, one case study reflected positive results through the establishment of a community garden. It also offered classes in the local language to parents and community members in the school setting. Adult education classes on school grounds proved popular at several other schools through activities such as computing and cooking classes.

Many schools celebrated culture through activities such as Sorry Day, NAIDOC Week, displaying the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island flags, as well as mural and art projects on-

site, often developed collaboratively with local artists and students. Some offered music and dance programs for students and parents, while others promote engagement through sporting days, or visits to museums and galleries. Some schools established dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and family spaces, which are culturally welcoming spaces that invite parents into the school community and are used to host meetings and discussions.

Evidence of outcomes

Performance Indicator 3

This performance indicator sought to gauge the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with personalised learning strategies in place, with a target for increased numbers involved in personalised learning.

Data across school sectors and jurisdictions is not comparable. For example, some jurisdictions reported proportions of schools involved in personalised learning, while others detailed the numbers of students per school.

Limited data was sought for 2013 in order to reduce the reporting by jurisdictions. Data for 2012, relative to 2011, demonstrated that a greater number of schools were involved in personalised learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. There is little doubt that the number, and proportion, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across Australia with personalised learning strategies in place grew during the rollout of the Action Plan, achieving the state target.

Performance Indicator 4

This performance indicator sought to gauge the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with school-community partnership agreements in place, with a target for agreements to be in place across all focus schools.

Data across school sectors and jurisdictions is not comparable, with different interpretations of what constitutes an agreement. For example, some schools introduced Reconciliation Action Plans, while others sought to tailor purpose-built documents.

Limited data was sought for 2013 to reduce the reporting by jurisdictions. Data for 2012 demonstrated some progress in introducing agreements, relative to 2011. However, there is little evidence that agreements have been introduced universally across focus schools. Further, as an output measure, it remains unclear whether and how the process of developing and agreeing a partnership will itself result in improved student outcomes over time.

Findings and future focus

The outcomes stated in the Action Plan for engagement and connections activities are to promote student engagement, which has a flow-on across all other domains. Student engagement is encouraged through activities that involve parents and community members to develop a shared perspective about the value of education. Many schools continue to face challenges in making progress in this domain, but those that have successfully connected with parents and communities have found these activities highly valuable.

Comments from surveys and case studies identified future needs for engagement and connections activities:

— many parents remain difficult to engage

- PLPs need to remain dynamic over time, rather than being a point-in-time snapshot
- engagement with other service providers is critical to engaging families
- service providers need to work better together across multiple communities.

Key Findings

Engagement and connections activities were critical to the achievement of all Action Plan domains. While the local actions in the Action Plan prompted targeted activity, they were often considered overly prescriptive and schools tended to be involved in a broader range of engagement activities.

Personalised learning plans helped schools to better understand student and family circumstances.

Aboriginal Education Workers or equivalents are critical to community engagement activities. In many cases, their tenure is uncertain beyond the expiry of National Partnership Agreement and additional Action Plan funding.

8.4 Domain three: attendance

Attendance has long been acknowledged as critical to student achievement and is closely monitored, despite differences between jurisdictions and school sectors in approaches to data collection. The Australian Government, in collaboration with states and territories, has placed a strong focus on attendance rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In December 2013, COAG committed to closing the gap in attendance between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students by 2018, with the aim of all schools achieving 90 per cent attendance. The COAG communique stated related commitments:

COAG agreed to a range of measures to improve Indigenous school attendance, including:

- minimum school attendance benchmarks;
- publishing twice-yearly data on school attendance for all students broken down by Indigenous and non-Indigenous;
- a 'no-excuses' messaging campaign;
- support and compliance, such as truancy officers, to ensure children attend school; and
- conducting audits of attendance, including on-the-spot audits.

All governments agreed to work together on additional strategies to improve Indigenous school attendance in remote schools and communities, recognising this will lead to better outcomes.

Recognising that each State's circumstances are different, COAG agreed that some flexibility in support and compliance measures may be needed.

COAG Communique, 13 December 2013

The Prime Minister's Closing the Gap report for 2014 also emphasises activities at the national level to address attendance, as shown in Box 4.

Box 4 CLOSING THE GAP PRIME MINISTER'S REPORT 2014

The Australian Government's highest priority in Indigenous Affairs is getting children to school. A good education provides a passport to more opportunities and a better life. It is a key pathway to prosperity and wellbeing for all Australians. Education is also the fundamental building block to establishing strong, sustainable communities.

Within the first 100 days of Government, the Prime Minister sought and received agreement from Premiers and Chief Ministers to have a stronger focus on school attendance, including improved reporting, support and compliance measures.

The Government has already acted to increase school attendance. Actions include:

- Rolling out the \$28.4 million Remote School Attendance Strategy to 40 communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia.
- Committing to expand the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) from 15 to 23 communities over the next two years.
- Continuing the \$22 million committed in the 2013–14 Budget to expand scholarship opportunities for Indigenous students.
- Working with the states and territories to ensure school-by-school attendance data are available and published on a regular basis.

In addition, the Government is committed to supporting remote primary schools to implement evidence-based teaching methods to improve English literacy.

Source: Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2014

The Action Plan included a domain focused on attendance, along with related elements of enrolment, retention and grade progression. Each of these factors influence students' ability to learn and to progress through schooling. The Action Plan's outcomes, targets, performance indicators and local actions for the attendance domain are detailed in Table 8. The focus of the local action is on schools developing an attendance strategy collaboratively with communities and regularly reporting on achievements.

Table 8 ATTENDANCE: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS

| Outcomes | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ All compulsory school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are enrolled in school and progressing through schooling at the same rate as non-Indigenous students. | |
| Targets | Performance indicators |
| Attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are equivalent to non-Indigenous student attendance rates. | Attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students in schools. |
| All compulsory school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled in school. | Enrolment to population ratio of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians compared to other Australians. |
| Increased retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. | Retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. |
| Increased grade progression ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. | Grade progression ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students. |
| Local Actions | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Focus schools will: commence developing an evidence-based attendance strategy in 2011 in consultation with parents and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, which includes targets for improved attendance and reflects how the school responds to and seeks to enhance the linguistic, cultural and contextual resources that students bring to their schooling; publish their attendance strategy in 2012; evaluate and monitor the success of their attendance strategy; and report annually on progress towards meeting their targets. The strategy and resources will be identified in school plans or other public documents. | |

Source: MCEECDYA 2010

Local implementation

Survey results

A multitude of factors impact students' ability and willingness to attend and engage at school. The school survey sought leaders' views about such factors that were hindering

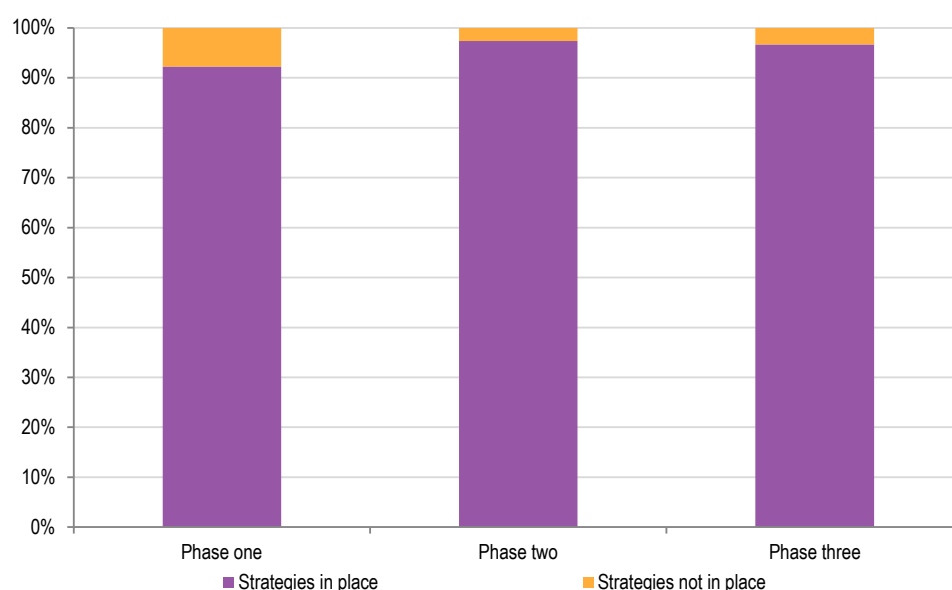
school enrolment, attendance, engagement and retention. The following factors were identified from coding of 101 open-text responses during phase three:

- poor parental and community attitudes to education (31 responses)
- family mobility and transience (21)
- health, wellbeing and nutrition (14)
- general family disadvantage and community dysfunction (13)
- alcohol and substance abuse (12)
- lack of transport and travel distances (11)
- homelessness, poverty and housing challenges (9)
- financial barriers (e.g. low SES status, school fees) (8)
- cultural priorities (e.g. sorry business, ceremony) (7)
- school staffing limitations (7)
- domestic violence (5)
- student attitudes to education (5).

Other factors identified with less than five responses included: lack of inter-agency coordination; issues associated with transitions to high school; justice-related issues; lack of pathways beyond school; religious barriers; mental health issues; lack of role models; poor student behaviour; pregnancy-related barriers; and limited residential facilities.

The survey also assessed the Action Plan's local action regarding the presence of an attendance strategy. Results shown in Figure 25 demonstrate that in phase one, only 10 per cent of schools did not have a strategy in place, while this dropped below 5 per cent in phases two and three. This indicates that schools have long been aware of the need to promote attendance among students and have been taking steps to do so.

Figure 25 **ATTENDANCE STRATEGIES IN PLACE**



Note: Phase one (91 responses), phase two (148 responses), phase three (122 responses)

Question: Does the school have strategies in place to promote attendance?

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

While strategies were generally in place, the survey also asked separate open-ended questions about activities that were having a positive impact in promoting enrolment, attendance, engagement and retention. Results were coded, with major responses shown in Table 9.

Table 9 **ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE ENROLMENT, ATTENDANCE, ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION, PHASE THREE**

| Enrolment (n=97) | Attendance (n=110) | Engagement (n=106) | Retention (n=82) |
|--|---|---|---|
| Relationships with parents (e.g. home visits, case management)(32) | Contact with parents(40) | Good subjects and culturally inclusive content/pedagogy(24) | |
| Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff(17) | Rewards and celebrations(30) | Relationships with parents and students(18) | Relationships with families and students(17) |
| Kindergarten/child care links(12) | Case management and monitoring (20) | Case management and personalised learning(17) | Good subjects and culturally inclusive content/pedagogy(10) |
| Follow-up of absences(10) | Truancy officers/attendance staff(19) | Rewards and celebrations(16) | Case management and personalised learning(7) |
| Advertisements/newsletter(8) | Newsletter and communications(11) | Quality teaching(13) | Rewards and celebrations(6) |
| Bus/pickup service(8) | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (8) | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff(11) | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff(5) |
| Rewards for high attendance(9) | Attendance policy/strategy(5) | Student input to learning(7) | VET activities and traineeships(4) |
| Welcoming school environment(6) | Welcoming school environment(8) | Welcoming school environment(7) | High expectations(4) |
| Sporting participation(5) | Breakfast/lunch provision(8) | Targeted literacy programs(6) | School workforce(4) |
| Nutrition/health/wellbeing(3) | Bus/pickup service(8) | Technology and hands-on learning(6) | |
| Cultural activities(3) | Engaging classes(5) | Tutoring and one-on-one support(5) | |
| High expectations(3) | | Mentors and role models(5) | |
| Transitions programs(3) | | Targeted numeracy programs(4) | |
| | | Links to other services(3) | |

Note: Based on survey questions regarding enrolment (97 responses), attendance (110), engagement (106) and retention (82).

Multiple responses were able to be submitted by each school. The number of responses by category were drawn from manual coding of open-text comments.

Questions: Which activities have made a positive difference in promoting enrolment? Which activities have made a positive difference in promoting attendance? Which activities have made a positive difference in promoting engagement? Which activities have made a positive difference in promoting retention?

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

The responses highlight several themes regarding school practices:

- Relationships with parents can support all aspects of student involvement. The relationships may be built and maintained through home visits, targeted case management, follow-up on absences and the formation of relationships with teachers.
- Many schools reward students that exhibit positive behaviours, attend school regularly, and are highly engaged and positively contribute to their learning. Rewards include involvement in sport, dance, excursions, art and other activities that students' value.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff assist all aspects of student involvement, often forming the link between schools and parents/communities.
- Many schools have and value staff dedicated to attendance.
- Provision of transport and breakfast/lunch are important to attract students to school.
- Good curriculum and culturally inclusive pedagogy support student engagement.
- Personalised learning support, including through targeted tuition or tutoring, also builds students' desire to attend.

In response to the identified challenges and needs, the survey also sought the views of school leaders regarding activities that would help to improve enrolment and attendance at school in future. Responses received from 76 open-text responses in phase three indicated a need to:

- address poor parent and community attitudes to education (24 responses)
- increase/maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff (9)
- ensure adequate financial support for the school and students (7)
- improve bus and transport options for students (5)
- promote inter-agency coordination (5)
- hire additional staff (4)
- additional literacy and numeracy tutoring (4)
- link with playgroups and kindergartens (3)
- promote a sense of student identity at school (3)
- improve teacher education (3)
- offer improved health and wellbeing support (2)
- more intensive school-wide support for attendance (2)
- offer breakfast and lunch at school (2)
- establish mentors and role models for students (2)
- introduce income management to promote attendance (2)

Activities identified through case studies

As identified through the survey process, attendance-related challenges are multi-faceted and based on each school's context. The myriad issues associated with attendance are detailed clearly in the following school case study report:

The principal acknowledges that varied levels of attendance are long standing issues that have had a negative impact on the educational outcomes for at least 30-40 per cent of students. For many families, this is an inter-generational issue where historical events, family breakdown, inter-family disputes, family sickness, ability to provide food for a school lunch, competing cultural practices and values all have an impact. Family mobility – such as visiting relatives - general health issues and substance abuse all impact on levels of attendance.

The school reported that attendance was very much a family-by-family issue rather than an across the board figure. That is, a small group of families are high level repeat offenders while Indigenous students from other families are regular attendees. The school reported that they have other non-Indigenous families with very poor attendance records and believe the issue revolves more around socio-economic circumstance and family attitude than, say, Aboriginality *per se*.

Many of the students live in quite diverse family units where changes in family circumstances can impact significantly on school attendance and opportunities for sustained learning. Students will often move to be with family members beyond the Maryborough area for months at a time, and then return to the community. Students do not normally attend another school during these stays away with other family members. The other consistent comment is that, for many of the low-attending Indigenous students, they make the decision to attend school rather than their parents. Some of the strategies in place to improve attendance include:

- increasing sport options and opportunities
- offering 'popular' lunch-time activities
- provision of a homework club
- building student resilience, through programs such as Bounce Back, Kids Matter
- follow-up telephone calls when students are away
- provision of lunch for students with no lunch
- minimising any stigma associated with a student arriving late to school.

School case study, phase three

Many schools with poor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attendance rates noted that this often reflected regular non-attendance by a small proportion of students, rather than systemic non-attendance by all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Attendance

data at the school level therefore needs to be treated with some caution. Responses to repeat non-attenders require specific targeted case management, while schools continue to focus on promoting a welcoming school environment and providing engaging classes for those students that do regularly attend. As outlined in a school case study:

The school reports that attendance is its most critical and long standing issue. Staff and parents have high concern for children of families with high levels of dysfunction. Issues such as serious health problems, substance abuse, violence, and mobility significantly impact on attendance at the school. It was reported that there is a core group of students which attends approximately 70 per cent of the time and that overall attendance rates are lowered by the proportion of students who attend casually.

Case study, phase three

Some schools noted a drop-off in attendance at the high-school level. As outlined by one remote high school:

Average attendance for all students is around 63 per cent for the whole school. Of this, the primary attendance rate is approximately 71 per cent compared to a state average of 93 per cent, whereas the secondary rate is around 35 per cent compared with 88 per cent state-wide...

Primary attendance continues to be greater than attendance in the secondary school, and with greater stability, pointing to a high dropout rate for students at the transition between primary and secondary education.

Case study, phase three

Secondary non-attendance may be in-part related to the difficulties faced by many students in transitioning between different school campuses or schools from primary/middle to secondary schools. As outlined in one case study:

Another area of concern is related to transition rates across the school. Staff indicated that the vast majority of students make the transition from primary to middle school. However, retention rates between Years 7 and 8 drop off significantly, anecdotally by up to 30 per cent. Much of this is seen as a result of the movement to other schools.

In 2013, 25 per cent of students did not make the transition from middle to senior school (Year 9 to Year 10). Some students move to the city. Others return to home communities, finding they cannot cope, while some may move to access Abstudy support funding, which they otherwise would be ineligible to receive in town. Top achievers are also lost to scholarships in other schools, while the whereabouts of others is unknown.

Case study, phase three

Student and family mobility also presents a significant challenge to many schools to maintain high levels of attendance and engagement, as detailed further in the mobility study in Chapter 9. For one case study school:

Family mobility impacts on the continuity of learning and the overall performance of the school. Feedback from the principal and staff indicates that its impact is most pronounced within the Aboriginal community with less than 10 per cent of the Aboriginal cohort originating from the local area... Without a system overlay to track students, this issue would be beyond the power of an individual school to resolve. It is one that needs broader consideration regarding balancing the right of families to relocate as they see fit whilst still maintaining continuity in learning for students.

Case study, phase three

Schools are making significant efforts to promote high levels of attendance. These mirror programs outlined through the survey responses. For one school:

Regular attendance is cited by teachers as the most significant factor in their ability to provide a targeted and sustainable curriculum to their students. In response, the school has implemented a mix of strategies to address attendance issues. These include:

- regular celebrations of high attendance, rewards and special recognition certificates
- linking attendance to privileges, such as school excursions or being part of sports teams
- keeping detailed records of attendance and requiring class teachers to report unexplained non-attendance

- home visits by the Community Education Counsellor and follow-up telephone calls when students are away. Although the school reports that parents are often un-contactable, in 2013, the Community Education Counsellor reported an improved response rate from parents
- provision of lunch for students with no lunch
- minimising any stigma associated with a student coming late to school.

Case study, phase three

The case study compendium details further examples of strategies instituted by schools to address attendance-related challenges. For many remote schools, and some provincial/metropolitan schools, mobility issues are the primary concern.

Evidence of outcomes

Performance Indicator 5

This performance indicator sought to gauge the attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students, with the target of closing the gap. Data are drawn from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) by jurisdiction and school sector (government, Catholic and independent).

Results for 2013 indicate that there remain issues in relation to attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across almost all education sectors, including:

- high levels of volatility across year levels, particularly in jurisdictions with lower numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- consistently lower levels of attendance, and larger attendance gaps, in the Northern Territory and Western Australia in the government and Catholic school sectors than other jurisdictions, likely reflecting challenges associated with remoteness.

On an Australia-wide basis, there remain significant gaps in attendance between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students across all schooling sectors. While gaps are smaller in the primary years, they grow across all jurisdictions and school sectors through secondary years.

Performance Indicator 6

This performance indicator sought to gauge the enrolment to population ratio of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians compared to other Australians, with the target of all compulsory school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being enrolled in school.

The data for this indicator are unreliable and have not been updated for 2013. An ABS investigation concluded that there are concerns regarding the quality of the enrolment to population data. Specifically, the rates for most states and territories exceed 100 per cent, primarily as a result of model difference in the data sources.

Performance Indicator 7

This performance indicator sought to gauge the retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with the target of achieving an increase. Retention rates provide an indicative measure of the number of school students who have stayed in school during a designated grade or sequence of years of schooling. Rates are expressed as a percentage of the respective cohort relative to the population in that year, based on an expectation that all students will progress each year. An apparent retention rate of 100 per cent suggests that all students progressed.

For the purposes of the Action Plan, retention rates have been assessed between Years 7/8 and Year 10 and Years 7/8 and Year 12. Care should be taken in the interpretation of apparent retention rates, given challenges associated with monitoring retention.

The data demonstrate improvements in apparent retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over time, including since the introduction of the Action Plan in 2010, both as a single cohort and relative to non-Indigenous students over time. While there have been real increases in the results achieved by both cohorts, the levels of retention among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have grown more rapidly, albeit from a lower base.

The retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students between Years 7/8 to Year 10 are significantly higher than for Years 7/8 to Year 12. This indicates that many students may reach Year 10, but do not continue through to the conclusion of Year 12. This is an area requiring ongoing attention.

Overall, the historical data indicate that the target is being met. The challenge remains to consolidate, sustain and extend the gains achieved.

Performance Indicator 8

This performance indicator measures the grade progression ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with a target to increase grade progression. The ratio measures the total number of full-time students in a designated year (e.g. Year 12 in 2013) divided by the total number of full-time students in a previous year (e.g. Year 11 in 2012).

Based on historical data, the grade progression ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been steadily increasing at all levels, demonstrating successful achievement of the target. The changes between 2010 and 2013 reflect achievements during the period of the Action Plan. Results demonstrate that grade progression ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students changed in the following ways:

- Year 8 to Year 9: decrease in grade progression ratio of 1.1 percentage point from 100.8 per cent in 2010 to 99.7 per cent in 2013
- Year 9 to Year 10: increase in grade progression ratios of 0.7 percentage point from 97.1 per cent in 2010 to 97.8 per cent in 2013
- Year 10 to Year 11: increase in grade progression ratios of 3.3 percentage points from 79.3 per cent in 2010 to 82.6 per cent in 2013
- Year 9 to Year 10: increase in grade progression ratios of 3.4 percentage points from 67.9 per cent in 2010 to 71.3 per cent in 2013.

Most positively, for each transition point, grade progression rates in 2013 exceeded those for 2012 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This shows incremental movement towards closing the gap and achieving greater numbers of Year 12 completions over time.

Findings and future focus

This section has detailed the varying contextual factors and school activities to support the closely related areas of enrolment, attendance, engagement and retention.

The mobility study found that attendance is a multi-faceted challenge, extending beyond truancy and absenteeism and involving issues of situational mobility and transience. Responses to mobility require targeted cross-sectoral responses, linked to mobility support

roles and adapted school procedures. There is a further need to understand mobility and to build systems that adequately adapt, given that patterns of family movement will continue.

At the same time, attendance levels are influenced by factors associated with the school environment, family attitudes to education, levels of engagement with students when they do attend, and teacher attitudes. Two-way dialogue with families remains critical.

In future, given the close links between attendance and other domains, it may not need to be a domain of activity in its own right, but could instead be a prominent outcome measure for schools to gauge the effectiveness of their school operations, processes and outcomes.

A phase three survey response sums up the major challenge for schools in engaging effectively with parents and community members to boost attendance:

Parents own experiences of school have made some families wary of school and teachers. We need to build their confidence in their school, by continually looking to build positive, sustainable relationships. We also need to be able to work with parents so they can see education as a positive and essential component in their children's development. People also need to have confidence that genuine educational and employment opportunities will be available to their children in the future. We need to build the expectations of our children and families, so that a positive future looks attainable.

Survey response, phase three

Key Findings

Challenges facing schools in relation to enrolment, attendance, engagement and retention varied based on their local context and student composition. Typical responses involved building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities, engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff, providing logistical support to families, delivering an engaging curriculum, providing quality teaching, offering personalised learning support, and rewarding positive behaviours.

There remain gaps in attendance rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students across all jurisdictions and school sectors, particularly at the secondary school level. However, retention rates and grade progression ratios have demonstrated improvement over the past three years.



8.5 Domain four: literacy and numeracy

The Action Plan affirms measures to promote student achievement through a domain that focuses on literacy and numeracy learning. It emphasises the challenges associated with language learning and links improvement with the development of a world-class curriculum, teaching approaches for Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy, pedagogies that engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' languages and cultures, and implementation of national partnership funding aiming to specifically boost literacy and numeracy outcomes.

The importance of literacy and numeracy is well acknowledged, including through the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (2014):

Proficiency in basic and advanced literacy and numeracy skills, and in other areas of practical and academic knowledge, is essential for continued participation in education and training, for academic achievement and for success in the labour market...

At the school level, there is some evidence to suggest that strong leadership by school principals (supported by high expectations of Indigenous students), targeted interventions (with students and their parents) to improve student attendance and learning, and common instructional approaches used by teachers across the school have helped to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Clearinghouse, education/employment paper, 2014

Action Plan outcomes, targets, performance indicators and local actions are detailed in Table 10. The local action aimed for schools to have a whole-of-school approach to the teaching and learning of Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy. It also sought to ensure that staff participated in professional learning to support the whole-of-school approach.

Table 10 **LITERACY AND NUMERACY: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS**

| Outcomes | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are improving. | |
| Targets | Performance indicators |
| Halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students by 2018. | Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the national minimum standard in reading, writing and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in NAPLAN testing. |
| Increased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student participation rates in the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). | Participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in NAPLAN. |
| Local Actions | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus schools will during 2011 have in place a whole-of-school approach to the teaching and learning of Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy which: builds from students' home language(s) where Standard Australian English is a second or further language; in literacy, in the first three years of school (and beyond if necessary), uses an integrated and balanced approach to reading that includes explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and text comprehension; in numeracy, in the first three years of school (and beyond if necessary), uses an integrated approach to numbers and includes explicit teaching of their purpose, representations, use and application, and interpretation in context (including comprehension); and in both literacy and numeracy, uses data to monitor individual student performance and drive whole-of-school improvement. Teachers and education workers in focus schools will participate in appropriate professional learning during 2011 and 2012 to support a whole-of-school approach to the teaching of Standard Australian English literacy and numeracy and use of data on student performance to drive individual and whole-of-school improvement. | |

Source: MCEECDYA 2010

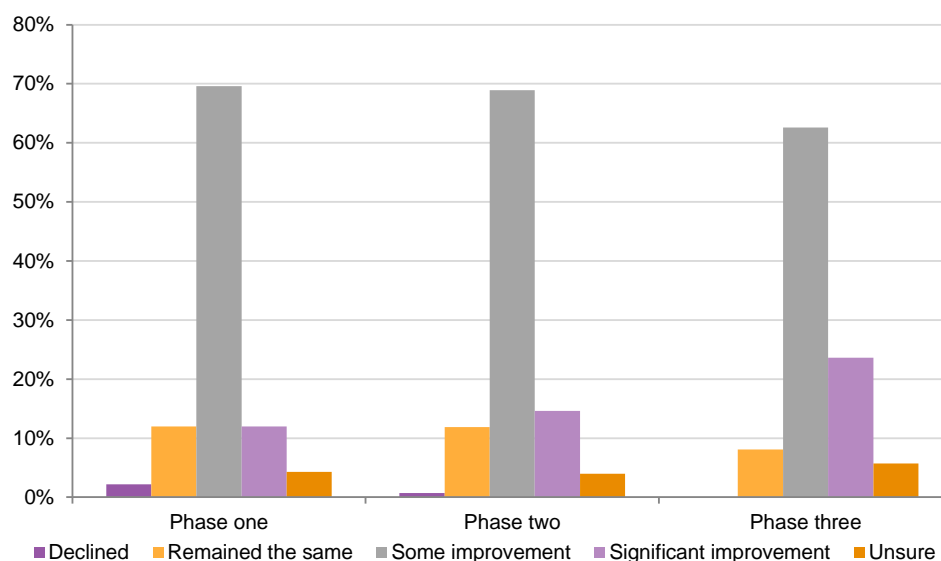
Local implementation

Survey results

The survey assessed whether a whole-of-school approach to the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy was in place. Responses in phase three indicated that of 120 schools, 107 (89.2%) had a whole-of-school approach in place, 12 (10.0%) had an approach in development and one (0.8%) did not have an approach in place.

In relation to how the literacy results had changed since 2009, results indicated that most schools had exhibited some improvement (more than 60 per cent each phase). Notably, by phase three, 23 per cent of schools considered that they had achieved significant improvement in literacy outcomes, as shown in Figure 26.

Figure 26 **CHANGE IN LITERACY RESULTS SINCE 2009**



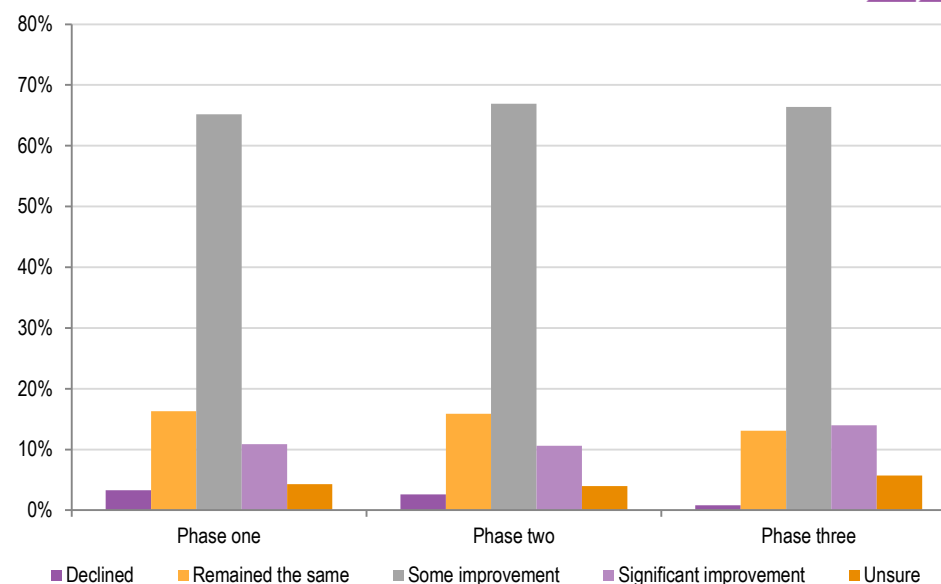
Note: Phase one (92 responses), phase two (151 responses), phase three (123 responses)

Question: How have literacy results changed among Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students at the school over the period 2009–2013?

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

In relation to changes in numeracy achievement, results in Figure 27 indicate a perception of some improvement over time, though phase three results are similar to phase one and two.

Figure 27 **CHANGE IN NUMERACY RESULTS SINCE 2009**



Phase one (92 responses), phase two (151 responses), phase three (122 responses)

Question: How have numeracy results changed among Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander students at the school over the period 2009–2013?

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

School leaders were asked about additional activities to improve literacy and numeracy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. A total of 93 open-ended responses were received, with responses noting the importance of:

- one-on-one tutoring or small group support (19 responses)
- teacher competency training (11)
- continued engagement of Aboriginal Education Worker or equivalent to support teachers (8)
- implementation of whole-of-school strategies (8)
- additional funding support (8)
- a focus on early years learning (7)
- parental involvement and relations (6)
- greater numbers of teachers (6)
- out of hours support (6)
- literacy and numeracy coaching (5)
- student attendance and punctuality (5)
- testing and monitoring (4)
- establishment of high expectations and aspirations (4)
- personalised learning plans (4)
- health and wellbeing programs (4)
- staff with EALD training (3).

The link between attendance and literacy and numeracy results was drawn out by several schools, indicating that students that do not attend are likely to fall behind in their learning. As noted by one school, poor attendance has impacted on NAPLAN results: “the children who are hard-core truants have affected the overall results in both areas (literacy and numeracy)”.

Activities identified through case studies

The school case studies identified the presence of school-wide approaches to literacy and numeracy learning at the vast majority of schools. With additional Australian Government funding focusing on literacy and numeracy over recent years and greater national monitoring of results through NAPLAN, this has been a major priority for schools.

Many case study schools identified one-on-one learning support for students as critical, despite its resource-intensity. For example, one case study school credits targeted literacy and numeracy programs as having a positive impact on student achievement:

The school has for several years run a program of guided reading and guided maths in Years 1 to 9. Guided reading takes place every day for one and a quarter hours, while guided maths occurs over four sessions each week. Under the current approach, small groups of students of similar ability are taken by teachers and employed tutors to focus on literacy and numeracy tasks. Students who need additional learning support also receive three, half hour, one-to-one sessions with a tutor each week. In 2011 the school moved to this model of guided reading and mathematics which differed from its previous approach of withdrawing students from classes for more tutorial support. The school now focuses on teaching as many students as possible in the classroom with their peers.

Case study, phase three

As part of its intensive support model, the school also provided targeted literacy and numeracy coaching to teachers. Peer to peer coaching was introduced by several other

schools. For one case study school, which exhibited significant improvement in literacy and numeracy results over recent years, coaching was a key feature of its approach:

The rigour associated with assessment and monitoring of student learning is mirrored with a systematic approach to coaching class teachers in planning, pedagogy and specific interventions for individual students, which is a significant component of the school's approach and part of the reason for the improved outcomes across the school for Indigenous students. Drawing on resources received through the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Literacy and Numeracy, the school has deployed two experienced teachers to work as literacy and numeracy coaches throughout the school.

The coaching program includes one-on-one meetings with all class teachers twice per term for literacy and numeracy. Additionally, staff meet with coaches in small groups on a fortnightly basis.

During the second site visit, a literacy coaching session was observed... What was most apparent in the observed session was the strength of the professional working relationship between the coach and the teacher. The teacher readily accepted tips and guidance and was confident in his capacity to fulfil the agreed goals based on the positive reinforcement he received from the coach. Critically, the tips and guidance were neither abstract nor superficial – the coach clearly had a deep knowledge of the students in the class and their learning strengths and deficiencies and a similar knowledge of the teacher and his capabilities.

Case study, phase three

Language barriers presented a particular challenge for many schools, with EALD strategies required in many cases to promote student learning. For one school:

Literacy and numeracy are a priority in the school's Operational Plan and the school has a whole-of-school approach to teaching literacy and numeracy, based on English as a Second Language and practices which are designed to meet individual student learning needs. With 99 per cent of the students being Indigenous, the school's approach recognises the importance of pedagogies which engage with local Indigenous language and culture.

The whole-of-school approach is based on first steps literacy and numeracy, with priority given to planning, assessment and monitoring of student progress, and quality teaching practice.

The following initiatives and strategies are in place at the school in relation to literacy and numeracy:

- the development of a whole school literacy and numeracy plan which aligns with the Remote Schools curriculum map
- a focus on oral and written language and a strong literacy focus in the early years, including the introduction of guided reading groups with a low student-adult ratio
- fostering learning environments to enable students to be self-directed learners in the future
- an increased focus on numeracy and evaluating current approaches
- ongoing school based professional learning, so that teachers can design, implement and evaluate their literacy and numeracy practices.

Case study, phase three

The case studies highlighted a number of instances where advanced results were achieved. One school's approach is summarised below:

The delivery of high quality literacy and numeracy programs has been an ongoing priority for the school and is well documented in their four-year strategic plan. The school's results through NAPLAN are noteworthy and are, from many different perspectives, quite extraordinary... The high levels of success have been attributed by the leadership team as an outcome of a concerted effort to:

- focus classroom work in mathematics around conceptual understandings through exploration and reflection in a real world problem solving context. The school provides training in the Natural Maths program as well as the Back to Front Maths program
- to have all staff trained in First Steps in literacy and numeracy programs and a number of experienced First Steps teachers on staff
- involvement in the Literacy Lessons for Learners program
- the use the Tests of Reading Comprehension (TORCH) assessment tool consistently across the school as a baseline, supported by strategies provided through a regional

university to help teachers differentiate their responses to students at different points of development in reading.

There are other wider factors which also appear to be having an impact, including:

- having three additional staff through the National Partnership Agreement supporting numeracy and literacy development and targeting gifted and talented students
- the fact that Indigenous families have settled in the area for work reasons, standard English is commonly spoken at home (about 70 per cent across the community).

Case study, phase three

Where poor literacy and numeracy results were unable to be improved, schools variously attributed this to broader social and behavioural issues, inconsistent application of literacy and numeracy approaches across the school, limited early childhood learning prior to attending school or limited school funding to support more targeted support or teacher professional development.

Evidence of outcomes

Performance Indicator 9

This performance indicator gauged the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at or above the national minimum standard in reading, writing and numeracy (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9). The target sought to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students by 2018.

National NAPLAN progress points have been defined to meet the targets by 2018 across reading, writing and numeracy. At a national level, the 2013 progress points (taking into account confidence intervals) are being met in only three of the eight reading and numeracy domains. Five domains failed to meet their progress points, including all year levels in the domain of numeracy and Year 7 reading. The gap between the 2013 results and expected progress was particularly large for Year 9 numeracy, with results falling 8.1 per cent below expected progress.

A comparison of results between 2011 and 2013 shows a decline in the number of progress points being met. The number of progress points met across the three years decreased from six in 2011 to five in 2012 and to three in 2013.

Disaggregated results show differences in achievement between school sectors, jurisdictions and geo-location. Student results in metropolitan and provincial areas are universally better across all NAPLAN tests (reading, writing and numeracy) than for remote students.

Performance Indicator 10

Performance indicator 10 sought to measure the participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in NAPLAN for reading, writing, and numeracy (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9), with a target to increase participation.

Results indicated that participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2013 relative to 2012 are mixed, with various increases and decreases observed across different years and domains. Compared to 2012, the 2013 participation rates in reading were generally lower (except in Year 5) while in numeracy they were generally higher (except in Year 9). In persuasive writing, participation rates were higher for some year levels (Year 5 and Year 7) and lower for others (Year 3 and Year 9).

Though not explicitly an element of the target, it is notable that the gap in NAPLAN participation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students has been steadily growing since 2008. The gaps are larger for Year 7 and Year 9 students.

Findings and future focus

While improvements in student achievement were not always able to be identified by schools during the period of the Action Plan's implementation, many feel that the foundations have been laid for future improvements in literacy and numeracy results. The key methods identified for driving improvement are intensive support, advanced pedagogy, peer to peer coaching and the establishment of high expectations for students.

While schools expressed concerns about the relevance of NAPLAN testing to students for whom English is an additional language, it provides a degree of national comparability that does not exist across other Action Plan performance measures. Results demonstrate the impact of geo-location on literacy and numeracy achievement, with remote students much less likely to meet minimum standards than students in provincial or metropolitan areas.

Many different whole-of-school pedagogical methods are being implemented, with some crediting their particular approaches as promoting student learning. Given the wide variety of approaches adopted, further detailed investigation of various approaches is warranted, particularly as results achieved by schools become clearer over time.

Key Findings

Many schools considered that the Action Plan helped to establish the foundations for literacy and numeracy improvement. However more needs to be done to support students through intensive support, literacy and numeracy coaching for teachers, implementation of whole-of-school approaches, and establishment and monitoring of high expectations for students.

At a national level, only three of eight literacy and numeracy progress points were met in 2013, fewer than 2011 or 2012.

8.6 Domain five: leadership, quality teaching and workforce development

The Action Plan sought to promote professional development, cultural awareness and improved pedagogical approaches to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It also emphasised the need to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working across the school community, including as teachers and school leaders.

The Action Plan's outcomes, targets, performance indicators and local actions are detailed in Table 11. The local actions sought to promote principals to undertake leadership training and to provide greater flexibility to principals to tailor operations to meet local needs.

Table 11 **LEADERSHIP, QUALITY TEACHING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS**

Outcomes

- High performing principals and teachers are effective in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students benefit from school leaders who have a strong understanding of their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

| Targets | Performance indicators |
|---|--|
| Increase in professional development hours in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and cultural and linguistic competence training undertaken by principals and teachers. | Number of professional development hours on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and cultural and linguistic competence training undertaken by principals and teachers. |
| Increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, principals and education workers (Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) and equivalents). | Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principals, teachers and education workers (AIEWs and equivalents). |
| Increase retention of principals and teachers in hard-to-staff schools with high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. | Average length of service of principals and teachers in hard-to-staff schools with high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. |
| Local Actions | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Every principal of a focus school will within two years be required to participate in a leadership program to assist them to lead improvement in the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. School principals will have the flexibility to tailor operations to meet the needs of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. This might include extending operating hours and providing onsite or co-located services such as health care, after hours' study support, multilingual and English as a Second Language programs, sporting programs, child care, and family support programs. Principals might also partner with other schools to share resources and facilities, develop joint initiatives and provide peer mentoring and support. | |

Source: MCEECDYA 2010

Local implementation

Survey results

Schools reported highly proactive approaches in offering professional learning to teaching staff. Through an open-ended question regarding school activities to enhance the capabilities of the teaching workforce, almost all schools identified professional learning as critical. Training included literacy and numeracy, cultural awareness, pedagogy improvement, leadership, EALD, Australian curriculum awareness, Aboriginal perspectives, and implementing personalised learning strategies. Other responses identified the importance of mentoring support across the school.

In relation to the number of hours of professional development principals had undertaken over the past 12 months, results indicated that principals had undertaken an average of 12 hours in 2011, 17 hours in 2012 and 16 hours in 2013.

In relation to challenges in building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce, responses focused on both general workforce attraction challenges and difficulties attracting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Major responses cited:

- limited availability of high quality teachers (23 responses)
- challenges associated with attracting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (22)
- difficulty training teachers and attending professional development (8)
- limited turnover at the school resulting in few new teachers (6)
- limited salaries in schools, particularly for support roles (7)
- variable and limited school funding (11)
- limited teacher attendance at school once employed (4)
- limited willingness to undertake criminal screening and working with children checks (3)

One of the major challenges identified was to attract suitably qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, with respondents noting various challenges, including:

- community resistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff teaching their children
- limited literacy and numeracy of available Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

- many capable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people already being employed in other jobs with better salaries, such as mining
- difficulty retaining capable staff
- limited funding flexibility for staffing within the school, due to funding allocation to programs.

In response to these challenges, schools had established targeted responses including:

- providing training and professional development to ensure all staff are trained and capable of teaching students
- encouraging good students to pursue teaching careers, including through academic and financial support
- partnering with universities
- mentoring within the school
- building relationships through the education department
- establishing capability building models to train local people
- providing competitive salaries
- offering practicums and teaching placements to university trainees
- employing local Aboriginal Education Workers or equivalents.

Activities identified through case studies

Case studies identified the critical importance of the school workforce in establishing and implementing approaches to support student learning and, in particular, emphasised the central role of the principal. By phase three, it was evident that a number of schools had experienced changes in their leadership during the course of Action Plan's rollout. This often resulted in significant disruptions to teaching practices and school-wide approaches to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Challenges associated with turnover were not restricted to school leaders. One of the major challenges, particularly in remote schools was the repeat cycle of teacher turnover every two-to-three years. Inexperienced teachers often stayed at the school for this period, before seeking to work in different locations. This limited the potential for teachers to connect with community members and impacted on the consistency of tuition provided. It also necessitated repeat involvement by the school in professional development of teachers. These challenges were further exacerbated where school leadership changed.

Where able to be attracted to work at schools, AEWs or equivalent staff members are critical to school's engagement activities and teacher professional development. Over the past few years, many schools supported AEWs through NPA or FSNS/IFS initiative funding, but now face funding pressures to retain these staff in the school environment following expiry of funding. One school case study demonstrated a willingness to retain their AEW through recurrent funding allocations:

Notably, the 0.4FTE funding for the AEW in 2014 was drawn from the school's annual allocation, rather than through additional funding received through Next Steps initiative or other Indigenous-specific allocations. This highlights the value and importance the school places on this role. The reasons cited for maintaining this capability is to ensure continuity of activity, particularly as AEWs are notably difficult to find due to systemic barriers (difficult for AEWs to achieve registration) and limited numbers of appropriately skilled and qualified AEWs.

Case study, phase three

Not all schools were able to continue funding AEWs or equivalent:

A major concern to all is the future of National Partnership Agreement funding. Currently the school receives a substantial amount to support programs essential to areas within the Action Plan. Projections for 2014 indicate a drop of over twenty percent. Funding diminution will impact on numbers of AIEOs employed above entitlements which in turn will impact on classroom programs. Uncertainty exists about funding viability in 2014.

Case study, phase three

Evidence of outcomes

Performance Indicator 11

This performance indicator sought to gauge the number of professional development hours spent on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and cultural and linguistic competence training undertaken by principals and teachers. The target sought an increase in hours undertaken.

Several data issues compromised the assessment of achievement towards the target, including that:

- there was no baseline dataset
- the majority of jurisdictions did not centrally collect data against this performance indicator
- little data were available about professional training in the independent school sector
- data often did not disaggregate results between principals and teachers.

The actual uptake of learning and development opportunities is therefore unclear.

Performance Indicator 12

This performance indicator assessed the number and full-time equivalents (FTEs) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principals, teaching staff and education workers (AIEWs and equivalents), targeting an increase over time.

There were significant differences in data collection methods between jurisdictions, limiting comparability. Some jurisdictions have not shared data for all sectors.

Based on available data, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principals, teachers and AIEWs or equivalent has gradually increased over the past three years in many school sectors and jurisdictions.

Performance Indicator 13

This performance indicator measured the average length of service of principals and teachers in hard to staff schools with high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with a target of increased retention.

Major data issues were encountered in measuring progress against this indicator, including:

- challenges defining 'hard to staff schools' and thresholds for 'high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students'
- highly variable counting methods between jurisdictions
- information provided in state and territory annual reports do not allow comparison between jurisdictions
- some jurisdictions provided information for 2013, though many did not.

As such, progress in relation to the target is unable to be assessed.

Findings and future focus

As emphasised through the mobility study, strong, effective and stable leadership is one of the most important success criteria for schools. Where effective and high performing principals were retained over time, their impact on the school was likely to be lasting. Constant change to leadership reduces program sustainability, strategic direction and impacts on relationships with community members. The most successful principals are those that stay for more than a few years and use their tenure as leaders to develop staff, thereby promoting staff retention.

Teacher attraction was also a major challenge for schools, with many remote schools facing challenges in gaining sufficient quality applicants for positions. Remote schools also generally experienced higher levels of turnover, creating a regular need to attract and train new teachers from other settings.

Key Findings

Many schools faced difficulties attracting and retaining appropriately qualified staff, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Sustainability of school practices was impacted by teacher turnover. Stability of leadership and teaching staff was important for implementation of approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over time.



8.7 Domain six: pathways to real post-school options

There is a need for schools to play a key role in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to engage in employment or further study (technical or higher education) following school. As noted in the Melbourne Declaration:

Globalisation and technological change are placing greater demands on education and skill development in Australia and the nature of jobs available to young Australians is changing faster than ever. Skilled jobs now dominate jobs growth and people with university or vocational education and training qualifications fare much better in the employment market than early school leavers. To maximise their opportunities for healthy, productive and rewarding futures, Australia's young people must be encouraged not only to complete secondary education, but also to proceed into further training or education.

Melbourne Declaration on Education, 2008

The pathways to real post-school options domain was largely directed to schools that offered secondary education. The Action Plan's outcomes, targets, performance indicators and local actions are detailed in Table 12. The local actions focus on the role of schools in providing mentoring, case management, pathways to accredited training, career services and business partnerships.

Table 12 **PATHWAYS TO REAL-POST SCHOOL OPTIONS: OUTCOMES, TARGETS, PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND LOCAL ACTIONS**

| Outcomes | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students make a successful transition from school to work and further study. | |
| Targets | Performance indicators |
| Halve the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020. | Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20 – 24 who have attained Year 12 or equivalent or Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate II or above. |
| Local Actions | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary schools will provide innovative and tailored learning opportunities, mentoring and targeted case management strategies to increase the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to Year 12. Secondary schools will provide pathways and improved access to school-based accredited training, including traineeships and apprenticeships, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 10-12. Secondary schools will provide case management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking school-based traineeships and link them to employment services. Secondary schools will provide access to career services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families to support informed career and study choices. Secondary schools will maximise opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students under School Business Community Partnerships to extend learning beyond the classroom, increase student engagement, deepen learning experiences and improve educational outcomes. | |

Source: MCEECDYA 2010

Local implementation

Survey findings

While the performance indicators focused on secondary school attainment and post-school options, many focus schools only offered primary classes. As such, surveys asked schools to indicate their approaches to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to transition to secondary school, with responses by metropolitan, provincial and remote areas shown in Table 13.

Table 13 PRIMARY SCHOOL ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT TRANSITIONS TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

| Metropolitan schools | Provincial schools | Remote schools |
|--|---|--|
| Consolidated comments | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orientation days – e.g. only Aboriginal students attend orientation on one day, attending high school Year 6 leadership days Secondary staff visiting primary school to speak with students Transition programs and meetings with secondary school – e.g. extra transition visits supported by Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer and Aboriginal Education Teacher, meeting high school students Transition staff accompanying families to high school High school staff running elective subjects in primary school Mentors and buddies Family meetings, information and support through forums | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PLPs transferred to secondary school teachers Secondary staff and students visiting primary school to meet with incoming Year 7 students Transition programs – e.g. students visiting secondary school and participating in practical lessons such as woodwork and art, transition coordinator, extended transition for Year 6 students in terms 2-4, sports days, 'taster' days Aboriginal Education Officer visiting secondary school with Aboriginal students as part of transition programs Welfare programs to monitor student progress in secondary school Parent forums and information evenings Community Education Counsellor working with Indigenous families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition programs e.g. transition day, two weeks on site at local high school, attending high school during last year of primary school and scheduled into high school timetable – supported by AIEOs Combined network meetings for year 6, 7, 8 teachers 'Year-long' orientation, combined orientation classes Close liaison with secondary school, boarding schools – visiting programs Secondary school representatives visiting primary school Scholarships for students attending secondary school In many circumstances schools offer both primary and secondary classes, so transition is like changing class |
| Quotations | | |
| <p><i>"All students transitions from primary to secondary Indigenous students from other feeder primary schools are identified and case managed through their transition"</i></p> <p><i>"Vulnerable students can participate in group sessions to discuss the transition and learn strategies for coping."</i></p> <p><i>"As with all students, Indigenous students attend open days with year level teacher to secondary colleges adjoining the school. Individual learning and social needs addressed with year level co-ordinator."</i></p> | <p><i>"Our Koorie Engagement Support Officer supports all our students to ensure they are enrolled in a secondary school."</i></p> <p><i>"Students are supported with a Koorie transition program offering several visits over and above the normal transition program. The sessions are overseen by a Koorie Engagement Support Officer and secondary college Aboriginal officer."</i></p> | <p><i>"We take our Year 6/7 students every two years to stay at a boarding school for a couple of nights for them to experience a secondary boarding environment."</i></p> <p><i>"Junior Secondary Plan created - engagement of students to show the benefits of school and their career paths."</i></p> <p><i>"We have a great approach supported by the local area school. They visit and talk to year 6 and 7 students in the first term and answer questions they have about high school and they use students from year 6 and 9 to facilitate this."</i></p> |

Note: Based on 93 responses received in phase three

Question: Please explain your school's approach to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to transition to secondary school

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

In relation to approaches to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to transition beyond secondary school to work or further study, including challenges faced, a variety of activities were undertaken, including:

- attending careers conferences
- orientation visits with post-school education providers
- supporting students to identify boarding placements
- provision of vocational education and training (VET) in school to develop skills
- working with employers and tertiary institutions to identify opportunities
- work experience, supported by personalised learning plans
- role modelling and mentorship programs
- careers counselling and advisory services.

Activities identified through case studies

Post-school pathways activities continued to evolve throughout the rollout of the Action Plan. For some schools, post-school transitions were a major focus, with many schools increasing their focus on trade training in schools in particular. At one case study school:

A range of strategies, programs and infrastructure are evident at the school to enhance pathways for students to post school destinations. Chief among these is the industry pathways program operating out of the Trade Training Centre (TTC). This program is operated by an experienced educator with significant links to industry in the surrounding region. The program has two main intentions. First, to develop a work culture among students and play a quasi-mentoring role in building essential employability skills such as punctuality and reliability among students, and in removing impediments to work such as gaining a drivers licence. Second, for program staff to act as employment brokers across the town, and also across the region, pairing students with employment, traineeships and school-based apprenticeships.

Case study, phase three

In another setting, a case study school increased its focus on post-school pathways during the rollout of the Action Plan:

...retention of students to Year 12 has not been strong in the recent past. In response, in 2013 the school reviewed its secondary program through consultation with students, parents, staff and the community. Through this review process, the school has progressively developed Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs as an alternative or complementary component of the secondary program.

One of the key developments in the revised secondary program was the building of a Trade Training Centre (TTC) in 2011 to enable VET programs to be delivered on site. The TTC is currently used for the delivery of AQF Certificate I level training in building and construction, horticulture and sustainability.

As a regional resource, the TTC is available to other schools to participate in VET courses. Arrangements for students to participate in VET programs are auspiced through the Secondary School Principals Network which is in receipt of VET funding from the Australian government for this purpose. However, with the infrastructure in place, the school's main challenge now centres on having suitably qualified staff to deliver VET programs.

Case study, phase three

Schools were actively involved in mentoring, counselling and careers support activities. Some schools offered excursions to employers and further education providers. There remain challenges at many schools, however, to lift Year 12 completion rates. This was acknowledged as an area for future focus as part of whole-of-school attendance strategies.

Evidence of outcomes

Performance Indicator 14

This revised performance indicator sought to measure the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent or AQF Certificate II or above by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the aim of halving the gap in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.

State and territory administrative data for Year 12 or equivalent completions is not nationally consistent. Therefore each state and territory is reporting on the revised measure in a different manner. As a result, the data and information provided by states and territories are not comparable or able to be aggregated nationally.

Results generally demonstrated increases in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completing Year 12 in real terms over time. In addition, most jurisdictions exhibited strong growth in Vocational Education and Training (VET) performance at Certificate II or above. However, the results have not been assessed relative to the estimated population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within each year group, so the proportion of students completing Year 12 is unknown.

Findings and future focus

Student retention through to completion of Year 12 remains a major challenge for many schools. While the Action Plan promoted post-school pathway activities, this needs to have a continued focus in the future.

To achieve improved transitions, students need support not only to complete their schooling, but to transition to post-school activities with sufficient preparation and clear expectations about the likely challenges that will be encountered in order to avoid dropping-out or losing interest.

The increasing recent promotion of trade training in schools is a positive development, both to develop hands-on skills but to retain students for longer periods to learn other essential skills in the school setting. The opportunities and benefits of VET in school are continuing to be explored by many schools.

Key Finding

The post-school pathways domain is critical to support students to complete Year 12 and to provide skills for lifelong learning. The focus on trade training over recent years was considered positive in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this regard.



9 Mobility study

This chapter summarises findings from a study of mobility undertaken as part of the case study process.

9.1 About the study

The complete mobility study was provided to ATSIEAG members through the final case study compendium.

Study rationale

Mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and students was identified as a key issue in some school case studies. As a concept, student mobility is ill-defined, its magnitude and operation in various locations is unquantified, and its consequences are uncharted.

Mobility of students and families is a particularly significant issue for many schools servicing outer regional and remote communities in Australia. Student mobility challenges are exacerbated by variable levels of teacher preparation and expertise, cross-cultural awareness and patterns of mobility, in so far as these impact on the quality and depth of classroom relationships.

As part of the phase three case studies, the opportunity existed to adopt a cluster approach to visiting a set of schools in one specific geographical area to explore the nature of mobility issues in more detail. This study therefor focuses on the effects of mobility on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the school-wide responses across a number of sites in addressing these concerns.

The full mobility study was provided to ATSIEAG members as part of the case study compendium.

Methodology

The study examined the impact of student and teacher mobility in Far North Queensland (FNQ) using a cluster case study approach across three schools. FNQ was identified as the most suitable region for a cluster case study model to be undertaken. Throughout the evaluation, the project team completed case studies in several FNQ schools, and particularly strong relationships were developed with schools in the area.

The three schools provided their permission to be named in the evaluation report:

- Yarrabah State School (YSS), located in the Yarrabah Aboriginal Community south-east of Cairns
- Western Cape College (WCC), located on the western side of Cape York Peninsula
- Cairns West State School (CWSS), located in the inner-western suburbs of Cairns.

The case study approach included: pre-visit discussions to gain a contextual understanding of student mobility in FNQ, as well as in other remote settings; site visits to each school and the Cairns Region Education Office; consultations with other educational support

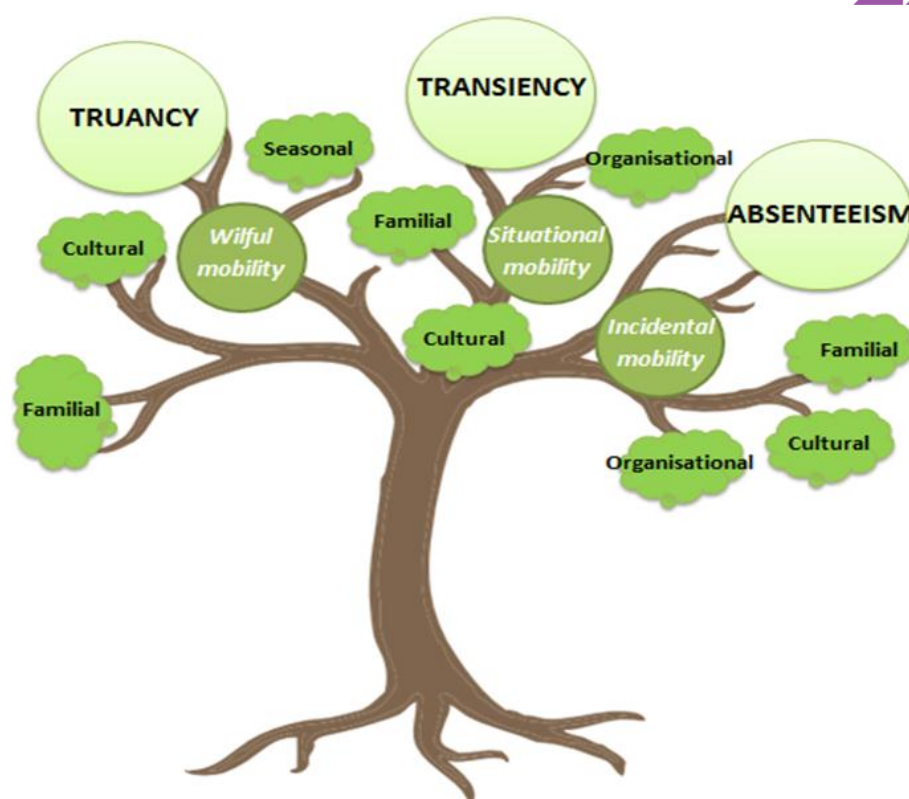
organisations in the region; and post-visit synthesis of data and findings, including validation of the case study reports and sharing findings with schools and other stakeholders.

9.2 Defining mobility

The Action Plan correctly placed a distinct priority on increasing levels of school attendance by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as a necessary pre-condition for Closing the Gap on levels of student performance. The Action Plan's concern for schools to address longstanding and continuing low attendance rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students masks a confusing set of related but overlapping concepts. Absenteeism, truancy and transience are the most commonly used terms, although mobility is the most inclusive concept since it embraces each of these subsidiary concepts.

If mobility is considered to be the root of the issue, truancy, transiency and absenteeism are the outer leaves. Stemming from these concepts are the terms wilful, situational and incidental mobility which describe some key reasons and rationales behind each group. A further set of subsidiary factors can be seen branching out from these second level concepts which encompass broader factors leading to mobility and which are related to familial, cultural, seasonal, or organisational events. The student mobility tree in Figure 28 unpacks these concepts.

Figure 28 **STUDENT MOBILITY TREE**



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting & PhillipsKPA 2014

Reasons for mobility

Patterns of mobility among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families across the selected schools studied in this region (CWSS, WCC, YSS) reflect the operation of a diversity of factors, some of which are known and able to be anticipated, for example:

- historical, cultural and seasonal movements (e.g. between Napranum community in Weipa, suburbs in west-central Cairns and Bamaga on Cape York, especially in the dry season)
- extended family links across locations, communities and schools
- movement to access housing, health and other key services
- attendance at key local, cultural and community events (e.g. Cairns Show, community events and ceremony).

9.3 Managing mobility in FNQ schools

Extent of the problem

The mobility study uncovered some sobering findings in relation to student mobility and the severity of this issue on school management and, more importantly, student learning. The overall reduction in classroom learning time over the whole childhood of highly-mobile Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be typically measured in years of loss, rather than months, weeks or days. For example:

- CWSS experienced 372 episodes of student mobility within one school year, more than the average number of students enrolled in the average Australian primary school (338)
- more than 1,500 school days were lost to mobility at CWSS in 2013
- a student at one school with 10 years of formal schooling had actually been present at school for between 1.5 and 3 years in total
- another student was out of school for approximately 79 days between leaving one school and enrolling in the next
- between January 2009 and March 2014, one student moved between five different schools eleven times.

Several broader findings stemming from the research in these three schools were also identified.

- Schools, even in the same educational jurisdiction and region, differ markedly in their current capacity to respond to the high rates of mobility of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- At the most basic level, schools differ in the extent to which they are able to consistently identify which students are most at-risk from repeated and extended periods of discontinuities in their learning and hence target them for specific interventions, programs and support.
- The roles and responsibilities of staff providing support services also varies across schools, as do expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous staff.
- Variations occurred in three schools studied, where each principal had been at the school for an extended period and where staff turn-over rates had been significantly reduced over several years.

- One school with exceptional performance in addressing high-mobility issues (CWSS) was able to do so because of its earlier involvement in a research project, which provided a Mobility Support Officer and the use of supplementary Australian Government funding to extend their operations by implementing reformed whole-school systems and procedures.

Although the effects of mobility varied across the three school sites, the impact of mobility on student learning at these sites and across the region is significant. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in FNQ experienced significant discontinuities in their school learning over many years, with interruptions typically beginning early on in their school lives.

School responses

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have experienced significant learning discontinuities through family mobility or dislocation have been able to overcome this disadvantage and re-engage successfully with their schooling.

Positive re-engagement appears to be related to the quality of sustained school responses, the depth and quality of relationships with key staff, and the timeliness and professional patience adopted in interventions made by the school. Schools that are more successfully addressing student mobility do so via a set of mechanisms which typically focus on the following sequenced priorities, with 1 being the least advanced response and 3 being the most advanced response:

1. *Systematic student targeting*: closer identification, tracking and targeting of those students who are experiencing different types and rates of mobility.
2. *Support staff roles*: appointment and/or training of key staff in mobility support roles to provide liaison and continuing links between students and their families, and supporting teachers and specialist staff to do so.
3. *Renewing school procedures*: remodelling and renovating school procedures and processes to ensure more complete enrolment and assessment, reducing waiting-times for student re-entry, easing re-engagement anxieties and monitoring progress in conjunction with classroom teaching staff.

Impact on staff

Current patterns of staff appointment and deployment in roles associated with attendance and mobility place very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in key decision-making roles, with responsibilities of such staff typically associated with lower-level support, liaison and community engagement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are members of both school staff and communities often face complex and compromising pressures as a result.

As a result of changing enrolment patterns throughout the year, student mobility also has flow-on impacts on overall school staffing levels, training, wellbeing, and on the capacity and timeliness of priority educational responses to address mobility-related disadvantage.

Systemic responses

Current jurisdictional systems for monitoring and reporting student attendance and absence underestimate the extent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family and student mobility affecting some schools. Systems typically fail to account for the extent of students both enrolling and exiting schools at various times in the year. Systems of enrolment to track

highly mobile Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are silent on many aspects of mobility, in particular:

- the duration between the recorded absence from one school and enrolment at another school
- the inability to track students across state, Catholic and independent sectors
- *ad hoc* and limited transfer of student educational data between schools.

The combination of these gaps results in significant lags in locating students, planning for tailored interventions and re-engaging them in learning programs.

Education authorities have specific responsibilities for providing better and more targeted support to those schools managing significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student mobility impacts, including:

- digital tracking and data management systems
- enhanced support for clusters and partnerships between schools on mobile student pathways
- capacity to link and coordinate—especially of key student data—across state, Catholic and independent schooling sectors
- enhanced staff provision, induction and training related to mobility with an anticipatory, preventative and foresight-oriented approach
- enhanced modes of training, development and mentoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff members.

9.4 Mobility in relation to the Action Plan domains

Mobility impacts across all domains of schooling. Based on the findings of the mobility study, it was apparent that mobility had an impact on achievement within each domain of the Action Plan. These impacts are summarised in Table 14.

Table 14 **KEY MOBILITY ISSUES BY ACTION PLAN DOMAIN**

| Domain | Key mobility issues |
|--|---|
| Readiness for school | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need for early identification of mobility on school readiness, focusing on the impacts of interruptions on social skills and learning habits Given changes in location, further need to reinforce the concept of parents and families as first teachers |
| Engagement and connections | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Efforts in developing Individual Learning Plans can be interrupted by student mobility Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff often have conflicted loyalties and feel stressed by the need to identify and pursue families over attendance and mobility and to share information that may be regarded as private and confidential |
| Attendance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on attendance tracking and truancy risks masking mobility factors Regular and irregular mobility patterns need to be acknowledged as part of the attendance domain, with links and distinctions between attendance and absenteeism, truancy and transience Truancy monitoring and compliance should not be assumed to capture all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mobility patterns or to be the intervention of first choice in all locations |
| Literacy and numeracy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum priorities require development of learning norms and routines for effective learning, systematic scaffolding and continuous and timely feedback for effective foundations to be developed and built upon Time spent on tasks, continuity of experience and consolidated patterns of learning are threatened by high levels of mobility, especially in the early years |
| Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remodelling school processes and realignment of roles and responsibilities must accompany sharper targeting, data-gathering and programming regarding mobile students Improved induction and development of non-Indigenous staff and improved training and mentoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff are required to better address mobility Effective, sensitive and sustained school leadership is necessary to remodel processes and procedures and to attract staff able to support mobility responses |
| Pathways to real post-school options | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> High mobility rates result in delayed or broken transition pathways, characterised by student anxiety and failure Partnerships between schools affected by student mobility, including across sectors, need to be stronger and deeper Links between key staff need to be supported by school and system leaders, with protocols established and implemented to track and share relevant information |

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

9.5 Lessons and broader application

There are several important findings arising from the study of mobility and its operation at the school and community level. Notably:

- student mobility most often occurs across low socio-economic communities
- mobility is often confused or confounded with other concepts related to 'low attendance', such as truancy, absenteeism and transience
- many schools affected by poor student attendance rates may be suffering the effects of high mobility rather than absenteeism
- patterns of mobility related to family and seasonal movements are often well understood in local community contexts, but not acknowledged in systemic responses
- mobility has been significantly underestimated as an issue affecting the performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, especially for those experiencing repeated periods of extended absence in their early years.

The lessons that emerge for the national context are that this issue is important and requires deeper study to prepare systemic responses that are appropriate to manage the challenge. The status quo also requires further assessment, in particularly the degree to which:

- mobility is understood as a key variable affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance and performance across the country
- systems and schools vary in how effectively they document and respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student mobility issues

- systems and schools are advanced in using and sharing consistent data which can be used to target high-mobility students and design more personalised interventions capable of withstanding interruptions and discontinuities
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high mobility students are currently slipping through the system until the longer-term effects of their discontinuous learning patterns surface in more serious negative behavioural patterns
- schools affected by high-mobility are assisted through appropriate funding mechanisms and staff allocations to build and maintain systems and procedures for managing mobile students
- high-mobility schools operating in different regions and systems are networked to learn from their experiences and approaches.

It is clear through this study, and the review of data collected and analysed, that this issue is of critical importance for schools in high mobility regions such as FNQ. It is the highest priority issue for CWSS, for example. However, the problems associated with mobility are not confined to FNQ. Through the focus school case study process, a number of other areas across the country were identified in which mobility is a challenge, including:

- the Kimberly and the Pilbara regions of Western Australia
- broad areas of Central Queensland
- movement in and out of the major service centres of the Northern Territory (such as Alice Springs)
- the South Australian corridor between Adelaide in the south and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in the north
- along the northern stretches of the Murray river bordering Victorian and New South Wales.

This list is far from exhaustive. Other regions, such as the Goldfields region in South West Western Australia, Far Western New South Wales, and the Great Australian Bight in South Australia, can also be expected to include sites where mobility significantly impacts on the operation of schools.

Although the effects of mobility are expected to vary across regions, townships and school sites, an investigation across the country to identify regions such as FNQ where the impacts of mobility can be debilitating on school morale and operations is both warranted and urgent. This would assist policy responses that are enable distinct levels of support, depending on the severity of the problem, to be devised and implemented across these high-mobility areas. Only then will serious inroads into the low attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in highly mobile regions be possible.

Key Findings

A study of mobility in the Far North Queensland region identified significant negative impacts on rates of attendance and student learning. Mobility is a recognised challenge across many other regions of Australia, impacting on metropolitan, provincial and remote schools.

While mobility is acknowledged as a serious issue within school systems, advanced systemic responses involving government, Catholic and independent schools were considered by stakeholders to be essential to supporting students and school staff.



10 Summary of findings

This chapter summarises the achievements of the Action Plan and details consolidated findings.

10.1 Achievements of the Action Plan

The Action Plan comprised 55 actions to “assist education providers to accelerate improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes and contribute to the achievement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) closing the gap targets” (Action Plan, 2010, p.37). It was developed to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at national, systemic and local levels, targeting approximately 940 selected focus schools across school sectors (government, Catholic and independent)².

The evaluation found that the Action Plan has influenced education practices at the national, systemic and school levels to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, it:

- established a common language and framework for action that added legitimacy, momentum and authority for activities to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the national, systemic and school levels
- provided a focus for information sharing at the national and systemic levels through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group (ATSIEWG) of the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC)
- established a framework for jurisdictions and school sectors to reference in developing policy directions to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- provided consistency of direction over time, despite changes in governments and education sector personnel
- created a focus for planning and implementation activities through the priority domain structure.

The Action Plan also enabled and assisted education professionals across Australia to progress specific actions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

At the national level, the Action Plan drew together agreed education-related reform directions into a single consolidated approach. It was also instrumental in accelerating delivery of several additional actions, such as the National Alliance of Remote Indigenous Schools and the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative, which were given priority through the Action Plan.

At the systemic level, the directions in the Action Plan were often embedded in Indigenous-specific education policies and plans, and subsequently flowed through into many school plans. Where the Action Plan was embedded in systemic policies, actions were more likely to be actively pursued at the local level.

² Based on the most recent available list of focus schools for August 2012 at: <http://www.scseec.edu.au/archive/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Education-Action-Plan/Focus-Schools1.aspx>

As result, the Action Plan had varied degrees of influence at the school level. It is difficult to establish the precise impact of the Action Plan relative to other programs, priorities and pedagogical approaches. While the Action Plan has helped to sustain a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in many schools, outcomes achieved often reflected a combination of programs and priorities, rather than being attributable solely to the Action Plan.

For many focus schools, the Action Plan provided an important guide to areas for action, in particular through the six priority domains. All focus schools visited through the evaluation were able to identify numerous activities being implemented across each of the Action Plan's priority domains. The progress of many focus schools in improving practices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was clearly evident, with many taking significant steps to change their school-wide culture and to better educate the teacher workforce.

Some focus schools also benefited from additional funding through the Focus Schools Next Steps (FSNS) or Investing in Focus Schools (IFS) initiatives. Surveys of focus schools identified that the additional funding through the FSNS and IFS initiatives had accelerated implementation activities, though it was too early to assess impacts on students' outcomes. There is a risk that sustained benefits of such funding may not be realised in the longer-term without ongoing systematic support.

National data presents a mixed picture of achievement during the course of the Action Plan. For example:

- Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) data demonstrated improvements by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students between 2009 and 2012, albeit from a low base
- school attendance rates continue to exhibit significant gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students
- through NAPLAN testing, some year levels achieved literacy and numeracy improvements while others regressed, with significant gaps remaining between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students in most jurisdictions and test domains (reading, writing, numeracy, language conventions).

There therefore remains more to do to continue activity started at many focus schools and to engage those schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that had little involvement in the rollout of the Action Plan.

10.2 Consolidated report findings

The findings from earlier chapters are detailed in full below.

Action Plan structure and design (Chapter 3)

The Action Plan extended prior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy directions and national reform directions in areas of need. Its domain-based structure has provided a conceptual framework for school sectors and schools to identify needs and priorities.

The Action Plan created a common language for activity across Australia, reinforcing the key areas for action.

Stakeholders considered the structure of the Action Plan to be largely appropriate.

During its early phases of implementation, the Action Plan was strongly supported by stakeholders for its action-based structure, though over time, various actions were considered to be overly prescriptive, unclear in intent or of limited priority.

The Action Plan may have benefited from greater focus on pre- and post-school education, rather than focusing only on school education.

During the early implementation of the Action Plan, there was limited awareness among school sectors and schools about the responsibilities, expectations and benefits for focus schools. This affected the focus school selection process in some school sectors, with a number of suitable schools opting out.

Most focus schools were primary schools, despite recognised needs across secondary schools.

Some school sectors supported all schools to implement the Action Plan equally, while others directed attention primarily towards focus schools.

Action Plan funding (Chapter 4)

Schools that received FSNS or IFS initiative funding appear to have implemented some Action Plan actions more extensively than schools that did not receive FSNS or IFS initiative funding.

There are concerns about the sustainability of activities introduced using time-limited FSNS and IFS initiative funding, with many schools employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education staff.

Governance, monitoring and evaluation (Chapter 5)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Working Group (ATSIEWG) played an active leadership role in planning and decision-making activities to support the rollout of the Action Plan. The Catholic and independent school sectors had limited representation on the ATSIEWG, relative to the government sector.

Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies provided valuable support for the rollout of the Action Plan within each jurisdiction, building on networks across school sectors and knowledge of practical approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The delayed agreement to the Action Plan impacted on the collection of baseline data in both 2010 and 2011.

The Action Plan's performance measures provided a basis for monitoring, but were impacted by data collection issues, a lack of clarity provided to schools and an inability to disaggregate findings between focus and non-focus schools.

The longitudinal evaluation has itself contributed to supporting the rollout of the Action Plan among schools and school sectors by gauging implementation progress, assessing outcomes and advising on future national directions.

National and systemic coordination (Chapter 6)

The national collaborative actions helped to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in national education reform directions and progress areas where limitations in evidence or action existed.

Adoption and promotion of the Action Plan's priority domains and actions in systemic policies was critical to supporting schools to implement the Action Plan's directions.

There was a lag effect in implementation of the Action Plan's directions in many school sectors, resulting from the variable timeframes for policy development and implementation.

Whole-of-school implementation (Chapter 7)

Action at the school level is driven primarily by local contextual needs, in combination with systemic policies, rather than as a direct result of national plans.

While a strong acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is critical to creating a welcoming school environment that encourages students to attend and engage, the influence of the Action Plan in explicitly promoting cultural recognition was limited.

The challenges facing remote schools differ significantly from metropolitan and provincial schools. However, the Action Plan promoted a largely uniform response to its local actions, only including a small number of national collaborative and systemic actions targeted toward remote schools.

Schools with high levels of capability in data literacy were better able to gauge student progress, tailor teaching practices to drive improved results and engage teachers in achieving student outcomes.

Many focus schools expressed a desire for greater practice sharing to learn from peers, including in other school sectors and jurisdictions.

School implementation by domain (Chapter 8)

Domain One: Readiness for school

Action at the school level is driven primarily by local contextual needs, in combination with systemic policies, rather than as a direct result of national plans.

While a strong acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is critical to creating a welcoming school environment that encourages students to attend and engage, the influence of the Action Plan in explicitly promoting cultural recognition was limited.

The challenges facing remote schools differ significantly from metropolitan and provincial schools. However, the Action Plan promoted a largely uniform response to its local actions, only including a small number of national collaborative and systemic actions targeted toward remote schools.

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Many focus schools expressed a desire for greater practice sharing to learn from peers, including in other school sectors and jurisdictions.

Domain Two: Engagement and connections

Engagement and connections activities were critical to the achievement of all Action Plan domains. While the local actions in the Action Plan prompted targeted activity, they were often considered overly prescriptive and schools tended to be involved in a broader range of engagement activities.

Personalised learning plans helped schools to better understand student and family circumstances.

Aboriginal Education Workers or equivalents are critical to community engagement activities. In many cases, their tenure is uncertain beyond the expiry of National Partnership Agreement and additional Action Plan funding.

Domain Three: Attendance

Challenges facing schools in relation to enrolment, attendance, engagement and retention varied based on their local context and student composition. Typical responses involved building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities, engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school staff, providing logistical support to families, delivering an engaging curriculum, providing quality teaching, offering personalised learning support, and rewarding positive behaviours.

There remain gaps in attendance rates between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students across all jurisdictions and school sectors, particularly at the secondary school level. However, retention rates and grade progression ratios have demonstrated improvement over the past three years.

Domain 4: Literacy and numeracy

Many schools considered that the Action Plan helped to establish the foundations for literacy and numeracy improvement. However more needs to be done to support students through intensive support, literacy and numeracy coaching for teachers, implementation of whole-of-school approaches, and establishment and monitoring of high expectations for students.

At a national level, only three of eight literacy and numeracy progress points were met in 2013, fewer than 2011 or 2012.

Domain 5: Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development

Many schools faced difficulties attracting and retaining appropriately qualified staff, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Sustainability of school practices was impacted by teacher turnover. Stability of leadership and teaching staff was important for implementation of approaches to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over time.

Domain 6: Pathways to real post-school options

The post-school pathways domain is critical to support students to complete Year 12 and to provide skills for lifelong learning. The focus on trade training over recent years was considered positive in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in this regard.

Mobility study (Chapter 9)

A study of mobility in the Far North Queensland region identified significant negative impacts on rates of attendance and student learning. Mobility is a recognised challenge across many other regions of Australia, impacting on metropolitan, provincial and remote schools.

While mobility is acknowledged as a serious issue within school systems, advanced systemic responses involving government, Catholic and independent schools were considered by stakeholders to be essential to supporting students and school staff.



11 Future directions

This chapter discusses the changing education context, future needs and design considerations for national education policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, along with considerations for outcomes measurement, governance and priority domains.

11.1 Changing education context

Any future national actions will need to be considered within the context of the education policy environment.

Education policy context

The Action Plan was devised at a time when a number of key education directions were being established at the national level, including the national assessment program for literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN), the national curriculum and the introduction of national teacher standards. These major reforms were intended to support greater levels of standardisation between school sectors in relation to the achievement of literacy and numeracy outcomes, development of curriculum and maintenance of teacher competencies. They have resulted in greater consistency of monitoring, particularly in literacy and numeracy, which has driven national and systemic education responses, supporting schools and students with the greatest needs.

A number of other directions have emerged, or been consolidated, which will have an influence on school practice over coming years, including:

- a shift towards supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through greater mainstreaming of education policies
- an increasing focus on school autonomy within the government school sector, and greater localisation of decisions, rather than standardised systemic approaches
- a continued focus on gathering and assessing student achievement over time through AEDI, NAPLAN and more standardised reporting of attendance
- the rollout of teacher standards across universities and through in-service professional development
- delivery of the Australian curriculum and cross-curriculum priorities
- the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership's (AITSL) policy directions, including:
 - › work priorities for Initial Teacher Education
 - › school leadership to effectively manage more autonomous schools
 - › engaging with the teaching profession so that teachers and school leaders maximise student learning.
- recent agreements by COAG to promoting school attendance, boosting support for remote schools and promoting transitions from school to post-school options.

In addition, many Closing the Gap targets are due for completion in 2018. This will likely continue, if not increase, the focus on student outcomes in the coming years.

School funding context

During the course of the Action Plan, a revised national school funding model was also developed, seeking to improve the certainty of funding for schools. The *Review of Funding for Schooling* outlined the problems within the existing funding model:

When considered holistically, the current funding arrangements for schooling are unnecessarily complex, lack coherence and transparency, and involve a duplication of funding effort in some areas....

There is also a significant overlap in the funding priorities of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. The overlap leads to duplication and inefficiency, and makes it difficult for governments and policy makers to decide how best to fund the needs of school systems and schools.

Gonski et. al., Review of Funding for Schooling (2011).

The agreed funding model being implemented from January 2014 is based on a schooling resource standard that provides recurrent funding to schools. This allocates each school with a base amount per student, plus additional funding (loadings) to meet additional needs, taking into account:

- students with a low socio-economic background
- students with a disability
- students who have a low English proficiency
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

There are also loadings applied to schools that are not in major cities (location) and schools that are not large schools (size).

The introduction of a stable funding base for schools has coincided with expiry of many purpose-specific funding payments to schools, including NPA funding previously allocated for low socio-economic status, remote service delivery, and literacy and numeracy. In addition, specific funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities, such as the FSNS and IFS initiatives, ceased in 2014.

This school funding model is being reviewed and it is currently unclear what changes will be introduced for 2018 and beyond.

Changes to national organisational architecture

At the national level, responsibility for policies and programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been drawn from other departments into the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), with the intention to promote greater coordination of national programs and supports, and to consolidate disparate programs.

In addition, the national intergovernmental architecture recently changed. In July 2014, SCSEEC was replaced by the Education Council (EC). The EC is supported by several standing working groups, along with the ATSIEAG, which is a cross-cutting advisory group that supports the standing working groups and reports to the EC.

Implications

These policy, funding and national organisational architecture changes will have important implications in shaping any future nationally coordinated activity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

In relation to policy settings, standardising approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the local level would need to be carefully balanced with moves towards greater school autonomy, with principals empowered to ensure schools are more flexible in

responding to local needs. Where additional services may be made available to schools, they are likely to be applied less prescriptively at the systemic level, with schools having greater ability to purchase services that respond to their local priorities and needs.

In relation to funding, support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners will most likely need to be supported from the school's recurrent allocations rather than through additional program funding. Additional loadings provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through recurrent allocations should be made explicit and transparent to schools and communities as a key mechanism to ensure the focus on specific interventions or whole-of-school activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is maintained.

Issues raised regarding patterns of student mobility will also need to be considered in the calculation of funding for schools in order to appropriately resource schools that experience increases of increases in enrolments due to student movements throughout the year.

Within such a shifting environment, there are likely to be significant changes in the way that schools plan their operations, resulting in greater flexibility and choice in how priorities and additional support services are determined. It will be important that the focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is maintained, not only by schools with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but by all schools.

11.2 Future needs

The Action Plan has helped to lay the foundations for improvement at the national, systemic and local levels for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, though there remain significant needs. The issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are complex and highly varied according to school setting. Needs are heightened in remote locations, with significantly poorer educational results achieved. The evaluation also observed significant and persistent gaps in performance between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people relative to non-Indigenous people, including:

- lower levels of access and participation in early childhood education
- lower rates of school attendance across almost all year levels and school sectors
- poorer literacy and numeracy outcomes
- lower Year 12 or equivalent completion rates
- higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of workforce participation.

To address these issues, there is a need to sustain the momentum established by the Action Plan. The key considerations in doing so relate to the nature and extent of nationally agreed directions that will best sustain the progress achieved to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Guidance can be drawn from reflections on the Action Plan.

National, systemic and IECB perspectives regarding need

Stakeholders at the national and systemic levels identified areas where the Action Plan had been of significant benefit, but also identified areas for improvement. There was strong support for a future national strategy, though not necessarily in the same format as the current Action Plan. Views of national, systemic and IECB stakeholders are in Table 15.

Table 15 **NATIONAL, SYSTEMIC, LOCAL AND IECB REFLECTIONS ON BENEFITS, SHORTFALLS AND FUTURE NEEDS FOR NATIONAL PLANS**

| Stakeholders | Benefits of the Action Plan | Shortfalls of the Action Plan | Future national needs |
|--|--|---|---|
| National (peak education sector bodies) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents and communities could use the Action Plan to hold schools accountable Supported shared commitments by Ministers Helped to coordinate action across school sectors Has provided a valuable feedback loop | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided few resources to support implementation, for example a register of training providers Many outcomes of the Action Plan are not measurable Little accountability for implementation and outcomes achieved National approaches did not always match school priorities Some national actions would have happened anyway School did not target highly disadvantaged children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More accountability for implementation and outcomes required There needs to be a different plan for remote and urban schools given very different contexts and needs Future plan needs to be pitched at a strategic, rather than prescriptive, level Greater focus required on secondary school students |
| Systemic (school sectors) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Added legitimacy, momentum and authority for action at the systemic and school levels Reduce the need for separate systemic plans, with the national plan able to be embedded in systemic planning documents Guided priority directions, particularly in smaller school sectors with limited resources Aligned thinking across sectors and created a common language Coordinated action between the Australian and state/territory governments Helped to provide consistency despite government and bureaucratic staff changes Provided a measure of accountability for implementation by school sectors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too many actions, resulting in limited implementation focus in some areas Overly prescriptive and did not allow the overarching objectives to be translated into flexible local solutions Too general about the school context into which the Action Plan would be delivered. Actions tied only to short term funding approaches Does not acknowledge that students also require ancillary services through schools, such as psychologists, counsellors, health specialists and speech therapists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs to be greater alignment between the national plan and activities/funding support provided by the Australian Government A future plan should take a holistic approach from early childhood to employment Beyond the activities in the plan, school sectors need to work out how systems can best support schools Some school sectors and many schools are only starting their implementation journeys late into the period of the current Action Plan, so need a plan to continue More guidance is required about effective practices Allow school sectors to play a role in setting their own performance measures and report on these Ensure a plan is in place by the end of Term 3 to aid annual planning and priority setting Promote cultural change across schools Develop teacher skills and awareness Seek greater involvement by secondary schools. |
| Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinated approach is valuable Action Plan helped to frame priorities of some IECBs Domains form a good driver for discussions at the school level | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NAPLAN testing for outcomes is narrow - there are other factors Little systemic accountability for results Cultural content has been missing Plan limited to focus schools No focus on adult education for parents and others There is an implementation lag for directions to reach the local level Some jurisdictions have selected the actions that they want to implement but ignored others Action Plan not known across many non-focus schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued need for national action, with some only just starting implementation Plan promotes continuity and focus Targets to 'halve the gap' should be to 'close the gap' More accountability for results Focus on more than just attendance Training pathways should be built into the plan, with TAFEs involved Avoid deficit models and promote value/improvement and celebration of talent Address resistance at school level Plan must be for all schools Lifelong education focus |

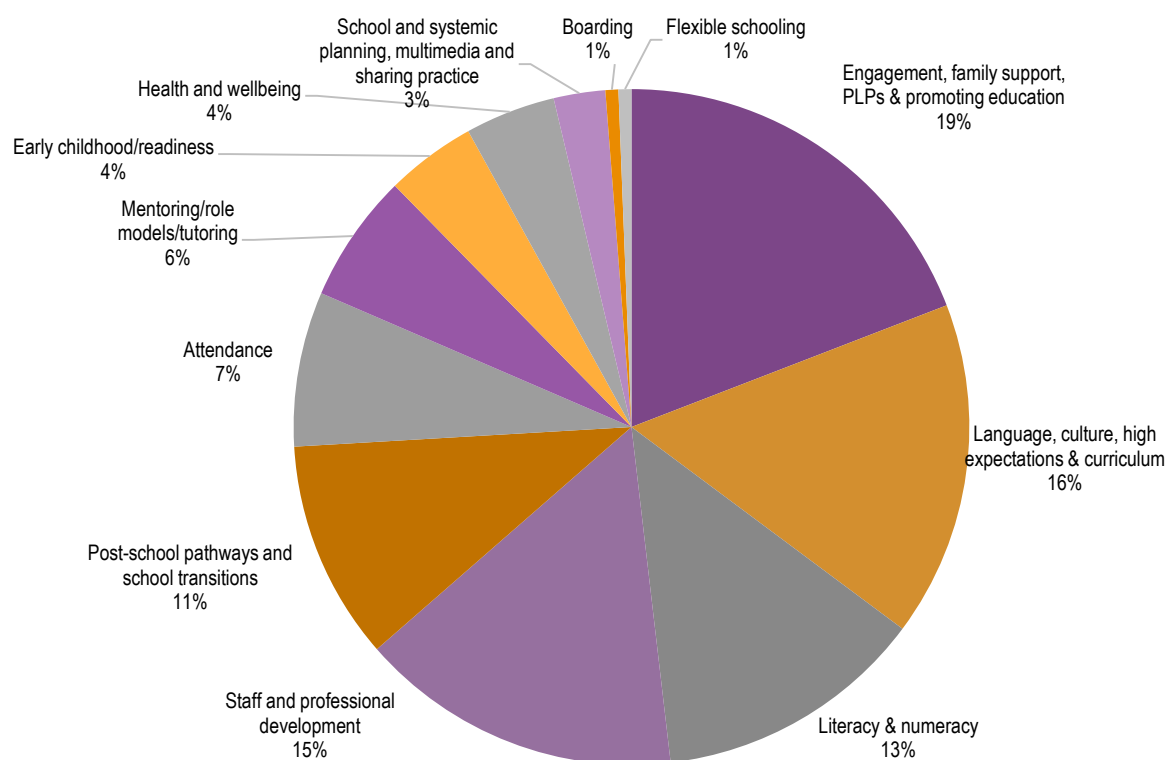
Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

School perspectives

School leaders identified a number of areas where schools need to focus in the future. Focus school leaders' responses to the school survey are presented in Figure 29, indicating:

- significant needs at the school level for continued support for family engagement activities
- a desire to promote language, culture, high expectations and curriculum
- a continued push for improved literacy and numeracy programs for students
- workforce development needs, including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support staff
- a desire to promote post-school options
- a continued emphasis on attendance
- a need for role models and tutoring.

Figure 29 **FUTURE FOCUS FOR NATIONAL POLICY, AGGREGATED RESPONSES, PHASE THREE**



Note:

Based on surveys by 86 schools to the open-text question: "What activities should be focused on in a future national education plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?"

Total of 159 responses provided, multiple responses captured

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

11.3 Design principles for future activity

The evaluation has identified an ongoing, if not growing, need for some form of nationally coordinated activity to provide continued focus and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly to realise and drive further improvements to educational outcomes from the foundations that have been established.

To assist and inform planning for such activity, the following principles have been drawn from the experiences with the current Action Plan:

- *Extend existing directions*: support schools to sustain directions established under the Action Plan and encourage schools to extend their gains over time
- *Encompass all students, not select schools*: the focus school concept has supported early adoption, but future activity needs to be broader and seek to support all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rather than selected schools
- *Seek longer-term implementation*: sustained action requires time, with benefits of longer-term implementation more likely to be realised if future strategies are introduced as soon as possible and pursued over at least a five year period
- *Leverage recurrent funding*: the design of future action should support implementation using existing school funding arrangements and student loadings, rather than additional funding packages
- *Promote local flexibility*: there is limited value in prescribing local actions when schools require local flexibility to achieve agreed outcomes
- *Build capacity and share practices*: provide adequate information and support for schools to learn from practices that have proven effective elsewhere, supporting those that require additional assistance
- *Develop the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce*: future activity must continue to expand the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce to support community engagement and student outcomes
- *Collaborate with parents and communities*: sustain the focus on engaging with, and promoting shared decision-making among, parents and families of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- *Reduce the reporting burden*: work with existing data and reporting cycles to help school sectors focus their attention on supporting schools to achieve changes and capturing effective practices for wider sharing.

11.4 Future design considerations

Implementing future national strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students could be achieved in a number of ways. While the Action Plan was found to be effective in promoting change in many areas, this section describes some possible alternate approaches to structure nationally coordinated activity, at the same time addressing the areas of improvement identified through the evaluation.

These are outlined in Table 16 and discussed further below. They draw on practices applied both in the education sector and elsewhere, and while presented as separate options, they provide a suite of elements that could be in considered in combination.

Table 16 DESIGN APPROACHES

| Approach | Description | Benefits | Issues |
|---|--|--|---|
| An action-based plan | | | |
| Revise the Action Plan | Document promoting change through specific actions to be implemented during the duration of the plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes distinct national, systemic and local activities Domain-based structure provides conceptual framework for action | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be overly prescriptive at the local level Little additional information or guidance in relation to actions Performance measurement against a large number of actions Jurisdictions largely report on outputs, rather than outcomes |
| Policy commitment | | | |
| Revise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy | A policy statement to outline national priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity to revise and contemporise prior policy, developed in 1989 Clear statement of future priorities and ambitions Policies can be high profile | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A national policy already exists, but does not itself drive action Policies can lack direction or support for implementation Policies are often linked to particular governments, rather than leading intergovernmental action |
| Educational declaration or statement of intent | A public statement that outlines the desired change and priorities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document can be strategic in nature Generates national attention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be impractical to implement Requires guidance about methods to support achievement May conflict with existing education declarations |
| Jurisdictional agreement | | | |
| Ministerial agreement (Australian Directions) | Document outlining a series of commitments by national and state/territory governments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inter-governmental agreement Consistent directions across jurisdictions Not prescriptive about specific local actions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the past has resulted in limited involvement by non-government school sectors Limited implementation consistency |
| Series of inter-governmental agreements | Series of agreements tailored to each jurisdiction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes varied targets for each school sector or jurisdiction Promotes local implementation Central coordination around aims Practice sharing and reporting supported | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited ability to incentivise outcomes achieved given new funding models Focuses on specific schools rather than all schools Continues time-limited funding expectation |
| Outcomes monitoring | | | |
| Establish outcomes framework | Document oriented around measuring and benchmarking performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexibility in implementation action School sectors report on outcomes Regular monitoring of change accompanied by research into advanced achievement Forums established to share practice Outcomes extend beyond a single term of government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited prescription may result in less coordinated or intensive action Usually requires incentives for success/failure Outcome monitoring limited to what can be measured Limited involvement by parents/communities May be challenging to extend beyond existing CTG target |
| Accord | | | |
| A service agreement or guarantee | An agreement between school sectors, students and their families and communities involving mutual obligations to achieve successful outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong commitment to students Promotes shared efforts between parents and schools Lifts levels of school and system accountability where families are meeting their obligations Provides schools with recourse where families are not meeting obligations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenging to negotiate shared principles More suited for local action than systemic or national rollout Guaranteed outcomes may require more intensive support Some school sectors and schools may not be able to deliver on promises Difficult to set achievable but meaningful targets across all school settings |
| No national action | | | |
| No future national plan | Each school sector establishes its own approach to implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outcomes focus remains on Closing the Gap targets Local flexibility maintained Routine monitoring of NAPLAN and attendance to continue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No additional support to share practice Opportunity lost to engage parents Less coordination between sectors Focus in each sector liable to shift with policy changes |

Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

Discussion

Consideration of these approaches is based on the evaluation team's assessment of each in relation to their likely influence in meeting the future needs outlined by stakeholders, with reference to the design principles for future activity. Selection decisions need to take into account the evolving policy and funding context, outlined earlier.

An action-based plan

As established through the evaluation, the Action Plan established valuable foundations for student success in many schools. A number of its actions and directions have been established as core practices in schools. The directions established through the Action Plan, particularly in relation to actions within the six priority domains, should be enhanced in future to sustain outcomes at the school level. However, many considered that development of a further Action Plan in its current form would be time and resource intensive, and there was limited stakeholder support for such a prescriptive approach in future.

Policy commitments

The existing national policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students—the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*—was developed in 1989, extended in 1993 and reaffirmed in 1995. Its directions could be contemporised through a new national education policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

However, the existence of policy does not itself promote activity. Given there are existing national commitments to address needs through the Closing the Gap agenda, there is likely to be limited additional value in devising a new, overlapping or complementary policy at this time. A revised statement of policy also risks failing to adequately garner non-government school sectors into action.

Likewise, an educational declaration or statement of intent may fail to adequately capture implementation needs and methods. If an education declaration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were to be developed, there is a risk that it could conflict with priorities set through the wider national education declarations, produced approximately every ten years. Greater value may be achieved by promoting directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through the existing declaration process, as currently occurs, rather than establishing a similar document of this type that runs the risk of being 'bolted on' rather than 'built in'.

Jurisdictional agreements

A Ministerial agreement document, such as Australian Directions, may alone find it difficult to generate sufficient impetus for change, particularly among Catholic and independent schools. The evaluation of the Action Plan found that clearer action-based guidance at the national, systemic and local levels had been more effective in stimulating activity.

Intergovernmental agreements, if tightly scoped and tailored, could prove an effective way to target priorities within each jurisdiction. However, with the National Education Agreement in place, and school funding levels for 2018 being reviewed, jurisdictions may be hesitant to agree to a specific set of directions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students until broader education settings are agreed.

Outcomes framework

There is clear desire among school sectors for a more flexible approach to tailoring educational responses to local needs, both at the systemic and school levels. In tandem, there is a desire among schools and school sectors to better gauge and understand effective practices that have emerged elsewhere.

An outcomes framework to collect data specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may assist school sectors to maintain a focus on student achievement. This could also serve to test whether foundational actions introduced during the Action Plan period achieved results over time. The specific outcomes to be achieved could be negotiated with each school sector to establish targets that are suitable and attainable, and to take into account the different starting points and existing data collection processes.

An outcomes framework could also promote closer analysis of results achieved by schools and school sectors, learning from those that are exceeding their goals and supporting those that are failing to achieve change. In doing so, schools would continue to tailor responses flexibly, but with a set of key priority outcomes towards which to strive. Many schools would need to improve their data literacy to assist in monitoring change and adapting to meet identified needs. The outcomes would need to be carefully established in the context of available data.

Accord

While schools are held accountable for results, their achievement requires cross-community commitment. The role played by students and their parents, families and communities is critical. Accords or service agreements (called service guarantees in some schools) between schools and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and communities could generate two-way support. These would ideally document clear statements of commitment to achieve improved outcomes for students, in response to declarations of support from communities. They may prompt greater dialogue between schools and communities about how to deliver on commitments. At present, such service agreements have been largely confined to the local level, between schools and families. Consideration should be given to their broader adoption across regions or school sectors.

No national action

A further option is not to have a national strategy in future. This would, however, fail to capitalise on the goodwill and commitment of school sectors generated during the implementation of the Action Plan. It could also lead to the perception that the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is no longer of national priority, with additional attention at the discretion of each school sector and school. This could also result in less focused monitoring of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes, which itself may reduce the impetus for action within schools.

Next steps

Irrespective of the approach adopted, it is important that the design of future national directions be undertaken as soon as possible to ensure continuity of action at the conclusion of the current Action Plan. The introduction of a new strategy will help to maintain momentum created through the Action Plan and drive continued change across schools and school sectors. Consultation, including detailed discussion with IECB representatives, will be particularly important to these discussions.

11.5 Setting and measuring outcomes

It is important to consider how outcomes measurement may be improved in future to assess changes over time. This section discusses lessons learned from the Action Plan's performance measurement approach.

Targets linked to performance measures help set the anticipated progress and focus efforts around the achievement of defined goals. While the Action Plan encountered significant challenges in quantifying changes against some of its measures, the majority served to focus attention on the progress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from early childhood through to the end of school.

While desired long-term outcomes are important, it is important that the focus include performance indicators linked to clear short-term and observable targets. Several factors are relevant to informing future performance indicators and targets:

- the availability of data and the practicalities for jurisdictions and school sectors relating to data collection and reporting
- the value of monitoring by geographic location, noting that remote and very remote schools require particular attention relative to metropolitan and provincial schools
- limiting the data collection and reporting burden on schools and school sectors, potentially by selecting a smaller number of key indicators
- specifying whether data are required from focus schools or all schools, should the focus school concept be retained
- where possible, continuing the measurement of time-series information to gauge longitudinal change, where nationally consistent or sector consistent data are available.

In implementing an effective set of performance indicators and targets it will be important to:

- provide advance guidance to school sectors regarding data collection methods and definitions for each indicator selected, including baseline data and formulas for calculation, to promote uniformity
- acknowledge where nationally consistent data are not available and provide school sectors with guidance about any new or amended data collection methods required to promote national consistency, including qualitative measures
- provide support to schools about how to use data collected to improve student-level monitoring, understanding and tailoring teaching and other support activities to meet identified needs, rather than reporting as an end in itself
- align reporting deadlines with data release dates, rather than on a 12-month lag, as is the case presently
- consider the most impactful way to publicise results, including sharing findings and specific practices among schools
- maintain a focus on data measurement and monitoring by the ATSIEAG to maintain a line of sight between implementation activities and results achieved.

11.6 Future coordination considerations

In order to better support school sectors and schools, consideration should be given to establishing mechanisms for:

- fostering relationships and networks across all school sectors

- coordination regular communication with all school sectors regarding implementation expectations and progress
- sharing tools and templates to aid implementation activities
- preparation and circulation of school case studies regarding practices across Australia in order to expedite action across other schools or school sectors
- provision of a linkage service for schools and school staff seeking to connect with, and learn from, other school staff that have overcome similar issues
- supporting outcomes monitoring and reporting in a timely fashion following release of critical national datasets.

It will be important that the value of the knowledge and networks developed by IECBs is harnessed. IECBs could play a much stronger role in supporting the rollout of future strategies, for example by:

- ensuring that schools are actively implementing agreed directions, and working with them to overcome any associated challenges
- supporting schools to apply funding received for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student programs and school activities in the most effective ways
- capturing and sharing best practices at the school level and reporting on major activities bearing successful results
- playing a monitoring role for the government, Catholic and independent sectors, raising their levels of accountability for action, with IECBs able to report independently and publicly on progress
- working with jurisdictions on the design of particular programs and gauging community feedback prior to, during and after rollout
- playing a role in hosting parent or community forums to build better awareness and understanding of the contents of national and systemic plans.

Consideration should be given to identifying mechanisms to support effective rollout of activities, including:

- sharing implementation tools to support schools and sectors, for example templates for personalised learning or guides to developing school-community partnerships
- monitoring and analysing the various ways in which schools and school sectors respond to the actions, and compiling and sharing this information to support other schools and school systems
- providing definitive advice regarding reporting requirements
- establishing a network of school sectors and schools to provide regular updates about ATSIEWG decisions in order to build and sustain momentum for the rollout.

11.7 Refining the priority domains

The priority domains were valued highly in the Action Plan as a conceptual framework for action, and should be retained in some form to help shape future national priorities. They were generally broadly accepted, though several enhancements were identified to improve the current domains. Discussion of, and suggested revisions to, the domains are presented below to inform further considerations by the ATSIEAG.

Cross-cutting domains of activity

There are many inter-dependencies and synergies evident in the current Action Plan domains. For example, 'engagement and connections' activities are a key enabler of activity within other domains. Likewise, 'leadership, teaching and workforce development' are critical to all activities across the school. These cross-cutting domains form important areas of action, without which achievements in other domains are likely to be hindered.

Workforce development remains central as a cross-cutting domain. The existing domain of 'engagement and connections' has been extended to focus on collaborative decision-making with parents and community members. This addresses ambiguities in the definition and meaning of engagement, focusing on empowering parents and communities to play a decision-making role in key matters affecting students.

A further area common to all domains that is currently missing from the Action Plan relates to culture and identity. The local focus on culture will vary based on different school settings, with some requiring additional attention on language and ceremony. For many schools, acknowledgement of culture has been of critical importance in driving school-wide change. It helps to draw parents and communities into the school community, promotes identity and pride among students, and allows non-Indigenous people to share in, and learn from, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Attendance as an outcome measure

The evaluation found that attendance is a multi-faceted challenge, extending far beyond truancy and absenteeism and involving issues of situational mobility and transience. Responses to mobility require targeted cross-sectoral responses, linked to mobility support roles and tailored school procedures. Given that patterns of family movement will continue in future, there is a need to better understand mobility and to build systems that can adapt to the challenges it presents.

At the same time, attendance levels are responsive to factors associated with the school environment, including family attitudes to education, levels of engagement with students when they do attend, and teacher attitudes. Two-way dialogue with families is critical.

Given the close links between the 'attendance' and other domains, it may not need to be a domain of activity in its own right, but instead a prominent outcome measure for schools to gauge the effectiveness of their school environment, processes and outcomes.

Readiness for (and of) school

At present, this domain encourages schools to play a role in assisting pre-schools and other early childhood services to improve the readiness of children, and to assess levels of student readiness for school upon entry. The evaluation found that it is equally important that schools focus on their readiness for students. This applies not only to early childhood, but to all years and may be supported by school enrolment systems, the cultural capability of the school workforce, the ability to gauge students' abilities, and the tailoring of pedagogy and additional support to meet students' needs.

Pathways to real post-school options

While this domain was relevant for secondary schools, it was less so to primary schools. This domain would apply more universally if it was adapted to address the broader challenge of 'transition points'. These are defined as the critical junctures in a student's educational pathway, and depending on jurisdiction, location and school sector, may include

entry to primary school, the shift from primary to middle or secondary schools, the transition from Year 10 into Years 11&12, or moving beyond school to post-school pathways. Each transition point presents a major risk of disengagement by students, with specific strategies needed for schools to support students at these key points so they can continue their educational pathways with minimal interruption.

Inclusion of vocational training, higher education and employment

Extending the reach of the plan beyond schools could be facilitated through a specific domain of activity to promote students to engage with vocational education and training (VET), higher education or employment. The activities within this domain would require further definition, but could include support activities within TAFEs and universities, along with career linkage services to help young people to find and maintain employment. There are expected to be benefits in drawing school and post-school plans together into a coordinated education strategy.

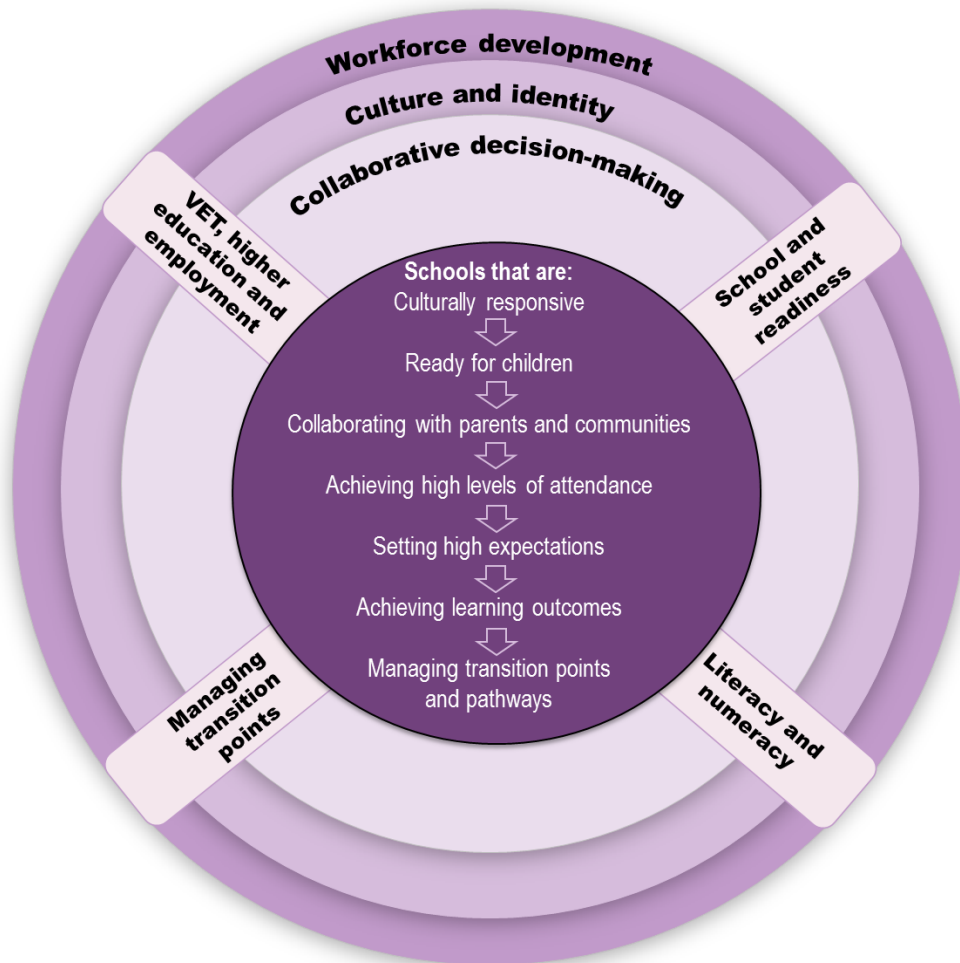
Potential future domain structure

The above considerations have been conceptualised in a revised domain structure, as shown in Figure 30. This places specific and cross-cutting areas of focus into sharper relief with:

- three cross-cutting domains that impact on school practice:
 - workforce development, incorporating leadership, teaching, administration and other support staff collaborative decision-making, which promotes the active involvement of parents and communities in matters concerning their children
 - culture and identity, to recognise, celebrate and share culture and history
- four domains for action, including:
 - school and student readiness to promote early childhood learning and to acknowledge the important role that school readiness plays in creating a welcoming environment
 - literacy and numeracy to continue the focus on activities to support student learning while at school
 - managing transition points, to recognise the need for specific action at critical educational junctures and the responsibility of schools to support students to remain engaged
 - VET, higher education and employment, to maintain a focus on post-school pathways
- a core ring which acknowledges schools' responsibility to be (in turn):
 - culturally responsive
 - ready for children
 - collaborating with parents and communities
 - achieving high levels of attendance
 - setting high expectations
 - achieving learning outcomes
 - managing transition points and pathways.

An additional benefit of extending the domain structure in this way is that it would create a further impetus for action across school sectors and schools, particularly by stretching schools that have already made good progress against the current Action Plan.

Figure 30 **POTENTIAL FUTURE DOMAIN STRUCTURE**



Source: ACIL Allen Consulting 2014

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