

Connected Communities Strategy– Interim Evaluation Report

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



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Connected Communities Strategy Interim Evaluation Report

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Abbreviations

AECG	Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
AEDC	Australian Early Development Census
AEO	Aboriginal Education Officer
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
ATSIEAP	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, 2010-2014
BOSTES	Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW
CCAF	Connected Communities Asset and Facilities Strategy
CESE	The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
FACS	NSW Department of Family and Community Services
FOEI	Family Occupation and Education Index
HSC	Higher School Certificate
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage
LALC	Local Aboriginal Lands Council
LCE	Leader: Community Engagement
LOTE	Languages Other Than English
LSIC	Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey
NSSC	National Schools Statistics Census
NSW	New South Wales
OCHRE	Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment
P&C	Parents and Citizens
PBL	Positive Behaviour for Learning
PCYC	Police Citizens Youth Club
PLP	Personalised Learning Plan
PPA	NSW Primary Principals' Association
RAM	Resource Allocation Model
RoSA	Record of School Achievement
SLCE	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
SLSO	Student Learning and Support Officer
SPC	NSW Secondary Principals' Council
SRG	School Reference Group
SSP	School for Specific Purpose
The Department	The Department of Education and Communities
TTFM	<i>Tell Them From Me</i>
VA	Value-added

Executive summary

Context

The *Connected Communities Strategy* (hereafter referred to as Connected Communities) is a key component of the NSW Government's plan for Aboriginal affairs, OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment). Connected Communities is intended to be a whole-of-Government commitment to working in partnership with 15 NSW school communities, to improve education and learning outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

The evaluation of Connected Communities will assess the implementation and effectiveness of Connected Communities in achieving its goals. The primary aim is to provide the feedback needed through the life of the initiative to support the continuous improvement of the initiative, and to build a strong evidence-base of the effectiveness of the initiative. The evaluation primarily aims to answer the following questions:

- How well has the model of Connected Communities been formed and implemented and what variation exists across schools?
- What were the outcomes and impact of components of Connected Communities?

This report presents findings related to the above questions at the mid-point of the strategy. The final evaluation report will be delivered in 2018.

Method

A mixture of qualitative and quantitative data was collected and analysed including:

- Interviews with schools and community stakeholders during site visits to each school
- Interviews with managers responsible for the design and implementation of the strategy
- Internal documentation, press releases and other reports on the progress of the strategy to date
- Student performance data pertaining to school attendance, Best Start Kindergarten assessment, NAPLAN, student retention to Year 12 and Higher School Certificate Awards
- Responses from the *Tell Them From Me* student survey
- Responses from a mixed-method telephone and face-to-face survey administered to parents and guardians of students at Connected Communities schools
- Responses from an online survey administered to teachers at Connected Communities schools

Evaluation findings – implementation to date

Table 1 provides an overview of the implementation to date of key features of Connected Communities relative to its original intentions.

Table 1:

Overview of implementation to date of key features of Connected Communities

Key feature	Intent	Implementation
Recruitment of Executive Principals.	All recruited by the start of 2013.	5 of 15 recruited by start of 2013 school year, with 10 not operational until at least Term 3, 2014.
Recruitment of Senior Leaders and Leaders: Community Engagement.	Recruited shortly after Executive Principals.	12 of 15 recruited before the start of 2014. One school yet to successfully recruit for the role.
Senior Leaders and Leaders Community Engagement (function).	Strategic community engagement including parents/guardians and school reference groups, and other functions to support local implementation of Connected Communities.	Using diverse skill sets to support implementation of a number of key features of Connected Communities including supporting School Reference Groups. Challenge for Executive Principals has been understanding the intended scope of Senior Leader and Leader role. Inconsistent focus on strategic community engagement, in particular around parent/guardian engagement in discussions about student learning.
School Reference Groups.	Work collaboratively with the Executive Principal in the development, planning and shared decision making of each school's Connected Communities strategy, as outlined in terms of reference.	School Reference Groups are not functioning to the full intent of the Terms of Reference. Executive Principals and School Reference Group members are unclear about the scope of their role in decision making at the school.
Teaching Aboriginal language and culture.	All schools to establish a language and culture program.	Progressing well to date in consultation with local community.
Cultural awareness training (i.e. Connecting to Country)	All school staff to attend.	Delivered at least once in all schools but delayed until 2014 or 2015 in 12 of 15 schools.
Schools as hubs for service delivery.	Formation of interagency linkages to connect students and their families with services and programs to address barriers to success at school. These services might be physically or virtually delivered from the schools, as a hub and spoke model at various locations in the community or as part of a multiple site model where a group of schools each deliver an agreed range of services on behalf of the cluster.	All schools are connecting students with a range of health and dental services, although this was occurring at a number of schools before Connected Communities. 10 schools involved in interagency groups, although the effectiveness of these groups in bringing about meaningful outcomes for children is unclear. Executive Principals are unclear what is required of them under this key feature. All schools have inadequate counselling capacity to address student trauma-related needs.
Early years focus	Fee relief and infrastructure funding in communities without a Department-operated preschool.	Early childhood infrastructure projects funded in six communities. Fee relief to be provided by new preschool funding model.
Further education and employment focus	Schools form partnerships with universities and TAFE.	All schools with secondary students, and one primary school, have partnerships with a university or TAFE.

Notwithstanding the delayed recruitment of Executive Principals at some schools, and the resulting delays in recruiting Senior Leaders: Community Engagement (SLCE) or Leaders: Community Engagement (LCE), there are many positive things happening in Connected Communities schools. All 15 schools are implementing, or working with their communities to implement, local Aboriginal language programs, have delivered cultural awareness training (i.e. Connecting to Country) to most staff, are attempting to incorporate Aboriginal content into mainstream units of work and have enhanced their early years focus where relevant. There are notable examples where schools have established enhanced early years transition programs and cultural resources and centres for students. A number of schools are also implementing a range of rewards-based attendance strategies for primary students. These may have contributed to an increase in attendance rates in some primary schools, although it should be noted that this increasing trend appears to pre-date the *Connected Communities Strategy*. Capital works funded under Connected Communities have also progressed as planned and are having a positive impact on the quality of the learning environments in a number of schools.

However, at this stage a number of schools are experiencing challenges and uncertainty around implementing the schools as service hubs model and establishing genuine school-community partnerships through School Reference Groups. While all schools are connecting students with health and dental services and trauma counselling, there is little evidence that schools are connecting parents and carers and other adult community members with support services to address home issues that are creating barriers to their children's learning. This appears to be due to a lack of clarity from some Executive Principals around the requirements of the model, the necessary skill set to coordinate the model within schools, a lack of cooperation by other government and non-government agencies in some communities, and the competing priorities of improving the academic and quality teaching frameworks at schools to date.

It is also clear that School Reference Groups are not delivering the intended impacts at this stage due to challenges related to role clarity. Despite the Connected Communities Directorate developing standard terms of reference for School Reference Groups, there is uncertainty, and in some cases tension, around the roles of School Reference Groups in decision making at the school. This could potentially be addressed through further governance training for School Reference Group members including Executive Principals.

The role of SLCEs and LCEs is still embedding and being clarified in schools, making it too early to make a definitive judgement about the benefits of the role. At this stage the major common benefit of the role is coordinating School Reference Groups. Depending on the skill sets SLCEs and LCEs brought into the role, they have also been involved in implementing language and culture programs in schools, interagency working groups and coordinating community events. However, at this stage this appears to be somewhat at the expense of developing and leading strategic opportunities to increase parent and carer engagement in discussions about student learning. Given the importance of parent and carers in student outcomes, this appears to be an area where the role of SLCEs and LCEs needs to be refocused.

Evaluation findings – outcomes to date

At this stage of implementation it is too early to conclude with any confidence that Connected Communities is having an impact on student academic outcomes, although it is important to note that the data presented in this report only covers up to the midpoint of a five year strategy. There is some evidence of the beginnings of upwards trends in the performance of students in the Best Start Kindergarten assessment across Connected Communities schools as a group. There has also been a continuation of a pre-existing upwards trend in primary school attendance rates. There has been no improvement in the rate of attendance by secondary students across the schools as group at this stage of the strategy.

NAPLAN participation and the number of students at or above the national minimum standard for reading and numeracy have not shown clear signs of improvement since the start of Connected Communities. Depending on the year group being assessed, participation and attainment have either increased or decreased since the start of Connected Communities. Gaps between the performance of Connected Communities schools and all other NSW Government schools have not closed.

However, Year 3-5 and Year 7-9 value-added scores pooled across 2013 and 2014 indicate that 14 of the 15 Connected Communities schools are adding an average level of value to student attainment, relative to all NSW Government schools with greater than 20 per cent Aboriginal students. One school has improved its Year 3-5 value-added scores from 2011-12, where it was adding below average value to student learning. However, the Year 7-9 value-added score at one school has declined since 2011-12 such that the school has gone from adding average to below average value to student learning.

Since the start of Connected Communities, there appears to be the start of a declining trend in the Year 10-12 apparent retention rate for Aboriginal students (-8.3 percentage points between 2012 and 2014). At some Connected Communities schools the rate is below 50 per cent. Across Connected Communities schools Aboriginal students are also at least four times less likely to receive a Higher School Certificate than non-Aboriginal students. According to student responses from the *Tell Them From Me* survey this is in the context of approximately 75 per cent of Years 7-10 Aboriginal students having the aspiration to finish Year 12 and participate in post school education and training. This suggests that the aspirations of many Aboriginal students at Connected Communities schools are not being realised.

Evidence from the survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools suggests that there has been an increased focus on students' Aboriginality since the start of Connected Communities. Importantly, this is reflected in survey responses from both student and parents and carers where the majority report feeling good about their culture at school, and in the case of parents and carers, also feel welcome at their child's school. However, survey responses suggest that although a large proportion of Aboriginal parents are engaging in community events held at the school, the majority of schools are still experiencing major challenges engaging Aboriginal parents and carers in discussions about their children's learning. The challenges appear to be more pronounced with the parents and carers of secondary students and according to teachers there has been no improvement since the start of Connected Communities.

Conclusions

At the mid-point of Connected Communities, the appointment of Executive Principals has undoubtedly had a positive impact on the learning environment at the majority of schools. Executive Principals have also demanded high expectations from teachers and set clear and consistent expectations for student behaviour. However, a long-term solution to address the educational disadvantage of many students across Connected Communities schools requires an effective whole-of-government response to the economic and social disadvantage experienced by the families of students. Many of these issues are beyond the abilities of schools to address alone. Therefore, for Connected Communities to be successful there needs to be clarification about the intent and framework for the schools as hubs model, and appropriate support from both senior and frontline levels of key government and non-government agencies.

It is probably only realistic that the focus of service connection within schools is around students, which is currently the case at most schools. However, as several schools are demonstrating, schools can have a leading role in working together with other agencies around community and social development. In communities where the current level of interagency coordination is ineffective and accountability for outcomes poor, Connected Communities schools can play a leading role in improving the effectiveness of interagency coordination.

The other challenge for addressing the educational disadvantage of students across Connected Communities schools is increasing the engagement of parents, and in particular Aboriginal parents, in their children's learning. Given the evidence about the importance of parental involvement in student outcomes it is imperative that Connected Communities schools devise innovative strategies to engage more parents in both discussions with teachers and their children about learning. There is a strong case that this should be a major focus of SLCEs and LCEs.

1. Background

1.1 The Connected Communities Strategy

The Connected Communities Strategy (hereafter referred to as Connected Communities) forms part of the NSW Government's plan for Aboriginal affairs, OCHRE (Opportunity, Choice, Healing, Responsibility, Empowerment). OCHRE is underpinned by a commitment to ongoing partnership with Aboriginal communities and aims to support strong Aboriginal communities in which Aboriginal people actively influence and fully participate in social, economic and cultural life. Connected Communities is a whole-of-government commitment to working in partnership with 15 NSW school communities, to improve education and learning outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

Connected Communities was developed in consultation with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), principals' groups and the NSW Teachers Federation. The 15 schools involved in Connected Communities are:

- Boggabilla Central school
- Bourke High School
- Bourke Public School
- Brewarrina Central School
- Coonamble High School
- Coonamble Public School
- Hillvue Public School
- Menindee Central School
- Moree East Public School
- Moree Secondary College
- Taree High School
- Taree Public School
- Toomelah Public School
- Walgett Community College
- Wilcannia Central School.¹

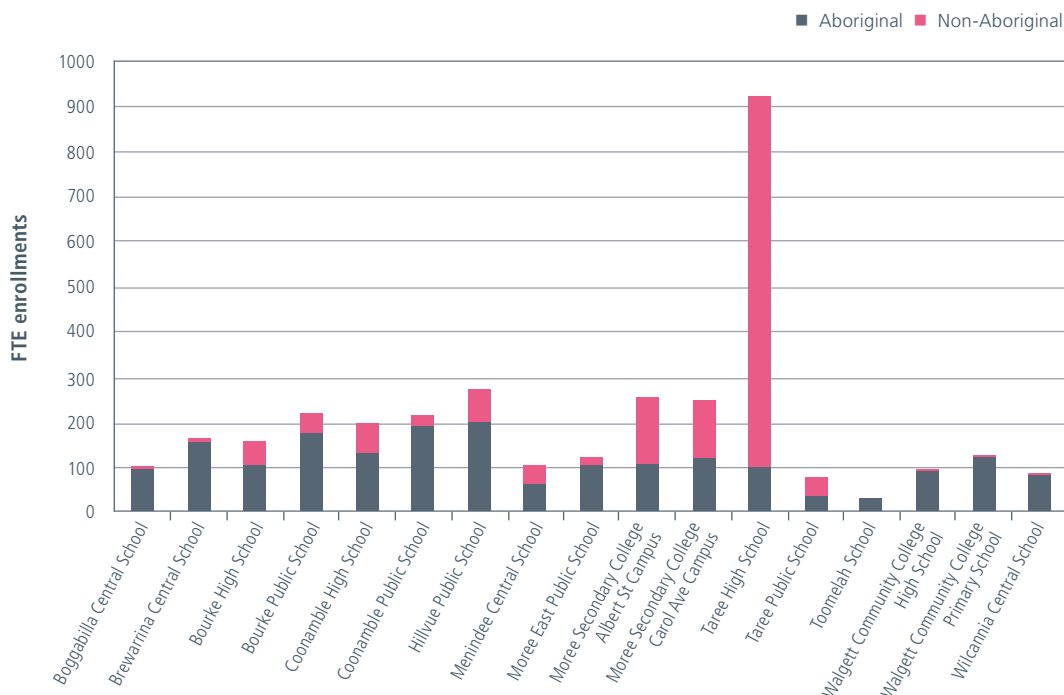
All of the schools are located in the most disadvantaged postcodes in NSW based on 22 indicators of disadvantage including: low family income; educational attainment; housing stress; unemployment; domestic and family violence; child maltreatment; adult and juvenile convictions; and student literacy and numeracy performance. Boggabilla, Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett and Wilcannia are five of the 10 most disadvantaged postcodes in NSW, with, Coonamble, Moree and Taree amongst the 40 most disadvantaged. All of these communities were amongst the most disadvantaged 10 per cent of NSW postcodes in 2007, indicating persistent disadvantage (Vinson and Rawsthorne 2015).

¹ Walgett Community College –Primary School and Walgett Community Secondary School are considered separate schools with separate school codes. Moree Secondary College Carol Avenue and Albert Street Campuses also have separate school codes operating as separate campuses or Years 7-9 and Years 10-12, respectively.

Figure 1:

**FTE enrolments at
Connected Communities
schools, 2014**

Source: Enrolments are sourced from the midyear census conducted annually in August by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Data were extracted in November 2014. For purposes of NSW reporting, only students in Year 11 and 12 may be part-time. Hence there is no difference between "full-time" and "full-time equivalent" (FTE) enrolments for grades K-10 or ungraded year groups in NSW government schools.



Note: Enrolments are sourced from the midyear census conducted annually in August by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Data were extracted in November 2014. For purposes of NSW reporting, only students in Year 11 and 12 may be part-time. Hence there is no difference between "full-time" and "full-time equivalent" (FTE) enrolments for grades K-10 or ungraded year groups in NSW government schools.

Key deliverables of Connected Communities

The targets and priorities for Connected Communities were set out to align with priorities under the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement, NSW 2021*, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* (ATSIEAP) and OCHRE. As outlined in the *Connected Communities Strategy*², the key deliverables for Connected Communities are:

- Aboriginal children are increasingly developmentally ready to benefit from schooling – in their physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication.
- Aboriginal families and community members are actively engaged in the school.
- Attendance rates for Aboriginal students are equal to the state average.
- Aboriginal students are increasingly achieving at or above national minimum standards and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are improving.
- Aboriginal students are staying at school until Year 12 (or equivalent training).
- Aboriginal students are transitioning from school into post school training and employment.
- Aboriginal parents and carers report that service delivery from the school site is flexible and responsive to their needs.

2 <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/news-at-det/announcements/yr2012/connected-communities-strategy.pdf>

- Aboriginal students and communities report that the school values their identity, culture, goals and aspirations.
- Staff report that professional learning opportunities build their capacity to personalise their teaching to meet the learning needs of all students in their class.
- Staff report that professional learning opportunities build their cultural understandings and connections with the community.

The key deliverables serve as the indicators of success that are being used for the evaluation.

Design features of Connected Communities

The principles underpinning implementation of Connected Communities are:

- Effective leadership
- Good governance
- Genuine community partnerships

The Strategy has a number of key features including:

- Cultural awareness (Connecting to Country) delivered locally for all staff
- Teaching Aboriginal language and culture
- Additional school executive position – (Senior) Leader: Community Engagement
- Early years focus through to further learning and employment
- Schools as a hub for service delivery
- Early intervention and prevention focus
- Partnership and co-leadership with the Aboriginal Community
- Partnership with a University and a TAFE Institute

At the conception of Connected Communities a number of these principles and features supported the NSW Government to meet its responsibilities and targets under the ATSIEAP. Some of these key principles and features are expanded upon below.

Leadership

Connected Communities is supported under the leadership of an **Executive Director** at the head of a dedicated directorate. The 15 schools have been grouped into a separate network under the support and guidance of dedicated **Director Public Schools NSW** to provide support to Executive Principals.

Executive Principals have been appointed by merit selection to lead each of the schools and report to their community and to the Executive Director on the progress and achievement of Connected Communities. Executive Principals are appointed on three-year contracts with the possibility of extension to five years subject to satisfactory performance in the role as determined by the Executive Director, Connected Communities.

There is a substantial body of evidence that school leadership has an impact on student learning (Hattie 2003; Leithwood et al. 2006; Day et al. 2009). It has been estimated that Principals account for approximately 25 per cent of a school's total impact on student achievement, in part through driving and maintaining the effectiveness of the teaching workforce. It was estimated that teacher effectiveness accounted for nearly 45 per cent of school impact, highlighting the inextricable connection between strong school leadership and student outcomes (New Leaders for New Schools 2009).

The importance of quality leadership at Connected Communities schools is further highlighted by a previous national study into factors that contribute to improved academic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools. Strong leadership that conveyed a clear vision based on high expectations for all students was a common theme across the schools. Common actions influenced by leadership observed across the schools were: strong instructional leadership; implementing whole-school approaches to evidence-based literacy and numeracy teaching; effective strategic planning; fostering genuine school-community partnerships; identifying and working on a manageable number

of priorities; distributing and empowering leadership structures; and making learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive (National Curriculum Services 2012).

To attract experienced and proven leaders, Executive Principals are classified at a higher level than Principals at other schools with comparable enrolment numbers. The rationale behind the elevated classification is that these schools have historically attracted inexperienced Principals. As schools were primarily selected for Connected Communities based on sustained low levels of academic achievement there was a view that proven school leadership was a necessity to improve student outcomes at these schools. Contrary to principals at most schools, Executive Principals at Connected Communities schools are also expected to lead interagency coordination and development of strong community partnerships.

Governance and community partnerships

Each Executive Principal has a School Reference Group (SRG) to provide advice and collaborative support on the implementation of Connected Communities. SRGs operate according to a Terms of Reference and are chaired by the Local AECG President. The core membership of SRGs is comprised of:

- Two parents
- Two Aboriginal Elders or Aboriginal Community members
- Parents and Citizens (P&C) representative (or local AECG nominated member where a P&C doesn't operate locally)
- Executive Principal

The Senior Leader or Leader: Community Engagement provides executive support.

The decision to mandate that local AECG Presidents are the Chairs of SRGs acknowledges the partnership agreement between The Department of Education and Communities (hereafter called the Department) and the AECG⁴. Under that agreement the AECG is recognised as the peak advisory and consultancy group to the Department regarding the education and training needs of Aboriginal students. At a local level, the AECG is intended to represent the entire community.

SRGs are intended to help drive authentic school-community partnerships in the local design and implementation of Connected Communities. SRGs are intended to support Executive Principals around strategic decision making to improve community engagement and meet the needs of students and the community. It is intended that SRG members act as a conduit between the school and the sections of the community they represent, providing a forum for sections of the community to both be informed about and contribute to school decisions. It is not intended that SRGs are involved in 'day-to-day' operational decision making at schools which remains the responsibility of Executive Principals. SRGs also establish a mechanism whereby Executive Principals are accountable to their communities for implementation of Connected Communities and the outcomes achieved by students.

Schools as a hub for service delivery

Establishing Connected Communities schools as hubs for service delivery recognises that a significant number of students experience multiple barriers to achieving positive educational outcomes. These barriers could include health issues, inadequate housing, personal or family alcohol and other substance abuse issues, domestic violence, abuse and neglect, economic instability and other personal and community trauma. Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015) recently highlighted the high level of disadvantage in Connected Communities locales. People living in the three per cent most disadvantaged postcodes in NSW, of which nine Connected Communities schools are located, are 3.6 times as likely to have spent time in prison, 3.3 times as likely to be experiencing long-term unemployment, nearly 3 times more likely to have suffered domestic violence and twice as likely to have a disability of significant mental health problem.

Research strongly indicates that education, employment, healthy living conditions and social support networks all strongly influence the ability of children to reach their full potential. It has been estimated that social factors explain 40 per cent of the variation in children's academic, life course and wellbeing

⁴ *'Together We Are, Together We Can, Together We Will'* is the 2010-2020 partnership agreement between the NSW AECG and the then NSW Department of Education and Training.

outcomes (West-Burnham et al. 2007). Therefore, in communities where social issues commonly impact outcomes for children, it is intuitive that any education reforms encourage schools to develop an outwards focus and work together with other agencies responsible for supporting children and their families.

While various configurations are possible for a school to be a hub for service delivery, the intention is that Executive Principals identify the service and support requirements of students and their families. Executive Principals would then work with local government and non-government agencies to identify and broker available services and address any service gaps. Where suitable community space is limited the school could establish a space within the schools where a range of services could be delivered at the school. This might include access to virtual and outreach services that are normally based at extensive distances from the school. Alternatively, a hub and spoke model could be implemented where services are delivered at, or hosted in partnership with, other services at several locations in the community. Another possibility is a multiple site model where a group of schools each deliver an agreed range of services on behalf of the cluster. This model could be applicable in communities where more than one school is involved in Connected Communities or where a Connected Communities school operates in close proximity to feeder schools that are not involved in the Strategy (Department for Education and Child Development 2013).

Similar models exist in other jurisdictions, most notable the 'Full Service Extended Schools' in the United Kingdom and the 'Extended Service School' model in the United States. Similar models have also been implemented in Australia, including the Victorian 'Extended Service Schools' model for low SES locations implemented under the Smarter Schools National Partnership.

There is some research which suggests that these models have benefits for improving community access to services, the relationship of schools with their community and educational outcomes for students. However, the evidence is limited, being primarily based on anecdotal and observational data collected as part of small-scale evaluations of short-term local initiatives (The Scanlon Foundation 2012; Department of Education n.d.). For example, an evaluation of Extended Service Schools in Victoria reported improved literacy and numeracy and curriculum progression but did not compare outcomes to a comparator group (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2013). In the absence of a well-matched comparison group, it is impossible to attribute any observed improvements in literacy and numeracy to the program.

Senior Leader or Leader: Community Engagement

The Senior Leader or Leader Community Engagement (SLCE or LCE) is a full-time position on the School Executive to support the Executive Principal and school staff to implement Connected Communities. The SLCE role is intended to provide a link between the school and the community, and provide strategic advice to the Executive Principal and school staff regarding community engagement and matters in the community that could impact students and the school. A key function of the SLCE is to provide executive support to the SRG to assist it to operate effectively.

Given the strategic mandate of the role, it is intended that the position is filled by an Aboriginal person with strong links across the community with the ability to operate across the entire community.

SLCEs are supported by a Team Leader, Community Engagement within the Connected Communities Directorate.

Teaching Aboriginal language and culture

Under OCHRE the NSW Government has committed to revitalising Aboriginal languages in NSW. This will help NSW put into practice the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that Indigenous people have "the right to revitalise, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literature" (United Nations 2008). During the consultations by the Ministerial Taskforce in 2012, Aboriginal communities expressed the desire to give Aboriginal people the opportunity to learn their language as a mechanism to discover and maintain their personal and cultural identity. The Department is leading the establishment of the five Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests across NSW. Connected Communities reinforces the Department's role in revitalising Aboriginal languages by committing to teach children and young people Aboriginal language and culture at school.

Strengthening connection to language and culture is intrinsically linked to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people. By engaging with language and culture, Connected Communities aims to improve school engagement and improve schooling outcomes for children and young people. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) found associations between language use, physical and mental health, employment, alcohol and other substance abuse, contact with police, school attendance and post-school qualifications (Commonwealth of Australia 2012). Conceptual mapping of qualitative data from the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) also found a directional link between connection to language and culture, strong identity and education (Centre for Labour Market Research 2012). The LSIC authors concluded that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents recognise the importance of education and that a strong identity through culture is important for educational success.

Incorporating Aboriginal language and culture in schools is also postulated as a mechanism to change student perceptions of schooling. Teaching non-Aboriginal students about local Aboriginal language, culture and history might also have the benefit of helping mutual respect within the school community (Commonwealth of Australia 2012).

International research has also suggested that bilingualism has cognitive and developmental benefits (Kovacs and Meller 2012). There has been recognition of the value of bilingualism in preserving and valuing traditions, enriching individuals, and in creating modern flexible and tolerant societies (UNESCO 2003).

Cultural awareness for staff

All teachers at Connected Communities schools are required to participate in the Connecting to Country program. This program builds cultural awareness and aims to give teachers the capacity and confidence to engage Aboriginal students and community. Connecting to Country is a three day cultural immersion program delivered by the local AECG, with the support of Elders, and aims to educate school staff about local Aboriginal culture and history. The program is locally adapted under a common framework to ensure the program is comprehensive but locally relevant.

Early years focus through to further learning and employment

The *Connected Communities Strategy* aims to support Aboriginal children and young people from birth through to their transition from school.

Early years focus

Connected Communities aims to support children to enter Kindergarten as confident learners with age appropriate socialisation and literacy and numeracy skills. The Review of NSW Government Funding for Early Childhood (the Brennan Review) highlighted the issue of preschool affordability and access for disadvantaged families, including Aboriginal families and families living in rural and remote locations. The review recommended the NSW Government target preschool subsidies to meet the full (or near to full) cost of preschool in the year before school for all children and two years before school for children from disadvantaged families (Brennan 2012).

Connected Communities initially aimed to address the issue of preschool access through two related projects: The Connected Communities Early Childhood Education Fee Relief Project and the Connected Communities Early Childhood Education Infrastructure Project. Both were to be funded under the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Education under which NSW committed to increasing access to preschool in at least the year before school for all children.

The Connected Communities Early Childhood Education Fee Relief Project aimed to provide fee relief payments to target increased preschool access and participation by disadvantaged families at six Connected Communities sites that do not already have access to a Department-operated preschool. Those sites are Bourke, Brewarrina, Hillvue, Menindee, Moree and Toomelah. These communities are currently serviced by Department-funded (or community) preschools and in some cases Commonwealth-funded long day care centres.

2 Results are based on the 5 well controlled studies included in the meta-analysis that included school dropout as an outcome measure. This effect size is based on the adjusted dropout rates that have all been adjusted for differences in pre-mobility achievement, family background and many other factors that vary across studies.

The Connected Communities Early Childhood Education Infrastructure Project was to provide \$3 million for the upgrade of existing community-based preschool facilities and/or outreach assistance, such as transport, that will directly support children's engagement in early childhood education. The funding was to be equally spread across the six sites without access to a DEC-operated preschool.

Further education and employment

Connected Communities reinforces that it is important for schools to work with their communities to create opportunities for further education and employment for students, thereby contributing to improved economic stability and 'breaking the cycle of disadvantage'. To support this aspect of Connected Communities, schools are encouraged to form partnerships with a university or TAFE Institute to provide a smooth transition from school into further education or training opportunities.

Capital expenditure

The Department allocated \$10 million in capital funding for refurbishments that improve Connected Communities schools under Phase 1 of the Connected Communities Asset and Facilities Strategy (CCAF).

Under Phase 2 of the CCAF, \$25 million was allocated for school rebuilds or substantial improvements to Moree East Public School (\$15 million), Walgett Community College (High School) (\$7 million) and Brewarrina Central School (\$3 million).

1.2 Evaluation of Connected Communities

The evaluation of Connected Communities will assess the implementation and effectiveness of Connected Communities in achieving its goals. The primary aim is to provide the feedback needed through the life of the initiative to support continuous improvement and to robustly assess whether the Strategy is meeting its objectives.

The approach to the proposed evaluation is anticipated to occur in three stages. These are highlighted below.

The evaluation aims to answer the following questions:

- How well has the model of the *Connected Communities Strategy* been formed and implemented and what variation exists across schools?
- What were the outcomes and impact of components of the *Connected Communities Strategy*?
- Pending the achievement of positive outcomes, does the *Connected Communities Strategy* deliver value for money?

An evaluation project reference group has been convened to provide guidance and advice to the evaluation.

The final evaluation report will be delivered in 2018 in line with the current funding commitment for Executive Principals and to provide enough time for progress against the key deliverables to be observed.

1.3 This report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2:** provides an overview of the methods used to collect data for this report.
- **Chapter 3:** presents findings on how the key features of Connected Communities have been implemented across the schools as a group and some of the challenges being faced by schools around implementation. This section also presents examples of good practice to date for some of the key features.
- **Chapter 4:** presents progress to date against the key deliverables, or intended outcomes, of Connected Communities to date.
- **Chapter 5:** discusses the evaluation findings to date and outlines next steps for the evaluation.
- **Chapter 6:** presents a list of references used in this report.
- **Appendix 1:** presents the list of stakeholders consulted for this report.
- **Appendix 2:** presents the survey of parents and/or guardians of students at Connected Communities schools.
- **Appendix 3:** presents the survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools.

2. Overview of evaluation methods

Stakeholder consultations

Face-to-face interviews or small group discussions were conducted with the Connected Communities management group and stakeholders in each of the 15 Connected Communities schools and communities. Stakeholders consulted at school level included: Executive Principals; SLCEs or LCEs; members of the School Executive; teachers; Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs); Student Learning and Support Officers (SLSOs); school administration staff; SRG members; P&C representatives and other parents; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community leaders; and representatives from service providers/agencies that are collaborating with Connected Communities schools, or which ought to be doing so. A list of stakeholders that were consulted is presented in Appendix 1.

Interviews were semi-structured, being guided by discussion guides developed for various stakeholder groups. Discussion guides were consistently applied across all site visits.

Interviews and group discussions were recorded with the agreement of interview participants, otherwise notes were taken during interviews. Audio recordings were transcribed and together with interviewer notes, thematically analysed across the principles and features, and key deliverables of Connected Communities.

Document analysis

Documents and other reports were analysed to help monitor implementation of Connected Communities. The types of documents analysed included: Strategy documents; consultation and discussion papers; periodic updates from schools for Secretary meetings with the Minister; other Cabinet Minutes and Briefings; the 2014 annual Connected Communities update report; the final report on Connected Communities delivered by the Department Audit Directorate in 2014; other relevant documents related to key features of Connected Communities; school newsletters; media releases; and social media content.

Surveys

Data has been obtained from surveys of students, parents and guardians, and teachers at Connected Communities schools.

Student survey

The *Tell Them From Me* (TTFM) student survey was administered online at all Connected Communities schools in Term 2 in 2014 and, in Term 1 in 2015 (for more information about the TTFM survey refer to CESE 2014a). The questions are multiple-choice with individual survey items combined to form valid and reliable measures.

The survey has been specifically designed for students in Years 7 to 12. Survey questions relate to the following measures:

Participation in Sports	Homework Behaviour	Expectations for Success	Positive Learning Climate
Participation in Clubs	Behaviour at School	Bully-Victim	Truancy
Sense of Belonging	Interest and Motivation	Effective Learning Time	Aspirations: finish Year 12, University, TAFE
Positive Relationships	Effort	Teaching Relevance	Positive Teacher-Student Relations
Values school outcomes	Skills-challenge	Teaching Rigour	Advocacy outside school
Advocacy at school			

Custom items were included in the survey to measure student perceptions on the value schools place on their culture and identity. The items were:

- I feel good about my culture when I am at school (strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree or agree, agree, strongly agree)
- My school has a good understanding of my culture (strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree or agree, agree, strongly agree).

These items were derived from Craven et al (2013).

In 2014 a total of 1,323 secondary students completed the survey across Connected Communities schools as a group. In 2015 the number was 1,265.

Parents and guardians survey

A telephone survey of parents / guardians was conducted across all 15 Connected Communities schools in Term 4 of 2014. The survey instrument is presented in Appendix 2 and captures information across the following domains:

- Families are actively engaged in schools
- Schools are collaborating with the community to strengthen support for students, parents and carers
- Communities report that schools value their identity and culture
- Parents feel informed by schools.

The survey items are derived from a framework of six types of family involvement with schools developed by Epstein (1995).

Based on student enrolment records, the sampling frame was made up of 1,101 unique families of Aboriginal students and 723 unique families of non-Aboriginal students across Connected Communities schools as a group. The final sample included all families of Aboriginal students across all schools, and all families of non-Aboriginal students across all schools with the exception of Taree High School and Moree Secondary College. Due to the high number of non-Aboriginal students at Taree High School and Moree Secondary College, families of non-Aboriginal students were randomly sampled (with replacement if contact details were not available for a given family). This resulted in 552 responses from families of non-Aboriginal students in the final sample.

Informative letters co-branded with school logos were distributed to all parents in advance of the survey.

Up to seven call attempts and five call-backs were made per family, and only one member per family was surveyed.

The final response rate for the telephone survey across Connected Communities schools as a group was 33 per cent (363 responses) for families of Aboriginal students and 60.0 per cent (331 responses) for the families of non-Aboriginal students. The combined response rate was 42.0 per cent, ranging between 12.5 per cent and 63.2 per cent across the 15 schools.

A large proportion of families could not be reached as the phone numbers recorded in the enrolment records system were disconnected or incorrect. This problem was raised during stakeholder consultations as being a major issue for school administration staff, because schools are unable to contact many parents in the case of an emergency. Where families could be reached, the 'cooperation rate' was 78 per cent across Connected Communities schools as a group. This high cooperation rate gives us reason to be very confident in the representativeness of responses, at least among families who have contact details.

A second, face-to-face, phase of the parent and guardian survey was conducted in school communities in Term 1 of 2015 where the response rate from the telephone survey was low. These school communities were:

- Boggabilla Central School
- Brewarrina Central School
- Bourke High School
- Walgett Community College
- Wilcannia Central School.

The face-to-face surveys were conducted by Aboriginal research staff with connections in the relevant communities. The researchers spent up to three days in each community. They surveyed a representative of an additional 134 families across the five communities with the criteria that the family had one or more children at a Connected Communities school and had not completed the survey previously by telephone. The questions asked in the face-to-face surveys were identical to those in telephone surveys.

Therefore, the combined response rate was 45.0 per cent for the families of Aboriginal students (497 responses) and 70.1 per cent for the families of non-Aboriginal students. The combined response rate was 50.1 per cent. The response rate by school community is outlined below.

Table 2:

Response rate for survey of parents and guardians

School	No. of families responding to the survey		Response rate (responders / population)	
	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal
Boggabilla Central School	44	–	100%	–
Bourke High School	22	22	71%	44%
Bourke Public School	38	20	74%	39%
Brewarrina Central School	32	–	17%	–
Coonamble High School	34	24	52%	49%
Coonamble Public School	45	9	69%	42%
Hillvue Public School	52	26	57%	49%
Menindee Central School	17	13	50%	55%
Moree East Public School	32	3	30%	43%
Moree Secondary College	52	66	62%	33%
Taree High School	46	131	64%	62%
Taree Public School	12	12	43%	57%
Toomelah Public School	8	–	32%	–
Walgett Community College	39	–	80%	–
Wilcannia Central School	24	–	75%	–
Total	497	333	60%	45%

Note: Any cells based on fewer than five survey respondents have been suppressed to ensure anonymity.

Teacher survey

All teachers at Connected Communities schools were asked to participate in a survey using the Survey Monkey online survey tool. The survey instrument is presented at Appendix 3. Measures of parent/carer involvement are based on the work of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2002) as part of the Teachers Involving Parents project.

The survey collected data from teachers regarding: access to professional learning; the impact of cultural immersion activities; the support available to implement the principles and features of Connected Communities; the ability and support to personalise student learning; parent engagement; student developmental readiness for learning; student engagement; teacher expectations for student learning; and teacher understanding of Connected Communities. Teachers who identified as being at schools before 2013 were also asked about changes at the school since the start of Connected Communities.

The final sample included 213 teachers across Connected Communities schools as a group and a response rate of 48.6 per cent was achieved. The number of responses by school is shown below.

Table 3:

Response rate for
survey of teachers

School	No. of responses	Response rate
Boggabilla Central School	14	77.8%
Bourke High School	13	56.5%
Bourke Public School	23	95.8%
Brewarrina Central School	10	40.0%
Coonamble High School	14	41.2%
Coonamble Public School	13	46.4%
Hillvue Public School	11	33.3%
Menindee Central School	9	50.0%
Moree East Public School	–	–
Moree Secondary College Albert St Campus	24	77.4%
Moree Secondary College Carol Ave Campus	15	41.7%
Taree High School	26	36.1%
Taree Public School	6	46.2%
Toomelah Public School	–	–
Walgett Community College - High School	10	47.6%
Walgett Community College - Primary School	10	55.6%
Wilcannia Central School	10	52.6%
Total	213	48.6%

Note: Any cells based on fewer than five survey respondents have been suppressed to ensure anonymity.

Student performance data

The following administrative data on student performance was sourced for this report:

Data	Source	Notes
Preschool enrolments	Enrolments in Department-operated pre-schools sourced from Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). Enrolments in Department-funded preschools sourced from the Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate.	Enrolments are based on a midyear census conducted annually. Data is only available for Department-operated and Department-funded pre-schools and not Commonwealth-funded long day care centres.
School enrolments	National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC) data cube, populated with NSSC data, held by Statistics Unit, CESE.	Enrolments are based on a midyear census undertaken in August by the Statistics Unit, CESE. For purposes of NSW reporting, only students in Year 11 and 12 may be part-time. Hence there is no difference between "full-time" and "full-time equivalent" (FTE) enrolments for grades K-10 or ungraded year groups in NSW government schools.
School attendance	Return of absences census conducted in the final week of term two by the Statistics Unit, CESE.	Kindergarten, Year 11 and Year 12 students have been excluded in attendance rates, consistent with national reporting standards. Distance education and Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) do not participate in the absences collection.
Best Start Kindergarten assessment	Public Schools NSW.	Data harvested from entries by Kindergarten teachers into the PLAN database.
National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy data (NAPLAN)	Statistics Unit, CESE NAPLAN data cube.	More information on the NAPLAN assessment is available: http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/naplan.html .
Higher School Certificate (HSC) awards	BOSTES.	Sourced in February each year.
Year 12 Record of School Achievement awards	BOSTES.	Sourced in February each year.
Year 10-12 full-time equivalent apparent retention rates	Statistics Unit, CESE.	Retention rates are calculated from enrolment data and are "apparent" as they do not track individual students through their final years of secondary schooling. What they measure is the ratio of the total FTE of students in a designated year (i.e. Year 12 in 2014) divided by the total FTE of students in a previous year (i.e. Year 10 in 2012).

Value added modelling

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) has developed a suite of value added (VA) measures that are intended to be fair and robust indicators of the contribution schools make to their students' growth in literacy and numeracy (CESE 2014b). VA measures take into account those contextual factors (both school and student-related) that impact on students' learning and that are conceived to be largely beyond the control of schools.

Key features of the CESE's VA models include:

- Explicitly accounting for the available school and student contextual factors that have been shown to have a persistent and significant impact on students' learning outcomes
- Utilising a multilevel modelling approach that takes account of the nesting of students within schools and hence provides more reliable and accurate school effect estimates
- Pooling of data across two measurement periods to reduce random errors, so that estimates are more likely to reflect any persistent differences in school performance
- Reducing the volatility of VA estimates, for small schools especially, by applying a statistical technique that adjusts the estimates in proportion to their reliability.

For this report Years 3-5 and Years 7-9 VA measures are calculated with the sample of schools restricted to only those NSW Government schools with greater than 20 per cent Aboriginal enrolments.

3. Evaluation findings: implementation

This section of the report addresses the following evaluation question: 'To what extent have each of the key features, or components, of Connected Communities been implemented in the 15 schools to date?'

This information will help understand whether any impacts relate to how Connected Communities was implemented or how Connected Communities was designed.

This section also presents some of the challenges faced by schools implementing some of the key features and presents examples of good practice.

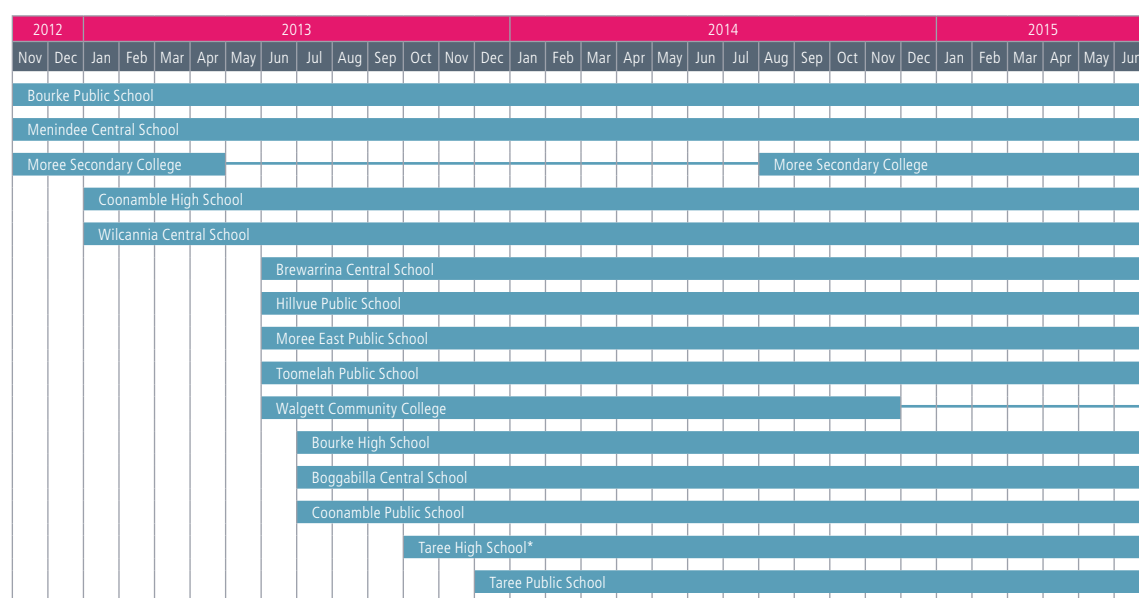
3.1 Executive Principals

Recruitment

Immediately following the launch of Connected Communities in 2012 the focus was establishing the Connected Communities Directorate and then recruiting Executive Principals. It was intended that Executive Principals would be recruited and operational by the start of the 2013 school year. Figure 2 below shows when Executive Principals were recruited to Connected Communities schools and their current period of service.

Figure 2:

Executive Principal entry on duty and period of service at Connected Communities schools



*The Executive Principal at Taree HS was previously the Deputy Principal prior to the launch of Connected Communities and acted as Executive Principal in the interim period.

The recruitment of Executive Principals at 10 of the 15 schools was delayed such that they were not operational until at least Term 2 of 2013, although the Executive Principal at Taree High School was acting in the role having previously been a Deputy Principal at that school. This meant that at nine of 15 schools, the full implementation of Connected Communities was delayed until at least Term 3 of 2013. Taree Public School was the last school to have an Executive Principal recruited, in Term 1 of 2014.

The first Executive Principal at Moree Secondary College was relieved of duties in March 2013, with two relieving Executive Principals in place until the current Executive Principal was in place in Term 3 of 2014. The Executive Principal at Walgett Community College resigned at the end of 2014 with a relieving Executive Principal currently in place.

Analysis of periodic school update reports and stakeholder consultation during site visits reveals that the implementation of key features of Connected Communities has in part been dependent on the period over which a consistent Executive Principal has been in place. For example, at Bourke Public School, Menindee Central School and Taree High School, local strategies are well advanced reflecting the continuity of leadership at those schools. The Executive Principals at those schools held Principal or Deputy Principal positions before Connected Communities was launched. Coonamble High School was also one of the first schools to have an Executive Principal appointed and the local strategy is well advanced there. Contrasting this is Moree Secondary College which has had two Executive Principals separated by two relieving Principals over an 18 month period. It was clear from interviews during site visits that implementation of Connected Communities has been much more challenging at Moree Secondary College primarily due to frequent changes in school leadership and the resulting lack of a consistent approach to implementation.

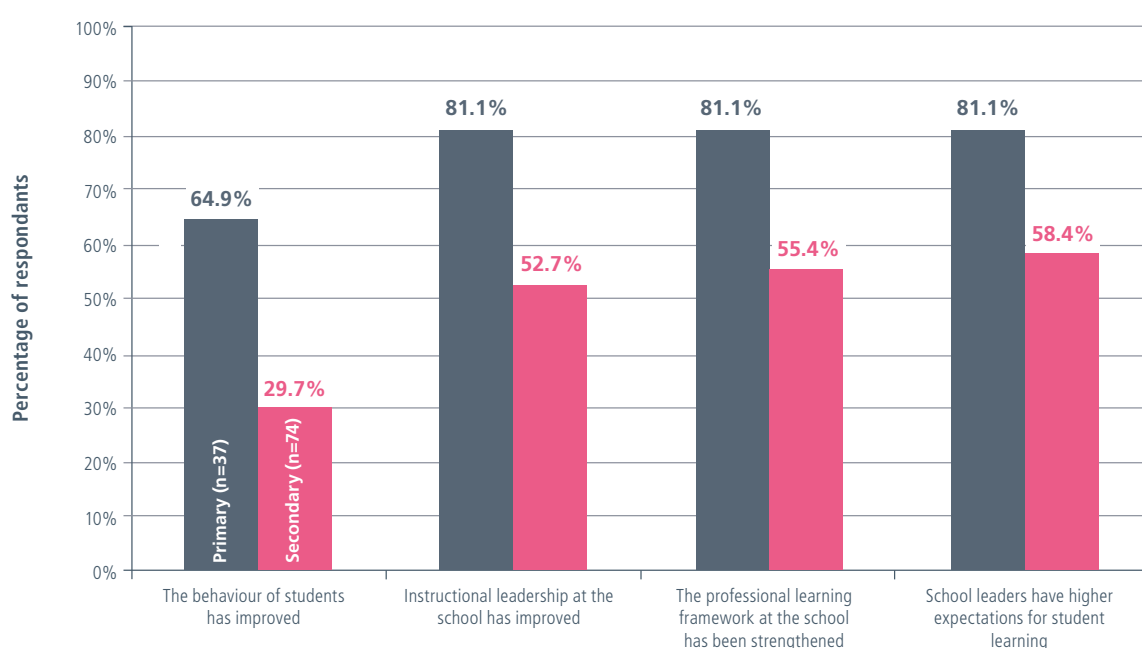
Impacts

Based on site visits it appears that the major impact of newly appointed Executive Principals to date has been to strengthen business as usual by addressing the learning and behavioural frameworks at schools, and improving the quality of the learning environment with capital works funding. This has included Executive Principals making changes to teaching and support staff to align with their approaches to implementing Connected Communities and expectations for student achievement. In primary schools improvements in the academic framework have been supported by Instructional Leaders funded under *Early Action for Success*. This has resulted in more widespread use of the literacy and numeracy continua beyond the Best Start kindergarten assessment. These findings are confirmed by findings from the survey of long-standing teachers⁵ in Connected Communities schools (Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Teacher reported changes to student behaviour and engagement, and instructional frameworks since the start of Connected Communities

Source: Survey of teachers in Connected Communities schools, 2015



⁵ Teachers that have been at their current school since before 2013.

Sixty five per cent of long-standing primary teachers indicated that the behaviour of students has improved at their school since the start of Connected Communities. Long-standing teachers at seven schools or campuses reported an improvement, with five of these being primary schools. This confirms the findings from site visits where teachers at primary schools commonly reported that the biggest change at the school under the new Executive Principal is improved student behaviour and consistent application of behavioural policies. Only 30 per cent of secondary teacher respondents reported that student behaviour has improved. Together the findings suggest that behavioural improvement strategies are either easier to implement or have more impact in primary schools compared to secondary schools, although during site visits secondary teachers at Brewarrina Central school did report that the behaviour of their students has improved. This could be the result of improved student engagement through the introduction of project-based learning by the Executive Principal.

The survey also revealed that 81 per cent of long-standing primary teachers reported that instructional leadership and the professional learning framework have improved at their school since the start of Connected Communities. Just over 50 per cent of long-standing secondary teacher respondents reported these improvements at their school. More than 50 percent of respondents at 12 schools or campuses reported these improvements, including six out of seven primary schools. Four in five long-standing primary teachers and 58 per cent of long-standing secondary teachers indicated that school leaders' expectations for student learning at their school have increased since the start of Connected Communities.

Two other notable changes to business as usual are at Moree East Public School and Coonamble High School:

- The Executive Principal at Moree East Public School is trialling a restructured school day from Term 2 in 2015, such that school operating hours are from 8:00 AM to 1:15 PM. The proposal to trial the new operating hours is based on international comparisons from the Programme for International Student Assessment results and observations of student engagement throughout the day. While there has been considerable opposition from the community about the change and the benefits are yet to be demonstrated, it does demonstrate an innovative approach to improve student engagement by an incoming Executive Principal.
- The Executive Principal at Coonamble High School has gone further by restructuring the school executive to include heads of teaching and learning, senior school, middle school, student wellbeing, learning innovation, learning and support, staff wellbeing, professional learning and workplace health and safety. Each head has whole school leadership responsibility for relevant functions and key learning areas, and is supported by a team of other school staff. Two clear benefits of this restructure to date are a strengthened and data driven student wellbeing program and expansion of the school's commitment to providing post school pathways that suit all students.

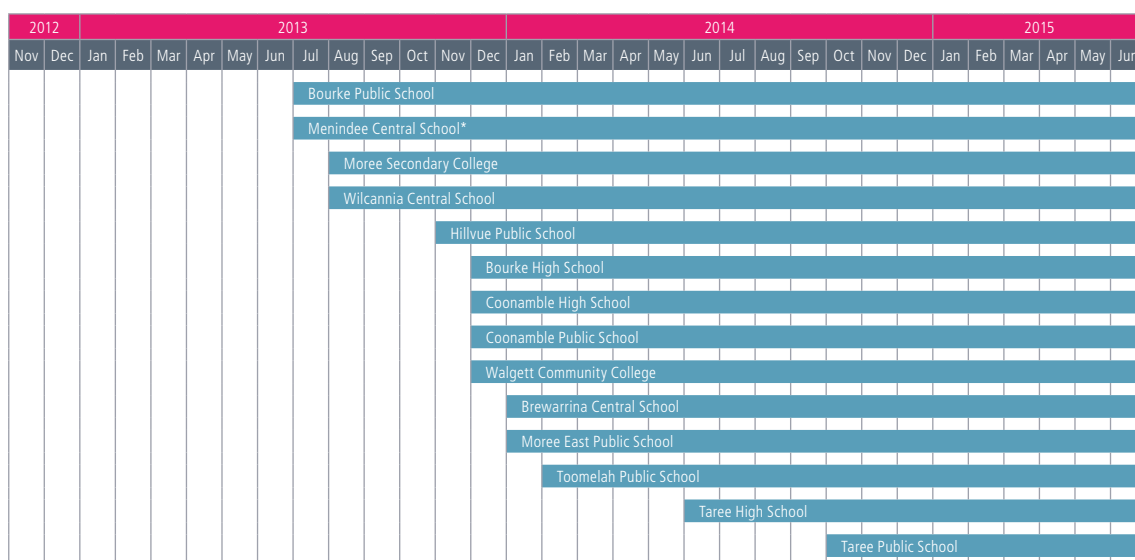
3.2 Senior Leaders and Leaders: Community Engagement

Recruitment

The appointment of SLCEs and LCEs lagged behind the appointment of Executive Principals by approximately 6-12 months. Boggabilla Central School has yet to appoint a SLCE and is currently advertising the position for the third time. Figure 4 shows the entry on duty date and duration of service to date for the 14 SLCEs or LCEs appointed to date. With the exceptions of Taree High School, Taree Public School (and Boggabilla Central School) all SLCEs and LCEs were in place for the start of the 2014 school year. This means that for 12 of the 15 schools, the major community engagement function of Connected Communities SLCEs was operational in either the second half of 2013 or the start of 2014.

Figure 4:

Senior Leaders and Leaders: Community Engagement entry on duty and period of service at Connected Communities schools



*The SLCE at Menindee Central School had previously been employed in a similar position at the school since 2006.

Ideally SLCEs and LCEs would have started shortly after their Executive Principals so that strategic community engagement and the formation of SRGs could have begun almost immediately. However, as one of the premises of the role is that the successful applicant has links to the community and a key accountability is working with the AECG, it was important that selection panels contained community representatives including the AECG and Elders. Some of these selection panel members had to receive merit selection training prior to sitting on the panel. Furthermore, at some schools more than one round of recruitment has been necessary to find a candidate meeting the role capabilities.

Activities being undertaken by SLCEs and LCEs

Site visits revealed that SLCEs and LCEs have a broad range of skills and prior experience. This has resulted in them undertaking a diverse range of activities to support Executive Principals to implement Connected Communities. Table 4 outlines the range of activities being undertaken by SLCEs and LCEs across the 14 schools where the position has been filled.

Table 4:

Activities and support functions being undertaken by SLCEs and LCEs across Connected Communities schools

Source: Interviews with Executive Principals and SLCEs and LCEs

Activity or support function	Number of SLCEs or LCEs delivering
Supporting School Reference Groups	14
Assisting with organising Connecting to Country	14
Attending community meetings (e.g. Council of Elders or equivalent, Local Aboriginal Lands Council meetings)*	14
Organising and promoting community attendance and participation in school events	14
Promoting school programs and values in the community	14
Attending interagency meetings (e.g. Community Working Party, targeted issue groups)	8
Organising programs in schools delivered by external agencies	7
Providing community intelligence to the Executive Principal	6
Organising Elders and community members to participate in student learning	5
Working with community leaders to establish language and culture programs in school	5
Directly supporting the delivery of language and culture in schools	5
Supporting interagency coordination	4
Conducting home visits	4
Student transport	3
Organising culture-based personal development programs for students	2
Engaging with early childhood education providers	2
Reconnecting adults with language and culture	1

Note: This does not include local AECG meetings which already have strong representation from Connected Communities schools.

As expected, and in line with the role description, all SLCEs and LCEs are engaging in a core group of activities related to supporting SRGs, assisting with Connecting to Country and strategic initiatives to engage various sections of the community. Outside of these core activities, SLCEs and LCEs are engaging in a diverse range of activities, in part as directed by their Executive Principals and often dependent on their skill set. Table 3 attempts to quantify these activities but it was commented by two Executive Principals that the value of their SLCE or LCE cannot be quantified into a tangible set of activities. Their SLCE or LCE provides them invaluable insight about negotiating community politics and effective mechanisms of community engagement. All Executive Principals see the SLCE or LCE role as critical for them to implement Connected Communities. For example, the Executive Principal at Boggabilla Central School indicated that without a LCE it has been difficult to implement some of the key features of Connected Communities to date.

There are numerous examples of important activities being delivered by SLCEs and LCEs across Connected Communities schools. Some notable examples that align with the intended strategic nature of the role are highlighted below.

Interagency engagement and coordination

The SLCE at Hillvue Public school has used his relationship with the Tamworth Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) to engage the Opportunity Hub⁶ team in Tamworth to deliver mentoring cultural activities for boys at Hillvue Public School. The SLCE at Hillvue also regularly attends interagency meetings to help operationalise the Coledale Action Plan in Tamworth⁷. Another example is at Toomelah where the LCE is part of the Toomelah Community Working Party which brings together community leaders and agency representatives to identify and tackle a set of community priorities.

The LCE at Taree Public School is using her previous links to agencies in Taree to represent the school on a number of interagency groups in town. This has directly led to Taree Public School forming memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with Communities for Children and the Biripi Aboriginal Medical Corporation, enabling parenting classes, protective behaviour classes for children and a weekly wound clinic to be delivered at the school. The SLCE at Coonamble High School also used her previous links to coordinate with other agencies in town to deliver the Coonamble Wellbeing Expo at the school.

The SLCE at Taree High School is taking a different approach to interagency coordination, by developing an online calendar system and android application to help agencies in Taree coordinate their events and activities.

Language and culture

Supporting the delivery of language and culture classes in schools has been another important role for some SLCEs and LCEs. The SLCE at Wilcannia Central School has worked with the Instructional Leader and existing Paakantji language tutor to develop units of work that help support teachers incorporate language and cultural content into mainstream classes. The LCE at Toomelah Public School also helps deliver “lingo” classes across the school, and the SLCE at Moree East Public School is collaborating with the AECG to develop a K-6 scope and sequence for teaching Gamilaraay and local Aboriginal culture. The SLCE at Moree East Public School has also established a men’s group, the Gaalimaay Brothers, where the fathers of students are taken to sites of cultural significance to engage them with their culture and help them understand how to be a strong role model for their children. Supported by the SLCE, a female Aboriginal Language and Culture Officer at the school has also established a similar group for women in the community.

Although not teaching language, the SLCE, in conjunction with an Aboriginal Education Officer, at Taree High School is working with the Gathang Language Group to come to an agreement with community leaders about teaching language in both Taree High School and Taree Public School.

6 Opportunity Hubs are part of the OCHRE plan, which aim to give schools students pathways to employment by getting local employers involved in career planning at school.

7 The Coledale Action Plan is an interagency regional action plan led by the Department of Premier and Cabinet to revitalise and address social disadvantage in the Coledale area of Tamworth. Coledale is a major feeder area for Hillvue Public School.

Community engagement

All SLCEs and LCEs are leading strategies to better engage their Aboriginal communities in the school. In some cases this has required them to navigate complex community politics in the process. For example, the SLCE at Brewarrina Central School has engaged Elders from the five major family groups in Brewarrina to ensure that an Elder from each group is represented on the SRG. The SLCE at Menindee Central School also successfully bridges the two main community groups in Menindee to provide strategic advice to the Executive Principal on potential impacts of decisions made at the school and appropriate processes to ensure community support. To ensure the whole community can contribute to decision making at the school, the SLCE led the expression of interest and community election process for nominating Elders for the SRG.

Another notable example of community engagement is the SLCE at Walgett Community College, who harnessed the support of the LALC and Shire Council to erect pillars displaying the core Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) values for the school in Gingie and Namoi Reserves where a considerable number of the school's students live. This has enabled the school to share one of its programs with the community and publicise the values the school expects of students. The SLCE at Walgett Community College has also been instrumental in the development of formalised partnership agreement between Walgett community, including the SRG, and the school.

Challenges to date

Role uncertainty

The major challenge reported by all Executive Principals and SLCEs and LCEs themselves has been understanding the intended scope of the role. This is reflected by comments from the Connected Communities management team that some of the activities being undertaken by SLCEs and LCEs do not reflect the intended strategic nature or executive level of the role.

The role description states that the primary purpose of the role is to support the implementation of strategic initiatives and programs in Connected Communities schools. The key accountabilities cover a broad range of items including:

- assisting the Executive Principal in the implementation of the Connected Communities strategy in the school;
- providing a vital link between the school and the local Aboriginal community in areas with large and diverse Aboriginal communities;
- providing strategic advice to the Executive Principal on key issues related to Aboriginal students, their families and the community regarding education and training for Aboriginal students; and
- collaborating with members of other government departments and schools on relevant Connected Communities policies and initiatives within schools.

According to the Connected Communities management team, the intended role of SLCEs and LCEs is to provide strategic advice to the Executive Principal and school staff about the ability of schools to effectively engage the community regarding the education of Aboriginal students. This is encompassed by the key accountabilities in the role description.

The wide range of activities being undertaken by SLCEs and LCEs indicates that the role is being broadly used to support the implementation of a number of key features of Connected Communities. However, at some schools this appears to be at the expense of the intended strategic role. It was commented by some Executive Principals that it had been a challenge for themselves and their SLCE or LCE to differentiate the role beyond some of the functions of an Aboriginal Education Officer (AEO). This was echoed by AEOs at some schools who perceived role overlap with the SLCE or LCE, and to an extent felt disempowered by the presence of an SLCE or LCE. This has created a discord between the SLCE or LCE and other Aboriginal staff at some schools. This is unfortunate because Aboriginal workers tend to have links to different sections of the community. If they can be encouraged to work closely with SLCEs or LCEs, their own community intelligence could improve the effectiveness of the SLCE or LCE role.

The Connected Communities management team has supported schools and SLCEs and LCEs to understand the role. This has included the offer, which has been taken up by some schools, for the Team Leader Community Engagement to visit schools and present to the SRG and school staff about what the SLCE or LCE role encompasses. Since the beginning of 2014, SLCEs and LCEs have also participated in monthly videoconferences that include two schools sharing some of their good practice. According to records from the Team Leader Community Engagement, in 2014 the overall attendance rate at these meetings was 70 per cent in 2014 with all 14 SLCEs and LCEs appointed to date attending at least 50 per cent of meetings.

SLCE profile in schools

It was clear from site visits that the majority of teaching staff at nearly all Connected Communities schools are unclear on the role of the SLCE or LCE. This was confirmed by the survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools where only 19 per cent of respondents reporting that they fully understand the SLCE or LCE role. Thirty-nine per cent of respondents claimed to have either little or no understanding of the role. At three schools or campuses this was over 50 per cent, and as high as 80 per cent at one school.

While knowledge of SLCE and LCE functions are not necessarily critical to the day-to-day functions of teachers and support staff, the appropriateness of SLCEs and LCEs being part of the School Executive was questioned by teachers at almost all of the 14 relevant schools. Given the strategic intent of the role it is probably appropriate that the SLCE or LCE is part of the School Executive. For the broader school staff to value the SLCE or LCE role it is essential that staff understand the role and have visibility of the strategic activities undertaken by the SLCE or LCE.

3.3 School Reference Groups

SRGs have been formed at all schools. The timing of their formation has for the most part been dictated by the timing of SLCE or LCE recruitment, although Boggabilla Central School which has not successfully recruited an SLCE or LCE has a functioning SRG.

Most SRGs are meeting at least twice a term, with the exception of Moree Secondary College where the several changes of school leadership have reduced the frequency of SRG meetings. Wilcannia Central School have also had difficulties holding regular meetings due to difficulties securing consistent SRG membership.

Membership

Most schools have maintained the core membership but a number of schools have chosen to expand on the core group as they feel appropriate for their school context. For example, several schools have included a staff representative to provide a conduit between the SRG and the teaching staff who are seen as an important part of the school and broader community. Other schools have smaller or broader memberships depending on the local context. For example, Brewarrina Central School has separate Elders representing each of the five main family groups in Brewarrina on its SRG. Wilcannia Central School has invited three parent representatives to ensure representation of parent interests from the three areas their students reside, the Mallee, the Mission and the town.

It is difficult to determine the range of community stakeholder groups represented on SRGs as members are often nominated under a particular interest but may be affiliated with several interests in the community. For example, some schools have been strategic about their choice of parent representatives nominating a teacher and/or external agency representative with a child at the school. There are also examples where members of agency boards are included on SRGs as Aboriginal community members rather than representing their agencies. Both of these strategies have enabled schools to include a broader cross-section of the community into school governance without contravening the stipulated core membership of the SRG. Table 5 attempts to quantify the range of community interests that are represented on SRGs across Connected Communities schools. It is important to note that this might understate the full range of interests represented on SRGs but indicates that a broad range of interests outside of the core membership are represented on some SRGs.

2 Results are based on the 5 well controlled studies included in the meta-analysis that included school dropout as an outcome measure. This effect size is based on the adjusted dropout rates that have all been adjusted for differences in pre-mobility achievement, family background and many other factors that vary across studies.

Table 5:

Community stakeholder groups represented on SRGs across Connected Communities schools as a group

Source: Interviews with Executive Principals and SRGs

Community interest	Number of SRGs
Local AECG President	15
Executive Principal	15
Elders or other representatives of the Aboriginal Community	15
Parent(s)	15
P&C representative	8
Staff representative(s)*	5
External agency representative(s)	4
Community Working Party Representative	3
Other non-Government schools	1

***Note:** This does not include local AECG Presidents that work at the school or SLCEs/LCEs.

The method of selecting parent, Elder and community representatives has varied between schools. Some schools released an expression of interest in school newsletters or local newspapers, while other schools specifically targeted people that they believed were suitable and/or important to include. Menindee Central School went further by calling for nominations for one of the Elder positions and then holding a community election.

Role of SRGs

Based on interviews with Executive Principals and SRG members during recent site visits, none of the SRGs are currently operating to the full intent of the Terms of Reference developed by the Connected Communities Directorate. This is no doubt due to the delay in stabilising SRG membership during 2014. In most schools, the first few meetings have been used for establishing their role and expectations with the Executive Principal.

There was no evidence to suggest that the SRGs were yet contributing to the establishment of a framework for baseline community assessment and measurement of progress of the Strategy. Likewise, there was no evidence to suggest that SRGs were sharing feedback from respective representative bodies and agencies and addressing ways in which to streamline service delivery and input. The lack of progress in this last area reflects the fact that only a small number of SRGs had representatives from government agencies external to the Department. A majority of Executive Principals expressed reluctance to expand SRG membership outside of the stipulated core group.

The first task that all SRGs have been asked to contribute to is providing input into the 2015-2017 School Plans. All SRGs have also been involved to some extent in developing strategies for parent and community engagement. There are notable examples where SRGs have played more critical roles. At Moree East Public School and Brewarrina Central School, the SRGs were actively involved in community consultation with contractors around the plans for the major capital works at those schools. SRG members sought input and feedback from the sections of the community that they represent and staffed information centres in the business districts of their towns. The SRG at Coonamble Public School was also involved in establishing the shopfront in the main street of Coonamble. The SRG at Moree East have since been tasked to determine the range of services to be delivered in the community centre that will be built as part of the capital works.

The SRG at Walgett Community College is seeking to solidify its role by developing a broader school-community partnership agreement in conjunction with the local AECG. The agreement outlines the priorities of the SRG and the roles of the community and school in achieving those priorities. The functions of the SRG align with the responsibilities outlined in the Terms of Reference for SRGs but include the additional responsibility to identify, sustain and review meaningful partnerships with community and local agencies, to address any gaps in services to support educational outcomes.

Challenges to date

Role uncertainty

The existence of SRGs and the public acknowledgement of the intent for communities to have greater involvement in decision making at Connected Communities schools has been challenging for Executive Principals. While the concept of a genuine school-community partnership is seen as important by all current Executive Principals, the precise role and decision-making boundaries of SRGs are still being clarified. There were indications that some SRGs want to be involved in day-to-day school decision making such as staffing, class structures and teaching strategies. These are the responsibility of the Executive Principal and fall outside of the Terms of Reference for SRGs. There are also examples where SRGs have provided input according to the Terms of Reference that has not been actioned by Executive Principals. Both of these issues have created tension between SRGs and some Executive Principals which is threatening the formation and sustainability of a genuine school-community partnership. At one school this lack of clarity about roles has resulted in a breakdown of the relationship between the school and its SRG.

In contrast to this, some SRGs have members that are reluctant to provide input as they are both unclear of their role and are unclear of how schools operate. This is reducing the effectiveness of these SRGs because either the group as a whole are not providing input or only the views of one or two members are being heard.

Another key issue is that at this stage no SRG appears to be consistently acting as a conduit between their represented bodies or groups in the community and the school. The intention is that members take information out to the community and bring input back to the school. Outside of their involvement in capital works planning at some schools, no clear examples were identified during site visits of SRGs facilitating a two-way dialogue between the community and school.

It is important to note that in 2014 the Connected Communities Directorate engaged TAFE Western to provide governance training for SRGs. Training was held in Moree and Bourke and transport arranged for SRGs from all 15 schools to attend. However, not all SRG members attended with the majority of attendees being the SRG Chairs and P&C Presidents.

Attendance

Nearly all Executive Principals reported that attendance at SRG meetings was inconsistent outside of the Chair and P&C representative. There are several reasons for this including the level of commitment from members and competing priorities.

Poor attendance has reduced the effectiveness of SRGs as the input at meetings does not consistently represent the views of the entire community but only of the regular attendees, which are generally the Chair and the P&C representative. Therefore some SRGs are not clearly differentiating their functions and value beyond the existing local AECG and P&C. Furthermore, subsequent meetings are being partially wasted bringing non-attendees from the previous meeting up to speed with what was previously discussed. This limits the amount of time available to have strategic discussions.

All SLCEs and LCEs are striving to ensure SRGs operate effectively by reminding SRG members about upcoming meetings and providing transport to and from meetings for members requiring assistance.

Meeting fatigue

It was commented that in a number of communities there is a select group of Elders and community members whose willingness to be involved in initiatives has resulted in them being asked to participate in multiple groups. It was clear in interviews with some SRG members that meeting fatigue was an issue that could impact some SRG members regularly attending meetings and sustaining their involvement.

In some communities there is overlap of membership between the SRG and Community Working Parties. This raised the question from some stakeholders as to why Connected Communities does not leverage pre-existing groups and their meetings with school business included as a priority and agenda item. This may or may not be appropriate in different communities given the different terms

² Results are based on the 5 well controlled studies included in the meta-analysis that included school dropout as an outcome measure. This effect size is based on the adjusted dropout rates that have all been adjusted for differences in pre-mobility achievement, family background and many other factors that vary across studies.

of reference for different governance groups. However, it does highlight that adding an additional governance group in small communities can place additional pressure on a few individuals and has the potential to make recruiting community members difficult.

A related challenge is being realised in communities with two Connected Communities schools, where the AECG President has to chair the SRG at both schools. The local AECG President is a voluntary position, with the majority also having full-time employment. To promote attendance by all members, SRG meetings are generally held during business hours. This means that the SRG Chair, and often other members, has to be released by their employers to attend. An example where this has been an issue is in Taree where the SRG Chair is a teacher at a nearby school. To ensure attendance at SRG meetings, Taree High School and Taree Public School coordinate their SRG meetings to be back-to-back on the same day but are still required to share the cost of providing release time to the SRG Chair's substantive school. The two schools are working on a proposal to combine the two SRGs with subsequent breakout groups for each school. A similar arrangement could also work in other communities and could also be a way to strengthen the relationship between schools so that they can coordinate their approaches to Connected Communities.

3.4 Teaching Aboriginal language and culture in schools

Aboriginal language

Figure 5 outlines the formal teaching of language in Connected Communities schools across stages, including preschool. The year in brackets after the school name indicates when local Aboriginal language was first taught in the school.

Figure 5:

Local Aboriginal language programs in Connected Communities schools

Source: Interviews with Executive Principals and SLCEs and LCEs

	Preschool	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
Boggabilla Central School	Gamilaraay						
Bourke Public School (2011)							
Bourke High School (2012)					Paakantji/ Baakantji		
Brewarrina Central School							
Coonamble Public School (2015)		Gamilaraay					
Coonamble High School (2015)					Gamilaraay		
Hillvue Public School (2015)		Gamilaraay					
Menindee Central School (pre 2012)		Paakantji/Baakantji					
Moree East Public School (2015)		Gamilaraay					
Moree Secondary College (2014)					Gamilaraay		
Taree High School							
Taree Public School							
Toomelah Public School (1999)		Gamilaraay					
Walgett Community College (pre 2012*)	Gamilaraay						
Wilcannia Central School (pre 2012)		Paakantji/Baakantji					

***Note:** Prior to 2015, Gamilaraay has been taught up to Stage 5 at Walgett Community College.

■ Stage being taught language □ Not being taught to this stage at school □ N/A - school does not have students at this stage

Figure 5 shows that local Aboriginal language is being taught in 12 of 15 schools, and most widely to students in stages 1-3. Across Connected Communities schools Aboriginal language is being offered to stage 4 students as part of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) which is mandatory for those students. Taree High School and Taree Public School do not currently have a language program but are working with the AECG and Gathang Language Group to come to an agreement about how Gathang will be taught in those schools. While negotiations are underway, Gathang is being taught to Aboriginal students as part of the Bro Speak program and to a limited extent by incorporating Gathang words and references into mainstream units of work including mathematics. Boggabilla Central School is currently only delivering Aboriginal language classes to preschool students as the school has been unable to secure an Aboriginal language tutor since the beginning of 2014.

Several Connected Communities schools were already teaching local Aboriginal language prior to Connected Communities being announced. These are Wilcannia Central School, Menindee Central School, Toomelah Public School and to a lesser extent Bourke High School and Bourke Public School. Although these schools had pre-existing language programs, Connected Communities has strengthened commitment to the teaching of Aboriginal language at these schools. In the case of Bourke High School it has provided the impetus to expand and embed sustainability into the existing program.

Across Connected Communities schools Aboriginal language is predominantly being taught by language tutors that are often AEOs at the schools. At Moree East Public School and Toomelah Public School the SLCE and LCE respectively also assist with language classes. Hillvue Public School is an exception, managing to secure a trained language teacher competent in Gamilaraay.

Incorporating cultural content and references into schools

Across Connected Communities schools there are examples where cultural references have been incorporated into the physical appearance of schools. The majority of schools have visible Aboriginal art work and local totems displayed. Hillvue Public School has taken this further by naming all of its buildings in Gamilaraay. There are also several examples where schools have, or are in the planning stages of, establishing yarning circles.

Taree High School provides a standout example of establishing a cultural place at the school, using part of their capital works funding provided under Connected Communities to establish a dedicated Aboriginal resource room. The centre has been named Ngarralbaa, which is Gathang for a place for listening, learning and knowing. The room is staffed by AEOs and is used for classes in culture and local history, in addition to other mainstream classes where local Aboriginal culture can be incorporated into specific units of work.

At most Connected Communities schools students also engage in projects and workshops where they learn local dance and art, and Aboriginal students are periodically taken to sites of cultural significance. In 2014 students at Moree East Public School participated in 'The Festival of the Brolga' performing arts project culminating in a performance of a local cultural story to community at the school. Several schools also incorporate culture into specific programs for Aboriginal students. For example, Moree Secondary College and Bourke High School offer the Sista Speak program for disengaged girls. Taree High School and Bourke High School, and shortly Moree Secondary College, offer the equivalent program for disengaged boys, Bro Speak. Hillvue Public School has a Boys and Girls Group for Stage 3 students where the students work with the SLCE, AEOs, Elders and the Opportunity Hub on leadership and self-esteem through culture.

There are also examples where schools are attempting to incorporate language and cultural content into mainstream units of work. At Wilcannia Central School, the Instructional Leader is working with the SLCE to incorporate Paakantji and cultural content into units of literacy and numeracy. Coonamble Public School, Taree High School and Taree Public School have all employed a local Elder as a Cultural Mentor or Elder in Residence, to work with students and teachers to incorporate cultural content into units of work. The SLCE at Hillvue Public School, and the LCE and another long standing teacher at Toomelah Public School also support teachers to incorporate cultural content into units of work.

Challenges to date

Ensuring community agreement about language programs

In all communities, Aboriginal stakeholders were adamant that language should be owned by the community and that language teachers and the method of teaching should be endorsed by the community. In most Connected Communities locations, this has not presented a significant challenge with SRGs involved in setting the parameters of language programs. Good examples are Hillvue Public School where the SRG and AECG were involved in selecting the Aboriginal language teacher, and Moree East Public School where the SRG and AECG are involved in developing a scope and sequence for language and culture at the school.

However, there are examples where community agreement around language has been a significant challenge for schools. The two main examples are Brewarrina and Taree. In Brewarrina disagreement within the community on the traditional custodians of the area has meant that agreement has not been reached on which language is appropriate to teach in the school. Bourke presents a similar challenge. While Aboriginal language is being taught at both Bourke Public School and Bourke High School, there is division in the community around native title of the region. This has resulted in division about whether Baakantji or Ngemba is the appropriate language to be taught. Currently Ngemba is taught at Bourke Public School and Baakantji at Bourke High School. While it is a positive that local Aboriginal language is taught at both schools, there is a lack of continuity of language as students transfer to the high school. Achieving a consensus on language in Bourke will be a challenge with reportedly up to 32 separate Aboriginal languages or dialects spoken in the area. Taree faces a different challenge, where community leaders are yet to agree to Gathang being taught to non-Aboriginal people.

Supply of language tutors/teachers

The concept of teaching language in Connected Communities schools to support language revitalisation in NSW is important but the very fact that Aboriginal languages need to be revitalised highlights the shortage of people in communities that speak their local language. This will pose a challenge to the sustainability of the language programs in nearly all Connected Communities schools.

TAFE Institutes are playing an important role in increasing the supply of qualified Aboriginal language tutors by offering certificates in Aboriginal languages. Aboriginal staff and other community members at a number of Connected Communities schools have completed a Certificate I in Aboriginal language, with most on a pathway to achieve a Certificate III qualification. TAFE Western and TAFE New England currently offer Certificates I-III in Aboriginal Languages (Gamilaraay). Four AEOs at Coonamble High School and Coonamble Public School completed the Certificate I in 2014 and are currently undertaking the Certificate II course. In 2015, a Certificate I in Gathang is being offered by the North Coast Institute of TAFE with a Certificate II course under development. TAFE Western also offers Certificates I-III in Paakantji/Baakantji.

The requirement to teach Aboriginal language in Stage 4 is possibly even more of a challenge for Executive Principals, because they require a trained language teacher to implement the curriculum. There are few qualified LOTE teachers able to speak Aboriginal language, so schools have employed team based teaching between a qualified LOTE teacher and an Aboriginal language tutor. For example, Bourke High school has a qualified Japanese language teacher who works with the Aboriginal language tutor to deliver Baakantji in Stage 4. Moree Secondary College uses a qualified Indonesian language teacher to support the delivery of Gamilaraay in Stage 4. Taree High School will be in a unique position once agreement with the community is reached on how to deliver the language program, because one of the AEOs is fluent in Gathang and has almost completed a teaching qualification. Given the close relationship and proximity of the schools, there could be an opportunity for Taree Public School to leverage this resource.

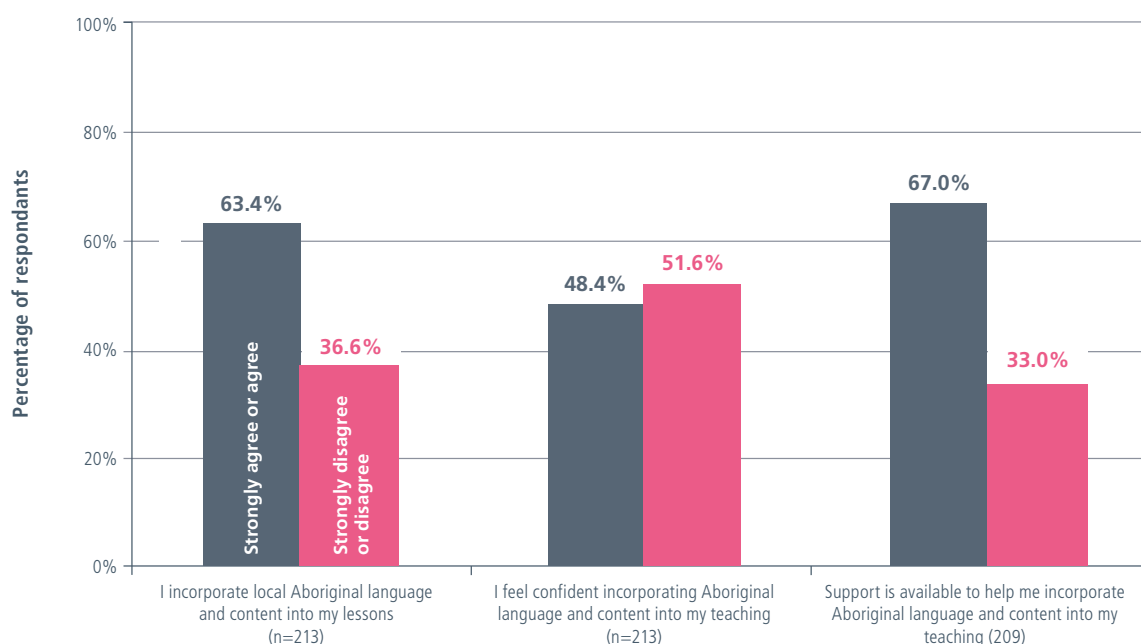
Incorporating local Aboriginal content into mainstream units of work

Establishing cultural references, workshops and selective programs across the school appears to have been relatively straightforward across Connected Communities schools as a group. However, incorporating local Aboriginal content and perspectives into mainstream units of work has been a challenge for many teachers in some schools. The main reasons identified during site visits were a lack of confidence by teachers and a perceived lack of support at some schools. Responses from the survey of teachers in Connected Communities schools support this (Figure 6). The responses suggest that almost two-thirds of teachers across Connected Communities schools are at least attempting to incorporate local Aboriginal language and content into units of work but just under half feel confident doing so. Importantly two-thirds of respondents agreed that support is available, although at three schools this was less than 25 per cent.

Figure 6:

Incorporation of Aboriginal content into mainstream units of work by teachers at Connected Communities schools

Source: Survey of teachers in Connected Communities schools, 2015.



There are several examples where schools are attempting to provide support for teachers to incorporate Aboriginal content into classes. Coonamble Public School, Taree Public School and Taree High School, employ a Cultural Mentor or Elder in Residence to support teachers to plan units of work that include local Aboriginal content and language. Based on responses to the teacher survey, this support is well perceived at these schools with more than half of survey respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that they feel confident incorporating Aboriginal language and culture into units of work. This suggests that there are benefits associated with employing community members as cultural mentors for implementing this component of Connected Communities.

At Wilcannia Central School, the SLCE and Instructional Leader are co-developing K-2 literacy and numeracy units that incorporate local Aboriginal content and language. Ninety per cent of teacher survey respondents at Wilcannia Central School agreed that support is available for them to incorporate local Aboriginal language and culture into units of work. The same percentage also reported that they attempt to incorporate local Aboriginal language and culture into units of work. There are six other schools where more than 70 per cent of survey respondents agreed that language and cultural support is available to them. Based on information obtained during site visits, this support is provided by SLCEs or LCEs, or AEOs.

It is important to highlight that the AECG is currently working with the Department on a K-12 Aboriginal cultural studies framework to be implemented across all NSW Government schools. This framework will first be tested at Moree East Public School, Brewarrina Central School and Coonamble High School. In time, this will provide a framework and support for all schools, including Connected Communities schools, to implement high quality local Aboriginal language and culture programs.

3.5 Connecting to Country

Connecting to Country has now been delivered at least once in all schools. In communities with more than one Connected Communities school, the event has been combined. Table 6 shows when Connecting to Country programs have been held in Connected Communities schools.

Table 6:

Connecting to Country programs held across Connected Communities schools

Source: Interviews with Executive Principals

	2012 T4	2013 T1 T2 T3 T4				2014 T1 T2 T3 T4				2015 T1 T2	
Boggabilla Central School						✓					
Bourke High School										✓	
Bourke Public School										✓	
Brewarrina Central School											✓
Coonamble High School										✓	
Coonamble Public School										✓	
Hillvue Public School							✓				
Menindee Central School		✓					✓				✓
Moree East Public School							✓				
Moree Secondary College							✓				
Taree High School	✓										
Taree Public School	✓										
Toomelah Public School											
Walgett Community College								✓			
Wilcannia Central School						✓					

There have been significant delays running a Connecting to Country program in some schools, with some schools not participating until 2015. According to stakeholders, some local AECGs have not had the capacity to develop and organise a Connecting to Country program until 2015.

Conversations with staff during site visits suggested that the majority of school staff attended their school's Connecting to Country.

Many Executive Principals plan to deliver the program to new staff later in 2015. This is important as data from People and Services indicates that as of 14 May 2015, there are at least 64 permanent or temporary teachers across Connected Communities schools as a group who started their appointment since the last Connecting to Country program was held at their school.

3.6 Schools as hubs for service delivery/interagency linkages

Interagency linkages

Establishing schools as a hub for service delivery and the formation of interagency linkages has occurred variably across Connected Communities schools as a group. Table 7 outlines interagency linkages that are supporting the provision of services in Connected Communities schools as determined from program documentation and site visits. This list is likely to underestimate the true number somewhat due to underreporting in school update reports and by staff during site visits.

Table 7:

Interagency linkages by Connected Communities schools

Source: Program documentation and interviews with Executive Principals, other Connected Communities staff and agency staff

	Aboriginal Medical Service	NSW Health	Medicare locals	Other health locals	Police (incl. PCYC)	FACS	Juvenile Justice	Family referral service	Other family or child services	Community steering committees	Community working parties	Other interagency coordination groups
Boggabilla Central School												
Bourke High School												
Bourke Public School												
Brewarrina Central School												
Coonamble High School												
Coonamble Public School												
Hillvue Public School												
Menindee Central School												
Moree East Public School												
Moree Secondary College												
Taree High School												
Taree Public School												
Toomelah Public School												
Walgett Community College												
Wilcannia Central School												

Almost all schools have a relationship with an Aboriginal Medical Service, and often a second medical service. There is evidence that 12 schools also have a relationship with NSW Police and that at least 10 schools have a relationship with a non-government family or children's service. What is evident is that two-thirds of the schools do not appear to have a working relationship with the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) despite all schools almost certainly having students that are on the FACS caseload. The only relationship many schools have with FACS is reporting to the Child Protection Helpline or providing FACS caseworkers access to students in out-of-home care (OOHC). There is little evidence at the majority of schools of coordinated case planning with FACS about children and families that are showing signs of stress that could lead to a risk of significant harm (ROSH) report. Coordinated case planning with FACS is evident at Menindee Central School, Taree High School and Taree Public School where discussions about particular students and families have reportedly led to coordinated follow-up actions. Coonamble High School was also the only school that reported a strong relationship with Juvenile Justice, with the school being notified about students returning to school following a period of incarceration. In other schools it is possible that the Police provide schools with this information.

Based on the information provided by Executive Principals, the majority of the interagency linkages formed by Connected Communities schools do not appear to involve the characteristics of strong collaborative partnerships such as high levels of commitment to working together, negotiated shared goals, frequent communication, and resource pooling/sharing (OECD 2006). Very few schools have MOUs or formalised partnership agreements with organisations. Exceptions are Hillvue Public School which has an MOU with the Department of Rural Health at the University of Newcastle, and Taree Public School that has MOUs with Communities for Children and the Biripi Aboriginal Medical Corporation.

Ten schools also appear to be regular attendees at interagency meetings in their communities. This ranges from Government coordinated steering committees, community working parties and other interagency forums organised around specific issues. Most of these groups have terms of reference and regular meetings, providing some formality to the schools' relationship with the other agencies represented on these groups.

Services being accessed

Table 8 shows the types of services that are being accessed through Connected Communities schools as determined from program documentation and site visits. Again this list is likely to underestimate the true number somewhat due to underreporting in school update reports and by staff during site visits.

Table 8:

The types of services and activities being accessed through Connected Communities schools

	Student health checks	Student dental checks	Speech pathology	Wound clinic	Student breakfast program	Trauma counselling for students	Programs for students (e.g. alcohol & drug, bullying, sexual health, protective behaviour)	Adult literacy classes	Parenting classes	Interagency codevelopment of strategies to address community issues impacting the school	Interagency student and family case management
Boggabilla Central School											
Bourke High School											
Bourke Public School											
Brewarrina Central School											
Coonamble High School											
Coonamble Public School											
Hillvue Public School											
Menindee Central School											
Moree East Public School											
Moree Secondary College											
Taree High School											
Taree Public School											
Toomelah Public School											
Walgett Community College											
Wilcannia Central School											

All schools are facilitating access to health checks and dental services. However, during site visits long-standing teachers at all schools revealed that they had been connecting students with health checks prior to Connected Communities. Some schools were also connecting students with dental checks prior to Connected Communities through partnerships with organisations such as the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health at the University of Sydney. Since Connected Communities the number of schools connecting students with dental services has increased. All schools with primary school students are also providing Speech Pathology services, although this is primarily funded through *Early Action for Success*.

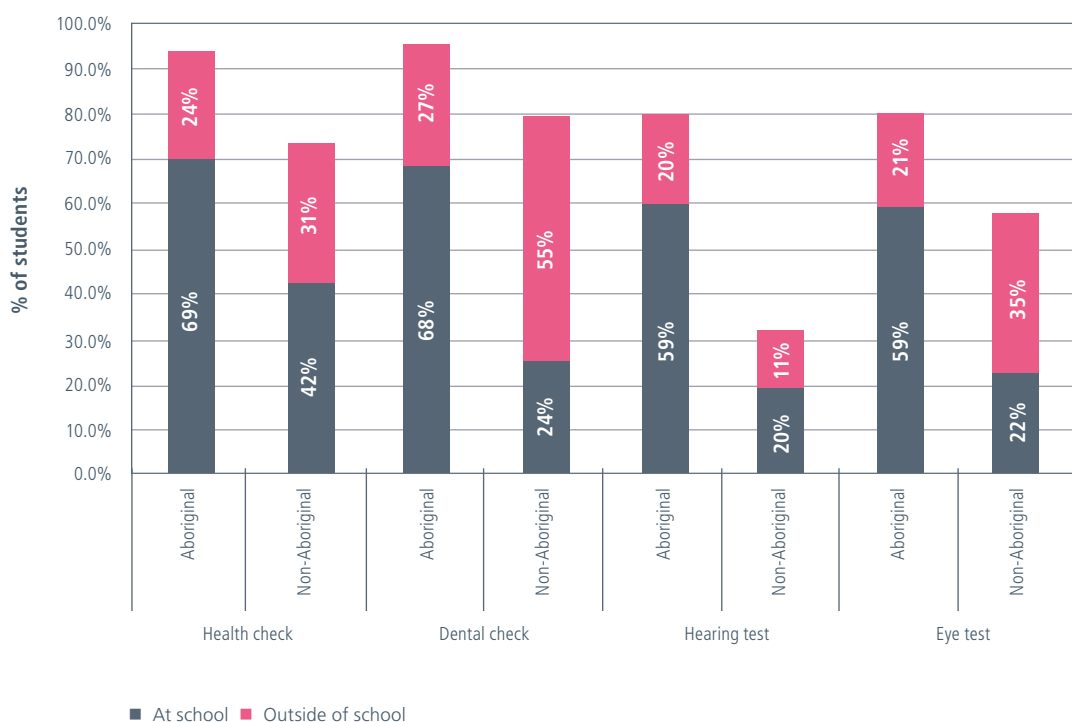
A notable program established through partnerships with health services has been the daily wound clinic at Bourke Public School. Through linkages with Bourke Aboriginal Health Service and the Bourke Community Health Centre, a nurse comes to the school every morning to treat skin abrasions, cuts, boils, scabies and other skin infections that students might have. Previously this was performed by the school administration officers. By having the nurse-led clinic, students and their families can also be referred for a medical appointment if necessary. A similar clinic is being established at Taree Public School under an MOU recently signed with Biripi Aboriginal Medical Corporation. Taree Public School also has an MOU with Communities for Children to provide regular protective behaviour classes for children and parenting classes for adults.

Figure 7 estimates the number of children at Connected Communities schools that accessed basic health and dental services at their school in 2014, based on responses from the parent and guardian survey.

Figure 7:

Percentage of children accessing health services at Connected Communities schools in 2014

Source: Survey of parents and guardians of students in Connected Communities schools



In 2014 an estimated 69 per cent of Aboriginal students and 42 per cent of non-Aboriginal students received a health check at school, and 68 per cent of Aboriginal students and 24 per cent of non-Aboriginal students had their teeth checked at school. At least 59 per cent of Aboriginal students had their hearing tested at school which is important given the high prevalence of otitis media amongst Aboriginal children. This is also likely to be an underestimate because some parents and guardians are unaware of what tests are conducted during health checks at the school.

The survey also indicates that approximately 25 per cent of Aboriginal students and 30 per cent of non-Aboriginal students had their health checked in 2014 outside of the school (and not at school). This suggests that the majority of students at Connected Communities schools had their health checked last year. Similarly, approximately 27 per cent of Aboriginal students and 55 per cent of non-Aboriginal students had their teeth checked outside of the school (and not at school), suggesting that the majority of students at Connected Communities schools also had their teeth checked in 2014.

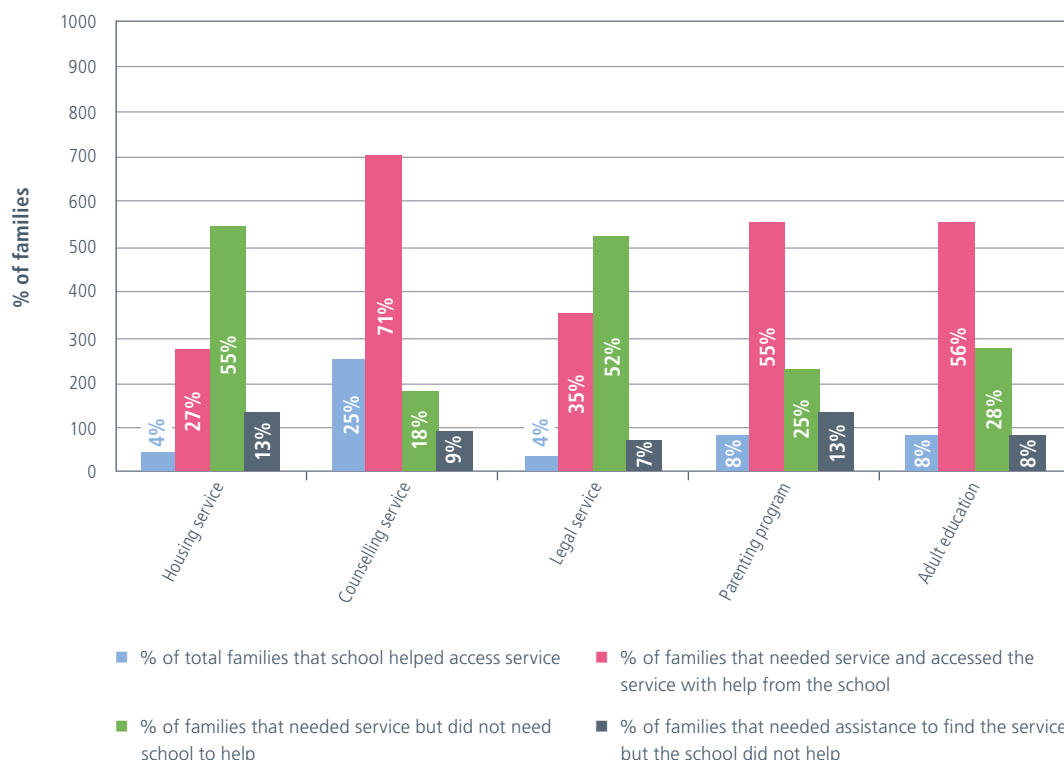
Other services and programs that all schools are providing include: breakfast for students through Department and philanthropic funding; ad hoc programs for students around issues such as sexual health, bullying, depression, alcohol and drug abuse and protective behaviour; and counselling for students through a combination of school counsellors and counsellors from non-government organisations.

Figure 8:

Percentage of parents and guardians reporting that schools helped their family access support services and programs in 2014

Source: Survey of parents and guardians of students in Connected Communities schools

Figure 8 shows the percentage of families who reported accessing support services and programs in 2014 with assistance from a Connected Communities school. Survey respondents were asked whether their child's school helped their family connect with a service and, if not, whether they needed that service or accessed it without the school's assistance. At this stage of implementation it appears as though only four schools are providing parenting and/or adult literacy classes at the school. This could be in part because schools find it difficult to engage parents and that most of the schools are yet to establish spaces for a community hub. However, the survey of parents and guardians has provided evidence that, where it is required, schools are helping to connect parents and guardians with services for their families.



The survey responses indicate that counselling services are the most common services schools are helping connect families with. Twenty-five per cent of survey respondents reported that the school helped their family access a counselling service in 2014. Of families who reported needing a counselling service, the child's school helped connect 71 per cent to a service. Similarly over half of parents and guardians who reported that they needed a parenting or adult education program accessed one with assistance from the school. More than half of parents and guardians who reported their family needed housing or legal services accessed that service without the assistance of the school.

These findings suggest that despite schools not necessarily offering a wide range of services for families at the school, they are providing information that is helping families connect with services and programs that they need. A scan of school newsletters and Facebook pages supports this with numerous schools advertising externally delivered services and programs.

Strategic interagency coordination and case management

Table 7 shows that at least 10 Connected Communities schools are involved in interagency groups such as Community Steering Committees, Community Working Parties and other interagency groups. Table 8 highlights that there are three schools involved in groups committed to co-developing solutions to community issues. These are described below.

The Toomelah-Boggabilla Steering Committee is an intergovernmental group represented by State and Commonwealth Government agency regional directors, NSW LALC, Moree Shire Council and the Executive Principals at Toomelah Public School and Boggabilla Central School. The group has a formalised partnership agreement and strategic purpose to drive strategic change by coordinating service delivery. The Steering Committee has developed a community action plan outlining a series of priorities that encompass the priorities of the Community Working Party. The priorities include child safety, healing, healthy homes, strong and healthy families, education, community health programs, transport, training and employment and infrastructure. The Steering Committee is supported by the Toomelah and Boggabilla Team which comprises a group of government and non-government agency managers responsible for ensuring that tasks identified by the Steering Committee are implemented. The LCE at Toomelah Public School sits on Community Working Party, providing a link between the groups. The Steering Committee has already led to an important outcome for Toomelah Public School by securing an agreement for the provision of a bus service to bring students from Goondiwindi. Currently teachers at the school conduct a bus run to Goondiwindi as there has been no public transport between Goondiwindi and Toomelah. Other actions that are outlined in the Steering Committee Community Action Plan that could lead to outcomes Connected Communities is trying to achieve include:

- Service mapping and gap analysis of health, family support and parenting programs in Boggabilla and Toomelah, including negotiating cross-border service delivery arrangements
- Repairing and maintaining homes in Boggabilla and Toomelah and developing a health homes program outlining community roles and responsibilities
- Developing an employment and training strategy with employment related agencies
- Finalising a community safety plan with NSW Police.

The Executive Principal at Hillvue Public School sits on the Coledale Steering Committee which has a number of strategic priorities to address issues in the Coledale community, one of the major feeder communities for the school. The Steering Committee comprises regional directors from all government and major non-government agencies, and is supported by a team of managers called the NOW Team that includes the SLCE at Hillvue Public School.

The Executive Principal at Moree Secondary College has recently engaged with the FACS-led Place Team which involves many of the key government and non-government agencies in Moree. The Executive Principal has taken the issue of school attendance to the team so that they can work on a coordinated response.

There is evidence that five schools are involved in groups that undertake interagency case planning under the provisions of chapter 16A in Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1988. Examples are outlined below. Details about the majority of these groups and the commitment by Executive Principals are unclear. A good example is the Menindee Interagency Case Management Team that was established at the start of 2013 by the current Executive Principal at Menindee Central School. The group brings together regional managers from the school, FACS, Police, health agencies and non-government agencies to exchange information about students and families on their caseloads. It appears as though the group effectively exchanges information, although it may lack the necessary case management capacity to coordinate services for students and families.

Challenges to date

The absence of framework for the schools as hubs model

It is apparent from discussions with Executive Principals, service providers in Connected Communities locations and other stakeholders that some Executive Principals and other government agencies are unclear about what is required under this key feature of Connected Communities. The *Connected Communities Strategy* document indicates a model akin to the Victorian Extended Service Schools model whereby access to a range of services for students, their families and other community members is facilitated or supported by the school. All schools have implemented this model to the extent that they are connecting students and their families with health and counselling services. However, there is little evidence that the majority of Connected Communities schools are undertaking a needs assessment of their students and families followed by subsequent service mapping and service coordination. The identification of programs in the school, outside of health and counselling services for students, has been ad hoc and opportunistic rather than strategic.

Other agencies are also unclear as to how they are supposed to support schools to implement Connected Communities. Discussions with non-government agencies in Connected Communities locations revealed a common misconception that Connected Communities provided schools with funds to broker services. Representatives from other government agencies appeared willing to offer assistance but were unsure how to progress that help. They appear to have received little or no guidance from their regional managers or the schools on what is expected.

The lack of support from other agencies

To date there has been a lack of active support for Connected Communities from other government and non-government agencies. There has certainly been support at the Ministerial level through the Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs that led the development of OCHRE. However, any consultation that may have occurred at the Senior Executive levels of government has not filtered down to frontline staff. Executive Principals at a number of schools commented that they have received very little support from key government agencies to date. It was apparent during site visits that frontline workers in agencies such as FACS and Police have not received a directive from senior managers to work with schools towards the objectives of Connected Communities. In many cases, these frontline staff had only cursory knowledge of the Strategy. It was also commented by Executive Principals and SLCEs or LCEs participating in interagency groups that most are failing to have an impact in their communities due to a lack of genuine cooperation by many agencies. This has seen waning commitment by some Executive Principals to participate in such groups.

This issue has been acknowledged by the Minister for Education and the Connected Communities management team and an interagency working group has now been formed to progress these interagency partnerships. The working group is comprised of Executive Directors from the Department of Education, the Department of Premier and Cabinet, NSW Health, NSW Treasury, Aboriginal Affairs, the Department of Families and Community Services, NSW Police, Juvenile Justice and Transport NSW.

Finding suitable space for establishing a service hub at the school

A challenge for schools establishing schools as a service hub has been finding a suitable space for the community and other service providers to utilise. Full implementation of the capital works program will help some schools overcome this barrier. At Brewarrina Central School, Moree East Public School and Walgett Community College dedicated community spaces have been included in the plans for the major rebuilds. Taree Public School has also benefited from the capital works program by refurbishing the school hall making it suitable for use as a community space.

The availability of quality services

It was suggested during site visits that there is a lack of quality services available in several Connected Communities locations. Some centres such as Tamworth, Moree and Taree have well established health and social service networks providing schools with a range of services that they can access. However, towns such as Coonamble, Menindee and Wilcannia have very few services based in town and are predominantly serviced by agencies based in larger centres such as Dubbo and Broken Hill. Boggabilla and Toomelah face a similar situation, relying on services from Moree or cross-border services based in Goondiwindi. Bourke, Walgett and Brewarrina all have a large number of agencies delivering services but coordination amongst agencies is reportedly poor due to the predominance of competitive funding based on service outputs as opposed to community outcomes. Therefore, despite the plethora of programs and services available, the lack of service coordination makes navigating the service system difficult for Executive Principals and SLCEs or LCEs.

The availability of counselling and mental health support

School staff and community members report that students at Connected Communities schools experience very high levels of trauma-related and mental health issues. It is therefore very important that schools have access to an appropriate quantity and quality of mental health and counselling support. It was evident during site visits to Connected Communities schools that they are all facing an under-supply of mental health and counselling services. All schools share a counsellor with other schools, at most having an onsite counsellor two to three days a week. Some schools have brokered counselling services from external organisations, but this is not sustainable as these organisations can only support schools for as long as they are adequately funded.

All Executive Principals stated during site visits that there is a need for a full-time school counsellor at their schools. It was commented that a regular presence, preferably in a non-teaching role, is important for children and young people to develop the necessary trust to disclose any issues that they are facing. A full-time counsellor would also provide schools with the necessary capacity to case manage students and provide a single point of contact to broker any support services required for students and their families. The lack of case management capacity in Connected Communities schools was highlighted by stakeholders from other agencies as a barrier for an effective education-led service hub and case coordination model.

In October 2014 the Minister for Education announced the Connected Communities Healing and Wellbeing Model which will commit \$8 million over four years to establish an integrated wellbeing model to address trauma-related issues at Connected Communities schools. The objective is to provide adequate resources and form local networks to case manage each student requiring support and ensure that their needs are met. As of June 2015 the model is still being developed, with the investment yet to reach any of the Connected Communities schools.

The skills, capacity and influence for partnership formation

Despite the expectation under the higher classification of Executive Principals that they lead strategic interagency engagement, partnership building with external agencies is a specific skill set that is largely outside of the core skill set of career educators such as Executive Principals. It is clear that Executive Principals have all addressed deficiencies in the teaching and academic program at the schools but have to date been less confident, and had limited capacity, to network and form partnerships with other service providers. Some SLCEs and LCEs have the previous employment experience and skill set to assist Executive Principals with this but this is not uniform across all SLCEs or LCEs. Furthermore it was commented by senior managers and regional coordinators from other agencies that interagency coordination requires networking amongst senior decision makers who can have influence on frontline service delivery. These stakeholders believed that at a regional level, an SLCE or LCE will often not have sufficient influence amongst agencies to lead interagency coordination and requires the leadership of the Executive Principal.

3.7 Early years focus

The early years focus of Connected Communities to date has come from a combination of dedicated early childhood education infrastructure funding and direct initiatives implemented by schools.

Early childhood education infrastructure funding

A single proposal was received to the request for tender under the *Connected Communities Early Childhood Education Infrastructure Project*. This was from Menindee Children's Centre for refurbishments including enhancement of the outdoor learning area and refurbishment of a dedicated 'transition to school' demountable at Menindee Central School. This also included funds for a preschool outreach worker to liaise with families in the community, although this appears to be partially undertaken by the SLCE at Menindee Central School who is also a board member at Menindee Children's Centre. The cost of this project was estimated at \$695,303 (incl. GST) and has been completed, including the transition to school centre established.

The remaining funds out the \$3 million allocated for the *Connected Communities Early Childhood Education Infrastructure Project* were evenly distributed to the other five schools for early childhood education initiatives⁸. Bourke Public School has used its share of capital funding for early childhood education to establish an Early Years Transition Centre at the beginning of 2014. Toomelah Public School has used its share to establish a suitable space for an Indigenous playgroup and transition to school classes, in part to compensate for the absence of any preschool facility in Toomelah. Brewarrina Central School and Moree East Public School have included plans for dedicated early childhood spaces as part of their major refurbishments.

Despite not being a part of the *Early Childhood Education Infrastructure Project*, \$462,200 of the original funding has been allocated to Wilcannia Central School to expand the existing preschool and include a dedicated transition to school space. The total cost of the project is estimated at \$1,350,000 with the remaining \$887,800 allocated from the *Connected Communities 2014-15 Major Works* program. The preschool at Wilcannia Central School is the only preschool in Wilcannia. As of 30 June 2015, this project has yet to commence.

Early childhood education initiatives

All of the primary and central schools taking part in Connected Communities have transition to school programs that offer preschool children at least 2 hours per week of transition to school activities for a minimum of the term prior to entering Kindergarten. At most of these schools, including those without a preschool, transition to school programs were established prior to Connected Communities.

There are two standout examples of schools that have expanded their transition programs since the start of Connected Communities.

The first of these is **Bourke Public School**, which as mentioned above has used its share of the *Early Childhood Education Infrastructure* funding to establish an Early Years Transition Centre at the beginning of 2014. Bourke Public School has worked in partnership with Bourke and District Children's Services to offer all children for the entire year before school two days a week at the preschool and two days a week of a transition program at the Early Years Transition Centre. This means that children in Bourke have the opportunity to spend four days in an educational setting in the year before school. Participation in the Early Years Transition Program is free. As part of the transition program, children have their health and hearing screened, and in 2015 will participate in the SWAY early literacy program developed by Royal Far West School⁹. Participation in SWAY also provides access to Speech Pathology. The school, led by the SLCE, has actively recruited Aboriginal families to participate at both the preschool and Early Years Transition Centre. Administrative records suggest that 60 children were enrolled in the Early Years Transition Program throughout 2014. According to the Executive Principal at Bourke Public School, 91 per cent of these children were enrolled in Kindergarten at Bourke Public School in 2015. Importantly, enrolments at Bourke & District Children's Service Pre-School increased from 33 to 43 in 2014, suggesting that the partnership may be increasing participation in early childhood education in Bourke.

⁸ Schools without a Department-operated preschool are Menindee, Bourke, Brewarrina, Hillvue, Menindee, Moree and Toomelah.

⁹ SWAY stands for Sounds, Words and Yarning and is an oral language program based on local Aboriginal language and stories within the early learning environment.

The second example where a Connected Communities school has significantly expanded its early years focus is **Toomelah Public School**. As mentioned previously, *Early Childhood Education Infrastructure* funding enabled a suitable space for an Indigenous playgroup and transition to school classes to be established. The transition program is available up to three days a week for 3-5 year olds and is delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher and SLSO. The program has a capacity of 10 children which has been filled in 2014 and 2015. The Transition Centre also provides a facility for Care Goondiwindi to deliver *Families as First Teachers* to parents of 0-5 year olds and Drug Arm to deliver a Mum's and Bub's playgroup. As part of the transition program each child is case managed to ensure school readiness, which includes speech assessments. Parents participating in the program have also been connected to services for children with high needs, including Northcott Disability Services. The school is currently applying for an Indigenous Advancement Strategy Grant to continue the current program and expand it so that children in the community can be case managed from age 6 months.

3.8 Further education and employment focus

Connected Communities schools vary in terms of their focus on further education and employment. Factors that appear to influence how much schools focus on post-school outcomes include historical student retention rates, post-school opportunities that are regionally available, student and family expectations, and community and family support for students.

All of the nine Connected Communities schools with secondary students have programs in place to support students in the transition from school into further education, training or employment. This includes supporting a range of VET options including school-based traineeships, programs delivered in partnership with a university or TAFE and additional unique programs to prepare students for further education and employment. Table 9 provides an overview of the types of initiatives targeting post-school transitions being undertaken Connected Communities schools.

Table 9:**Further education and employment focus in Connected Communities schools**

Source: Program documentation and interviews with Executive Principals

	Head teacher VET	Careers teams	Partnership with a university	Partnership with TAFE for specific programs	Other school initiatives
Boggabilla Central School	✓		University of New England, Indigenous Pathways Program		
Bourke High School	✓			Yarr Pai Paka-ma	
Bourke Public School					
Brewarrina Central School	✓				
Coonamble High School	✓		UNSW, ASPIRE Program; University of New England, Indigenous Pathways Program		Enterprise Education; Bovine Appreciation Society
Coonamble Public School			UNSW, ASPIRE Program		
Hillvue Public School			University of Newcastle, Department of Rural Health; University of New England, student-led clinic and Indigenous Pathways Program		
Menindee Central School	✓				Menindee Enterprise Park
Moree East Public School					
Moree Secondary College	✓	✓	University of New England, Indigenous Pathways Program		
Taree High School	✓	✓	Charles Sturt University, Future Moves Program		
Taree Public School					
Toomelah Public School				University of New England, adult literacy classes in the school's adult learning centre	
Walgett Community College	✓		UNSW, ASPIRE Program; University of New England, Indigenous Pathways Program		
Wilcannia Central School	✓				

All schools with secondary students have a Head Teacher VET who coordinates the provision of VET-in-schools (VETiS) subjects for Stage 6 students. Stage 5 students also sometimes participate in VETiS subjects. In addition to a Head Teacher VET, Taree High School and Moree Secondary College have dedicated career pathway teams. The careers team at Taree High School implemented the Prep Program in 2013 in response to the high numbers of 17 years olds that were not finishing school since the school leaving age was raised. All Year 10 students are surveyed as part of the school's partnership with Charles Sturt University to identify their strengths and aspirations. Using survey findings, students are then placed on an individualised study and support program for Stage 6. Both schools have a strong focus on preparing students to qualify for an ATAR if they choose and have a wide range of school-based and TAFE-delivered VET pathways for students to obtain a Certificate II while still at school. Moree Secondary College also has a careers Facebook page where post-school opportunities are posted.

Partnerships with a university or TAFE

At least seven Connected Communities schools have a partnership with at least one university, primarily as a result of equity funding for universities under the Commonwealth Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). The majority of these partnerships were formed prior to the start of Connected Communities and appear to have been initiated by the universities in response to the HEPPP, rather than the schools.

An exception is Hillvue Public School that has formed a partnership with Department of Rural Health at the University of Newcastle for undergraduate medical and allied health students to work in the school's After School Learning Centre three to four afternoons a week. Hillvue Public School students are also taken on tours of the Department of Rural Health facility in Tamworth. Hillvue Public School also has an agreement with the University of New England for social work students to undertake placements in the school and for the University's student-led clinic at the Coledale Community Centre to provide basic health screens and immunisations to students.

Partnerships with a TAFE Institute for specific programs appear to be less common. Since 2014 Bourke High School has partnered with TAFE Western to deliver the Yarr Pai Paka-ma program for disengaged students (more details below). Toomelah Public School also has a partnership with TAFE New England in Moree to provide adult literacy programs in the adult learning centre at the school.

Other school-led initiatives

Menindee Central School has created Menindee Enterprise Park which provides direct opportunities for school-based traineeships in areas such as hospitality and media and communications, but also generates revenue to fund students to undertake school based traineeships elsewhere. Towards the end of Stage 5, a study plan is developed for all students, predominantly to undertake a traineeship unless the student has the desire and perceived ability to gain an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). A café at Enterprise Park also provides casual employment for students, enabling them to develop some of the skills required for employment.

Coonamble High School has implemented an Enterprise Education program for students identified as likely early school leavers. Students engaged in the program undertake a range of construction-based projects on school or town land. The projects are contracted out to local or regional businesses with the requirement that the successful bidder mentors the students to acquire a practical skill that could lead to post-school employment. Coonamble High School also has a Bovine Appreciation Society as part of their Agricultural Studies Program, where students learn many aspects of commercial cattle farming.

Bourke High School implemented the Yarr Pai Paka-ma program in 2014 in partnership with TAFE Western, targeting disengaged students to deliver community projects and in the process achieve a Certificate I or II qualification in carpentry and stone masonry.

Of the above three programs only the Yarr Pai Paka-ma program at Bourke High School was implemented after Connected Communities was announced.

The role of Clontarf Academies at Bourke High School, Brewarrina Central School, Coonamble High School and Moree Secondary College in supporting the schools' further education and training focus must also be acknowledged. Albeit only for male students, Clontarf Academies support graduates to secure and sustain further education and training either locally or further afield. The Executive Principals at all Connected Communities schools with a Clontarf Academy commented that Clontarf is an important part of the school's further education and employment focus. The impact of Clontarf Academies on post-school transitions is something that will be evaluated separately by CESE as part of the evaluation of Clontarf Academies commissioned by the NSW Minister for Education. The results from that evaluation will be considered for the final evaluation report for Connected Communities.

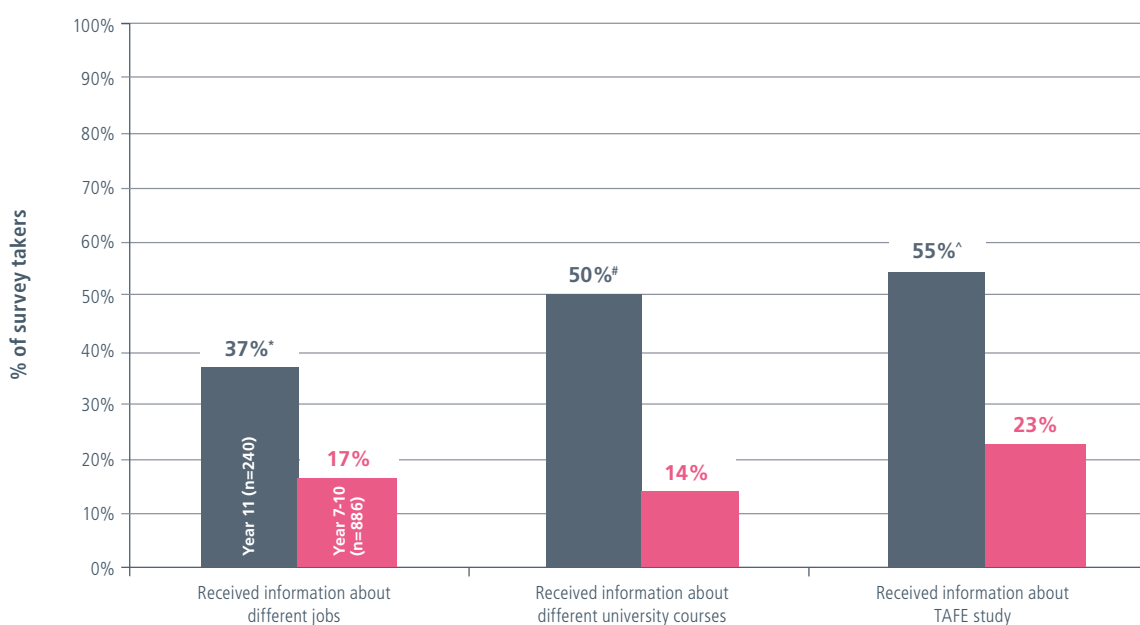
Student reported information about employment and further education

It is clear that Connected Communities schools are all reporting activities indicative of an employment and further education focus. However, from the students' perspective, this information is often not being transferred and the lack of information is particularly acute among younger students. Figure 9 reports information from the 2015 *Tell Them From Me* student survey. Students were asked a number of questions about the extent to which they received information from their school about their post-school options. Approximately half of the Year 11 cohort reported receiving information about their options for university or training post-school. The proportion of the Y7-10 cohort who reported receiving this information was significantly lower (14% and 23% for university and TAFE, respectively). This could reflect the fact that the survey was administered in Term 1 and these activities occur later in the year. However, the data does indicate that at least by Year 11, a substantial percentage of students across Connected Communities schools did not report receiving information about post-school transitions, in particular about different types of jobs. This suggests that the employment and further education activities that schools are conducting are either not universally reaching students or are not being recognised by students. The data also suggests that these activities are either not delivered universally or are particularly ineffective for students in Y7-10.

Figure 9:

Student reported receipt of information about post school transitions across Connected Communities schools, 2015

Source: Tell Them From Me student survey, 2014



* $\chi^2(1) = 40.95, p < 0.05$ # $\chi^2(1) = 144.22, p < 0.05$ ^ $\chi^2(1) = 92.22, p < 0.05$

3.9 Capital works

Approximately \$35 million has been allocated under the *Connected Communities Asset and Facilities Strategy* in two phases. Phase one has allocated \$10.9 million for maintenance and refurbishments across all Connected Communities schools. Phase two has allocated \$25 million for extensive capital improvements or rebuilds at Moree East Public School (\$15 million), Walgett Community College High School (\$7 million) and Brewarrina Central School (\$3 million).

Phase one projects

Almost all phase one projects have been completed except for:

- The new preschool and transition space at Wilcannia Central School
- Refurbishment of the community room and building of a yarning circle at Toomelah Public School
- Building of a covered outdoor learning area at Menindee Central School
- Upgrade of the administration area at Coonamble High School.

It was commented by Executive Principals and teachers at all Connected Communities schools that the refurbishments have vastly improved the classrooms and wider school facilities that were either outdated or substandard before the works.

Phase two projects

The development of plans for the three phase two projects involved an extensive community consultation process. This was led by a consortium of community engagement and design consultants appointed in March 2015 from a competitive tender process.

In March and June of 2014, the consortium carried out extensive community consultation on the projects in Moree, Walgett and Brewarrina. The first round of consultations was used to develop an agreed set of educational and design principles for the capital projects. Draft concept designs were presented to SRGs and the broader community during the June community visits. At all three locations the SRGs were actively involved in organising community consultation sessions. Feedback from the June concept meetings guided the development of final plans.

The consultation process appeared to be thorough and inclusive. However, the community outside of the SRGs have not had an opportunity to view the new plans. There appears to have been no campaign by the schools or the Department to promote the final plans to the relevant communities. There will undoubtedly be interest from the communities once construction begins but an opportunity might have been lost to keep the three communities engaged and excited in the additional learning and community spaces that will be available at the schools.

Construction contracts were awarded by competitive tender for Walgett Community College and Brewarrina Central School in February 2015 and for Moree East Public School in April 2015. Works have begun at Brewarrina Central School but as of June 2015 have not commenced at Walgett Community College or Moree East Public School. Construction is scheduled for completion at Brewarrina Central School in February 2016 and in October 2016 at Moree East Public School and Walgett Community College.

3.10 Interaction with other policies and programs

There are a number of other policies and programs that are supporting Connected Communities to achieve its outcomes.

The most notable of these is Early Action for Success which has placed a K-2 Instructional Leader in each Connected Communities School. With the exception of Boggabilla Central School and Toomelah Public School that share an Instructional Leader, there is a dedicated position for each school. This is above the level of support provided to other Early Action for Success Schools that often have to share an Instructional Leader where K-2 enrolments are low. For example Wilcannia Central School which only had five K-2 students in 2014 would ordinarily be required to share an Instructional Leader with at least one other school. Early Action for Success is being evaluated by Erebus under the governance of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Literacy and Numeracy (MAGLAN) and the results will feed into the final Connected Communities evaluation report.

In Boggabilla, Walgett and Wilcannia the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has placed School Attendance Monitors in the schools as part of the Commonwealth-led *Remote School Attendance Strategy*. The funded organisations delivering the Strategy have an 85 per cent attendance target and work each morning to follow up on absentees and work with families with a history of school absenteeism on strategies to improve school attendance.

Another Commonwealth initiative worth mentioning is the HEPPP funded by the Department of Education and Training. HEPPP provides universities equity program funding to deliver pathway programs in schools that support higher participation of equity groups in tertiary education. Over 2010-2014 HEPPP provided more than \$174 million to universities in NSW¹⁰, including to fund school-based projects in Boggabilla, Coonamble, Hillvue, Moree and Walgett.

Interactions with other OCHRE initiatives are less obvious. There has been good collaboration between Hillvue Public School and the Tamworth Opportunity Hub, resulting in Opportunity Hub workers delivering a weekly cultural mentoring and classroom-based program for boys at the school. Cooperation between the Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests and Connected Communities is less obvious. The Paakantji/Baakantji Language and Culture Nest is located at the Wilcannia Central School, and is being supported by staff from Wilcannia and Menindee Central Schools. However, according to Executive Principals, SLCEs or LCEs, and Aboriginal language tutors, Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests have not provided any support for schools with their language and culture programs. This could be related to the fact that with the exception of Wilcannia, the Aboriginal Language and Culture Nests are in separate towns to Connected Communities schools. Given the availability of interactive technology, there are undoubtedly opportunities available to strengthen this collaborative effort.

¹⁰ Senate standing committee on education and employment – education, question on notice, additional estimates 2013-2014. Question 3 – Higher Education, research and International, Department of Education Question No. ED0282_14

4. Evaluation findings: Outcomes to date

This section of the report focuses on the progress against the key deliverables as outlined in the Connected Communities Strategy.

Specifically this part of the evaluation is interested in measuring the extent to which the Connected Communities Strategy has improved:

- the developmental readiness of children to benefit from schooling
- the attendance rates for students
- the overall literacy and numeracy of students
- the retention rates for students until Year 12
- the engagement of parents and guardians with schools
- the perceptions of students and communities that the schools value their identity, culture, goals and aspirations.

As previously mentioned, the baseline period for Connected Communities is considered to be 2009-12 with 2013 considered to be the first year of the Strategy on the ground. However, it is clear from the review of implementation above that many of the initiatives were still being put in place during 2013 and into 2014. It would therefore not be surprising to find a lagged effect on outcomes. This highlights the importance of allowing sufficient time for reforms to become embedded before making summative assessments of their impact. The final Connected Communities evaluation report, which is due to be delivered in 2018, will make more certain conclusions about the impact of the Strategy.

4.1 The developmental readiness of children to benefit from schooling

One objective of Connected Communities is to ensure that children are increasingly ready to benefit from schooling with respect to their physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication. The evaluation will use the Best Start Kindergarten assessment, Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data and responses from the survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools to report against this key deliverable. For this report, AEDC data is not considered as the 2015 census is still being undertaken. Therefore, only pre-Connected Communities AEDC data from 2009 and 2012 are currently available. Findings from analysis of Best Start Assessment data and teacher responses are presented below.

Best Start Kindergarten Assessment

The Best Start Kindergarten assessment has been administered in Term One to all Kindergarten children in NSW Government schools since 2010. Best Start is designed to identify each student's literacy and numeracy skills at the beginning of Kindergarten. It aims to provide teachers with the ability to identify the basic skills that each child brings to school as they enter Kindergarten. Best Start is not a test; it is a teacher rating system against literacy and numeracy rubrics to provide information about students' preparation for school. The assessment helps teachers to differentiate teaching to meet the individual literacy and numeracy needs of students. However, Best Start does provide some indication of the relative literacy and numeracy skills of students as a measure for their preparedness for school. As part of Best Start, seven aspects of literacy and four aspects of numeracy are assessed. Cluster one and emergent are the modal levels for literacy and numeracy aspects, respectively.

Figure 10 shows the percentage of children at Connected Communities schools assessed in reading, comprehension, writing and phonics from 2010 and 2015. Figure 11 shows the percentage of children assessed in early arithmetical strategies over the same period. Table 10 shows changes in the gaps in the percentage of Kindergarten students in Connected Communities schools assessed at cluster 2 or above in reading, comprehension, writing and phonics, and perceptual or above for early arithmetical strategies, relative to all Kindergarten student across NSW Government schools. Note that Best Start data is not

presented for individual schools due to volatility from year-to-year associated with the small number of Kindergarten students at several of the schools.

The gap between students at Connected Communities schools and students across all NSW Government schools narrowed in 2015. More students were assessed in Connected Communities schools in 2015 and their capabilities appear to have improved. Approximately 94 per cent of Kindergarten students at Connected Communities schools were assessed in all seven aspects of literacy and 97 per cent were assessed for all aspects of numeracy in 2015 (data not shown).

Across all NSW government schools, there is a relatively stable long-term trend in the proportion of students assessed at cluster 2 or above for phonics, comprehension and aspects of writing but a steady decline for reading texts. However, in contrast to state-wide trends, all four aspects trended upward in Connected Communities schools in 2015. Relative to 2012, the percentage of Kindergarten students assessed at cluster 2 or above has increased by:

- 4.1 percentage points for reading texts
- 7.5 percentage points for comprehension
- 7.4 percentage points for aspects of writing
- 15.0 percentage points for phonics.

While these increases are very encouraging, it will be important to monitor whether this increase is sustained when more data are available in future years.

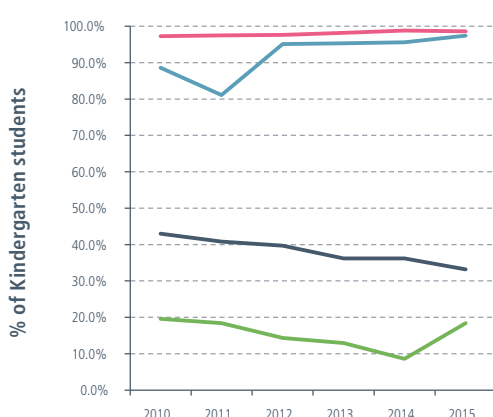
While improvements have been observed in early literacy, there was no evidence of a comparable improvement in early numeracy. Since 2012, the percentage of Kindergarten students assessed at perceptual or above for early arithmetical strategies decreased by 2.1 percentage points in Connected Communities schools. The percentage remained steady from 2014 to 2015.

Figure 10:

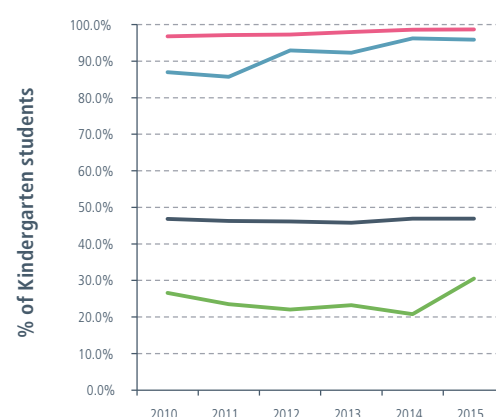
Percentage of students assessed in the Best Start Kindergarten assessment for literacy, 2010-2015

Source: Public Schools NSW, Department of Education and Communities, June 2015

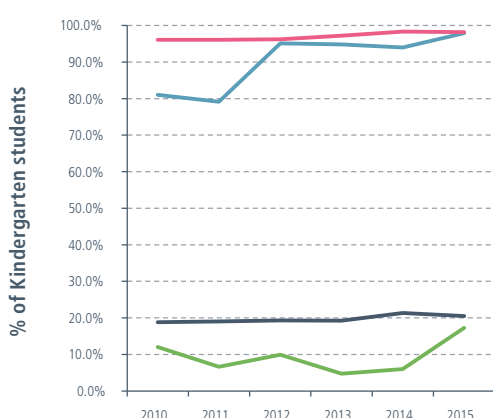
Reading texts



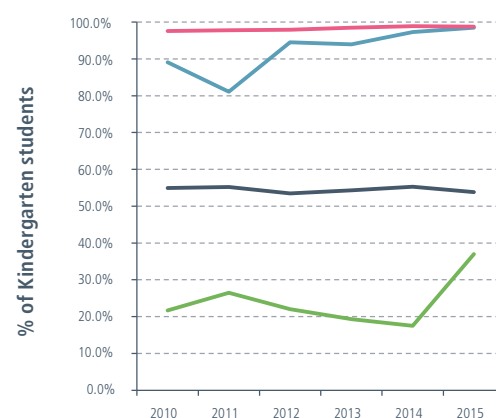
Comprehension



Aspects of writing



Phonics



— Connected Communities - % assessed
— Connected Communities - % cluster 2 or above

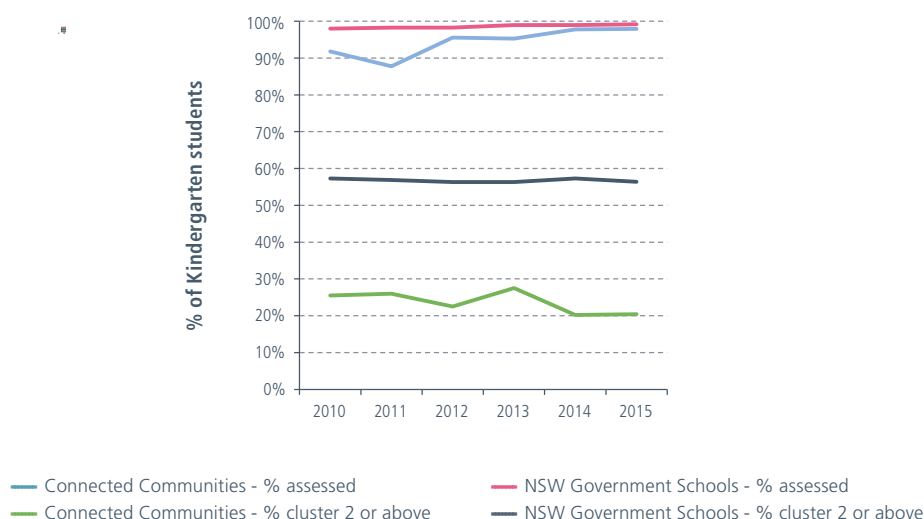
— NSW Government Schools - % assessed
— NSW Government Schools - % cluster 2 or above

***Note:** Data sourced from Public Schools NSW, Department of Education and Communities, as at June 2015. The percentage of students assessed at cluster 2 or above only takes into account assessed students.

Figure 11:

Percentage of students assessed in the Best Start Kindergarten assessment in 'early arithmetical strategies', 2010-2015

Source: Public Schools NSW, Department of Education and Communities, June 2015



***Note:** Data sourced from Public Schools NSW, Department of Education and Communities, as at June 2015. The percentage of students assessed at perceptual or above only takes into account assessed students.

Table 10:

'Gaps' between the percentage of Kindergarten students assessed for Best Start at cluster 2 or above for literacy aspects and perceptual or above for early arithmetical strategies, relative to all NSW Government schools, 2010-2015.

Source: Public Schools NSW, Department of Education and Communities, June 2015

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Reading texts	23.4%	22.4%	25.4%	23.3%	27.6%	14.8%
Comprehension	20.2%	22.8%	24.1%	22.6%	26.1%	16.4%
Aspects of writing	6.8%	12.4%	9.4%	14.5%	15.3%	3.2%
Phonics	33.2%	28.7%	31.5%	35.0%	37.8%	16.8%
Early arithmetical strategies	31.8%	30.9%	33.8%	28.8%	37.1%	36.0%

Table 11 shows the number of schools with changes in the percentage of students assessed at cluster 2 or above for literacy aspects from 2014 to 2015. From 2014 to 2015, three schools showed an increase in the percentage of Kindergarten students assessed at cluster 2 or above for all four reported literacy aspects. These were Boggabilla Central School, Brewarrina Central School and Moree East Public School, although Boggabilla Central School had fewer than ten Kindergarten students in 2014 and 2015. Hillvue Public School improved in three out of the four aspects, while the remaining schools improved in two or fewer of the reported literacy aspects.

Table 11:

Changes in the percentage of Kindergarten students assessed at cluster 2 or above for Best Start literacy aspects, 2014-2015

Source: HSC data are derived from the NSW Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) each year in February

	Number of schools with increased percentage of students assessed at cluster 2 or above	Number of schools with decreased percentage of students assessed at cluster 2 or above	Number of schools with unchanged percentage of students assessed at cluster 2 or above	Range
Reading texts	4	2	5	-17% to 67%
Comprehension	6	5	—	-100% to 65%
Aspects of writing	6	—	5	0% to 33%
Phonics	7	3	1	-100% to 70%

Caution should be taken with these findings as it is too early to be confident if there are the beginnings of trends in Best Start achievement. If increases in achievement for Best Start are sustained in 2016 and beyond then there can be more confidence that Kindergarten students across Connected Communities schools are starting school with have improved literacy skills compared to before the start of Connected Communities.

Teacher reported readiness of students for school

Figure 12 presents responses to survey items asking Stage 1 teachers to rate their agreement with statements about the developmental readiness of their students across a range of dimensions. A majority of Stage 1 teachers believe that their students are physically ready for school. Between 51 and 62 per cent of respondents also agreed that their students were developmentally ready for school across the domains of socialisation, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills.

However, when the responses from Stage 1 teachers at Bourke Public School and Hillvue Public School are removed, the percentage of teachers who agreed that their students were developmentally ready for school fell across all aspects. Approximately one-third of Stage 1 teachers outside of Bourke Public School and Hillvue Public School agreed that their students were emotionally ready for school and had the necessary socialisation skills.

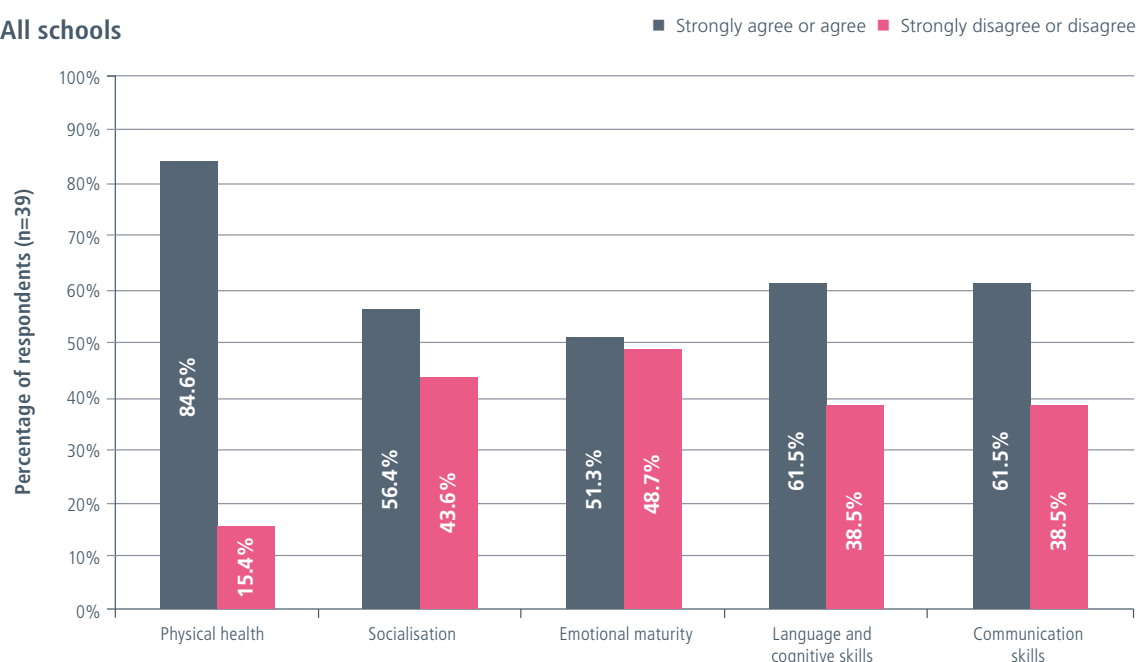
While these teacher surveys are not referenced to standards-based measures of child development, they provide indicative evidence that students in Stage 1 at Bourke Public School and Hillvue Public School may be more developmentally ready for school than students in the remaining schools. This would be consistent with the reputed achievements of the expanded transition programs established in these two schools in 2014.

Figure 12:

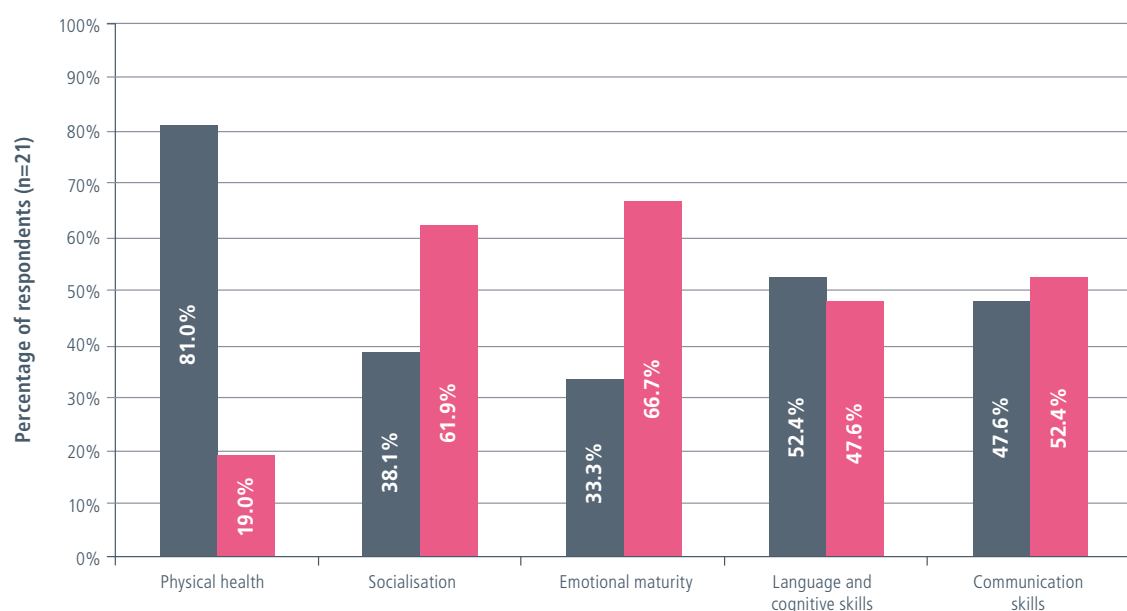
Stage 1 teacher reported developmental readiness of students for school

Source: Survey of teachers in Connected Communities schools, 2015

All schools



All schools (excluding Bourke Public School and Hillvue Public School)



Taken together, the Best Start data and survey responses suggest that Kindergarten students across Connected Communities schools may be more developmentally ready to benefit from schooling in 2015 than they were before the start of Connected Communities. There appears to have been an increase in literacy skills of children entering Kindergarten across Connected Communities schools, in particular between 2014 and 2015. At least for Bourke Public School and Hillvue Public School this coincides with the majority of teachers reporting that Stage 1 students in 2015 are developmentally ready to benefit from schooling. Whether these increases are due to activities within Connected Communities schools, such as the expanded transition to school programs implemented in 2014, cohort effects or some other factor(s) will be examined in more detail in the final report. The final evaluation report will also be able to consider data from the 2015, and possibly 2018, AEDC which will provide more evidence about changes in the developmental readiness of Kindergarten students in Connected Communities schools.

4.2 Student attendance

Figure 13 shows that the attendance rates for all primary students across Connected Communities schools has been steadily increasing since 2009 (+4.9 percentage points), and that this has been due to increased attendance by Aboriginal students (+5.6 percentage points), and not non-Aboriginal students. Since 2012, the attendance rate of Aboriginal primary students across Connected Communities schools increased by 2.6 percentage points. Over this period the gap in attendance between primary students across Connected Communities schools and all primary students across NSW Government schools has closed from 8.9 percentage points to 7.7 percentage points (-1.2 percentage points).

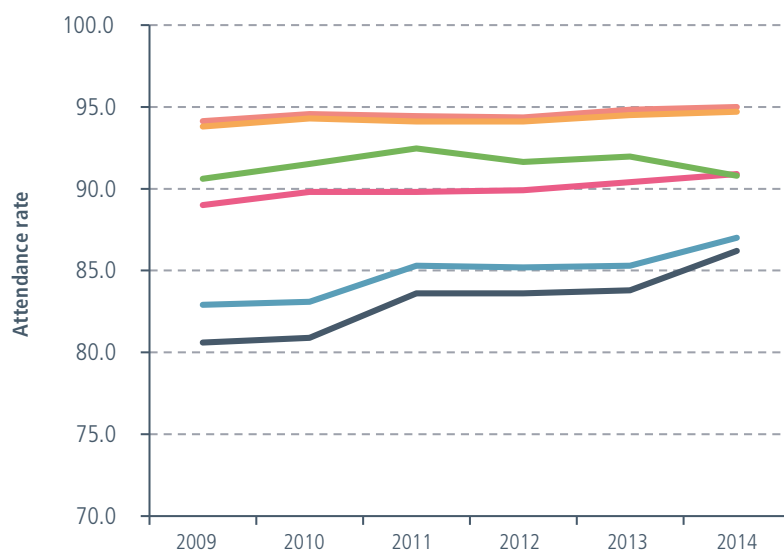
The attendance rate for secondary students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal has remained steady since both 2009 and 2012. The gap between secondary students across Connected Communities schools and all secondary students across NSW Government schools has also remained remaining steady.

Figure 13:

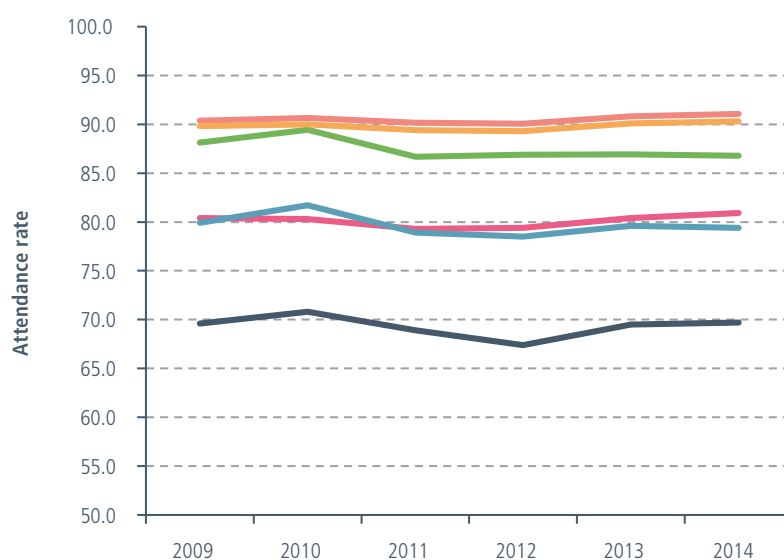
Attendance rates for students across Connected Communities schools, Semester 1, 2009-2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE)

Primary School



Secondary School



— Connected Communities - Aboriginal
 — Connected Communities - non-Aboriginal
 — Connected Communities - All students
 — NSW Government Schools - Aboriginal
 — NSW Government Schools - non-Aboriginal
 — NSW Government Schools - All students

***Note:** Attendance rates are sourced from the return of absences census conducted in the final week of term two by the Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Kindergarten, Year 11 and Year 12 students have been excluded in attendance rates, consistent with national reporting standards. Distance education and SSPs do not participate in the absences collection.

Figure 14 shows the attendance rates for primary students for each Connected Communities school in 2012 and 2014. Figure 15 shows the attendance rate for secondary students. These data are also available at the My School website¹¹. The schools are presented in ascending order according to their 2014 attendance rates. The 2012 attendance rates are shown to give an indication of changes at the school level since the start of Connected Communities. The 2014 attendance rates for all students in NSW Government schools are displayed for benchmarking purposes.

Eight of the 11 schools with primary students reported increased attendance rates from 2012 to 2014. Three schools reported improvements of more than seven percentage points over the last two years for Years 1 to 6. There are no discernible differences in the trends for Aboriginal students, which is not surprising given that the majority of primary students across Connected Communities schools are Aboriginal.

Attendance rates for secondary students show varied patterns across the Connected Communities schools. Although Years 7 to 10 attendance improved by more than seven percentage points at three schools or campuses from 2012 to 2014, it declined by more than seven percentage points at two other schools. For Aboriginal students, the attendance rates clearly increased from 2012 to 2014 at five schools including by 8.0 or more percentage points at three schools. However, at two schools that attendance rate for Aboriginal secondary students has declined by more than 6.5 percentage points over the same period.

It is important to highlight that the attendance rates at all Connected Communities schools are below the attendance rates for all primary and secondary students across NSW Government schools.

In interpreting school-level attendance rates, note that attendance rates at small schools should be treated with caution. They can be affected by just one family with poor attendance patterns joining or leaving a school. Changing systems for recording attendance can also result in more accurate recording of student absences. School-level attendance rates can also sometimes mask instances where schools have had success reengaging students with historically long-term poor attendance. Based on discussions with Executive Principals, there are numerous examples of this across the schools as a group.

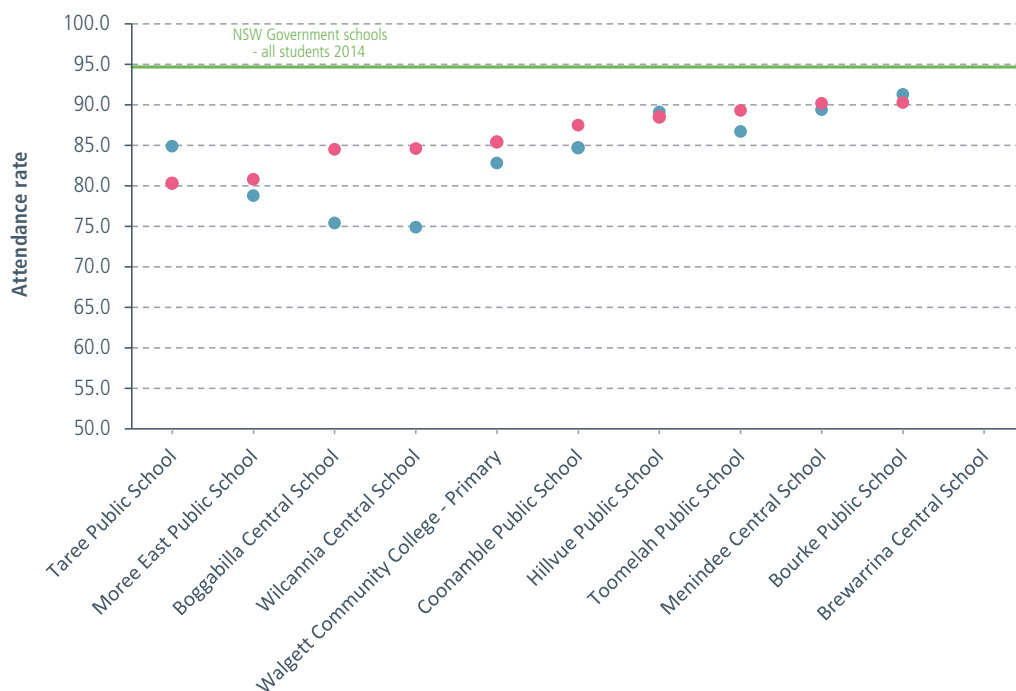
¹¹ <http://www.myschool.edu.au>

Figure 14:

Attendance rates for primary students at Connected Communities schools, Semester 1, 2012 and 2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE)

All students



Aboriginal students



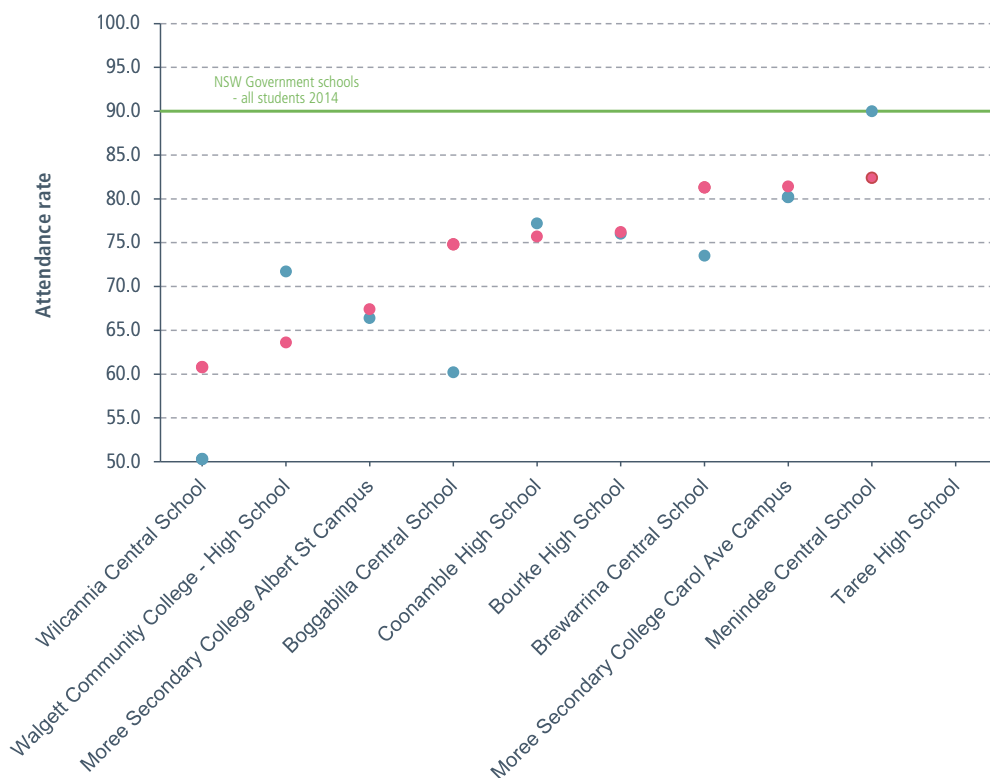
***Note:** Attendance rates are sourced from the return of absences census conducted in the final week of term two by the Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Kindergarten students have been excluded in attendance rates, consistent with national reporting standards. Distance education and SSPs do not participate in the absences collection.

Figure 15:

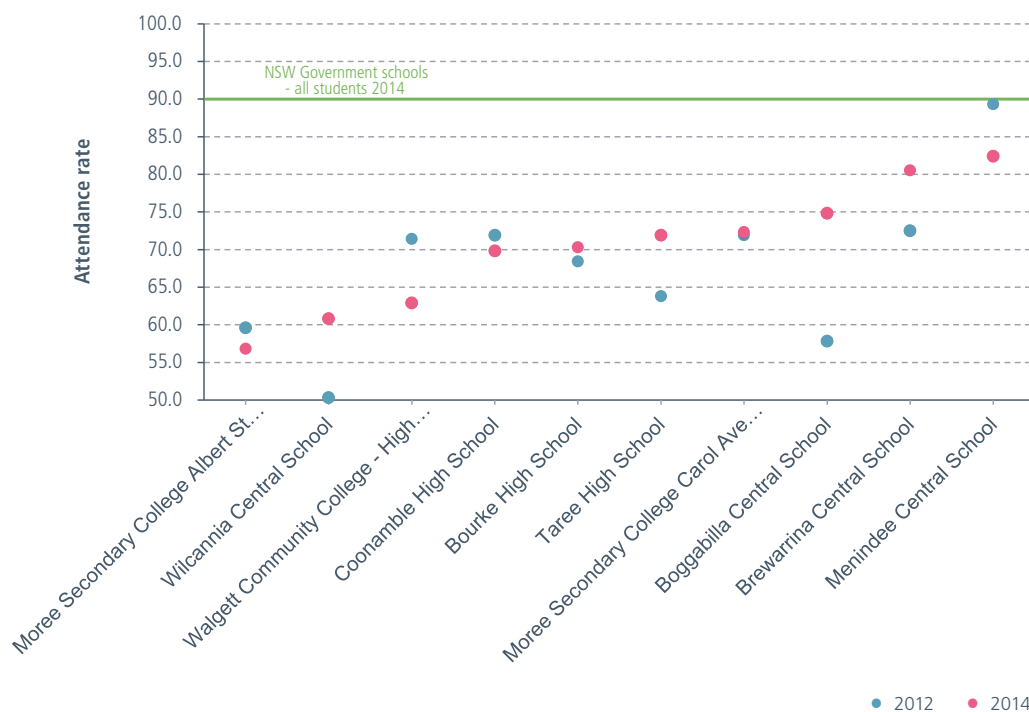
Attendance rates for secondary students at Connected Communities schools, Semester 1, 2012 and 2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE)

All students



Aboriginal students



***Note:** Attendance rates are sourced from the return of absences census conducted in the final week of term two by the Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. Years 11 and 12 students have been excluded in attendance rates, consistent with national reporting standards. Distance education and SSPs do not participate in the absences collection.

4.3 Literacy and numeracy

NAPLAN is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Commencing in 2008, NAPLAN assessments are undertaken nationwide each year in the second full week in May. The NAPLAN is made up of tests in the four domains of reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.

NAPLAN participation

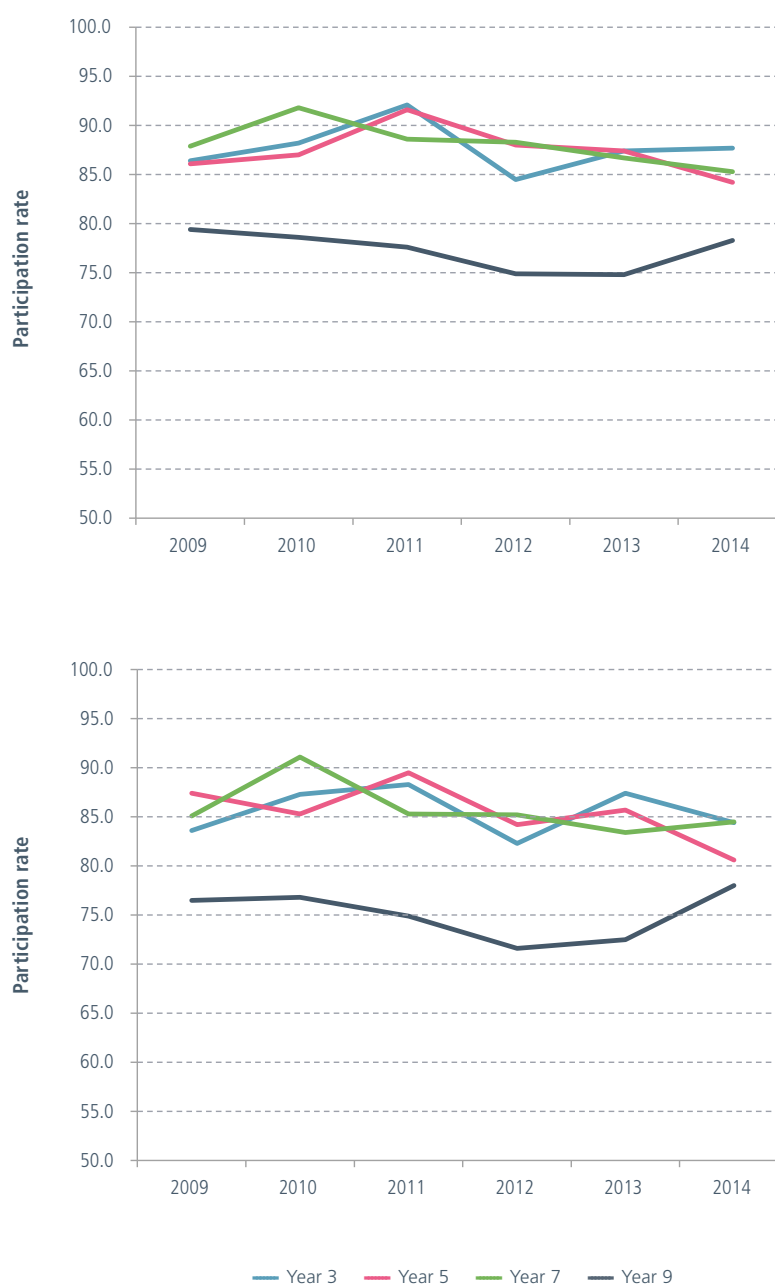
Figure 16 outlines the percentage of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students across Connected Communities schools as a group from 2009 to 2014 participating in NAPLAN reading and numeracy assessments. These trends are difficult to determine due to volatility from year-to-year and the low number of students participating at several of the schools. Overall, there is no discernible increasing or decreasing trend in participation rates across any year groups. The most obvious pattern in Figure 16 is the lower participation rates among Year 9 students across both reading and numeracy assessments.

Figure 16:

Participation rate of students on NAPLAN across Connected Communities schools as a group, 2009-2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). NAPLAN data extracted from student-level NAPLAN data stored in the Statistics Unit's database

Reading



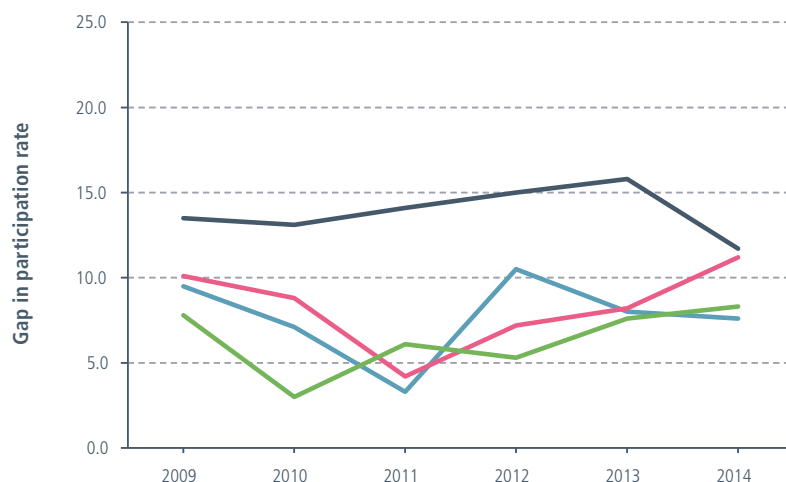
***Note:** NAPLAN participation rate is the total number of students, by grade, who participated in a given test over all students registered at the school in the relevant grade.

Figure 17:

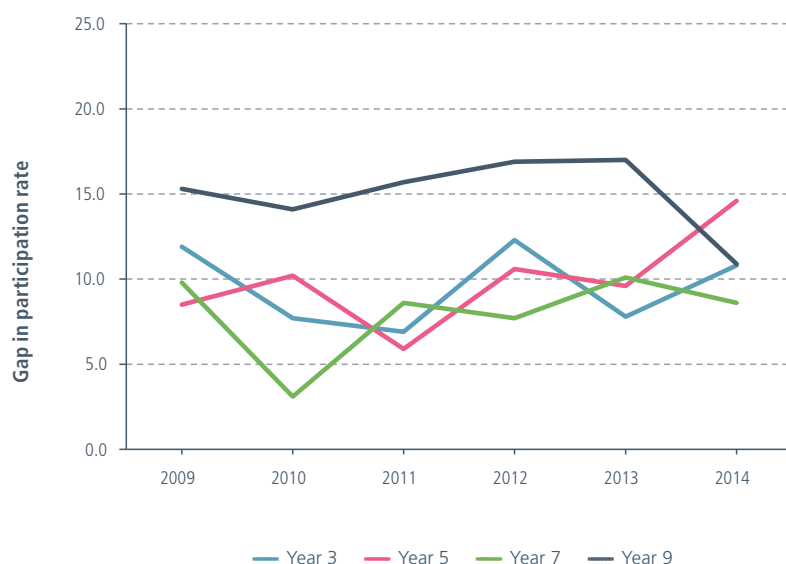
"Gap" in participation rates of students on NAPLAN between Connected Communities schools as a group and all NSW Government schools, 2009-2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). NAPLAN data extracted from student-level NAPLAN data stored in the Statistics Unit's database.

Reading



Numeracy



***Note:** NAPLAN participation rate is the total number of students, by grade, who participated in a given test over all students registered at the school in the relevant grade.

Students achieving at or above the national minimum standard (NMS) for NAPLAN

Figure 18 outlines the percentage of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students across Connected Communities schools as a group from 2009 to 2014 achieving at or above the NMS. Figure 19 presents the gaps in these measures between Connected Communities schools as a group and all NSW Government schools.

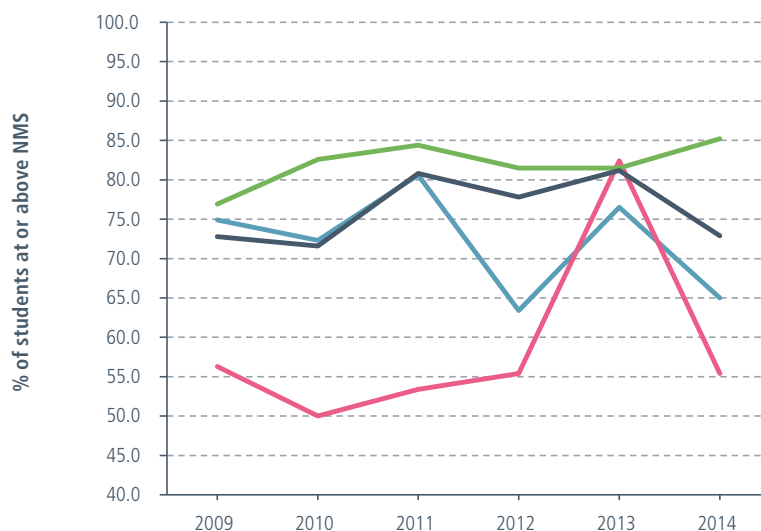
Trends since 2012 on both measures are unclear due to considerable volatility from year-to-year. However, there are no clear signs that Connected Communities has made any impact on the percentage of students achieving at or above the NMS.

Figure 18:

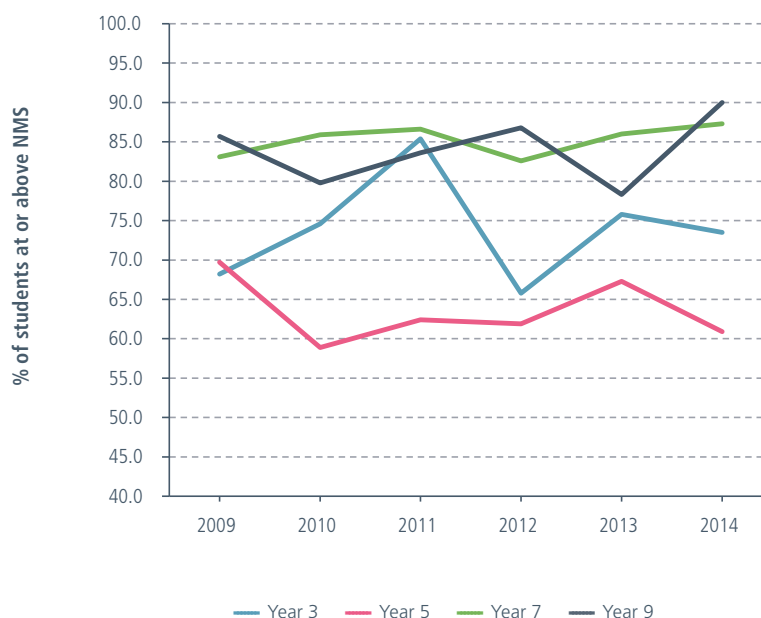
Percentage of students at or above minimum standard on NAPLAN across Connected Communities schools as a group, 2009-2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). NAPLAN data extracted from student-level NAPLAN data stored in the Statistics Unit's database.

Reading



Numeracy



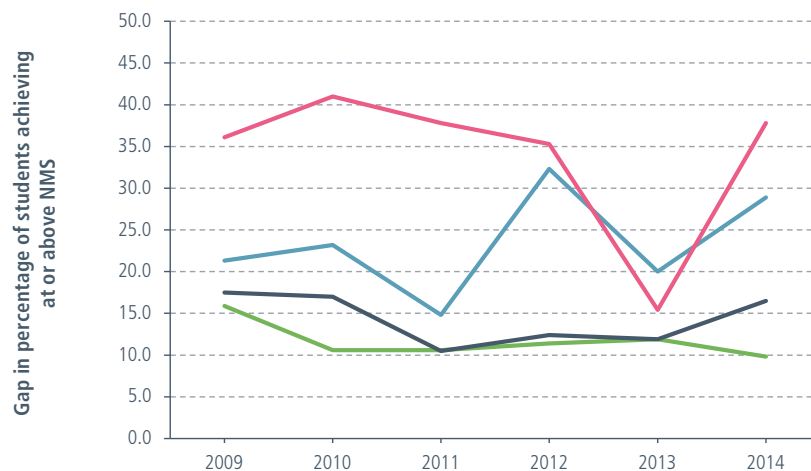
***Note:** The results provided in the above figures are based on the number of “assessed” students only, that is, the number of students who sat the NAPLAN tests. This differs from national reporting, where the number of “exempt” students is also taken into account when calculating the proportion of students meeting national minimum standards.

Figure 19:

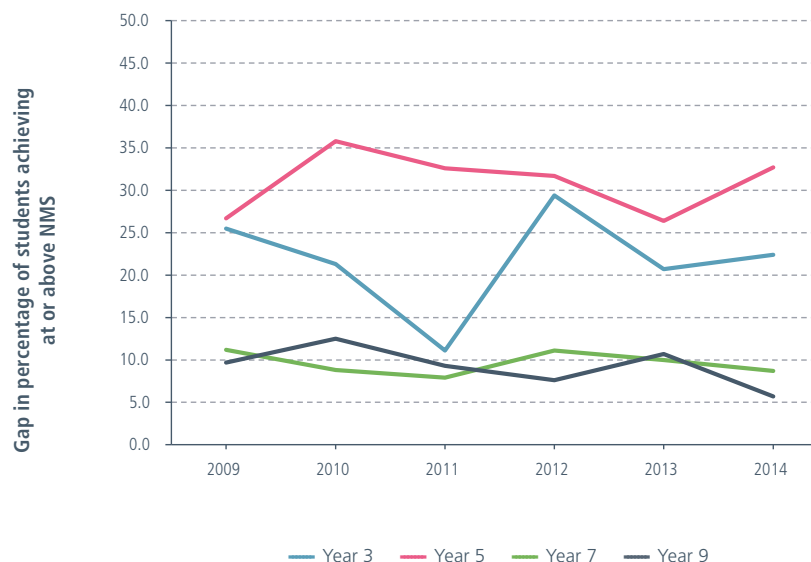
"Gap" in the percentage of students at or above minimum standard on NAPLAN across Connected Communities schools as a group and all NSW Government schools, 2009-2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). NAPLAN data extracted from student-level NAPLAN data stored in the Statistics Unit's database.

Reading



Numeracy



***Note:** The results provided in the above figures are based on the number of "assessed" students only, that is, the number of students who sat the NAPLAN tests. This differs from national reporting, where the number of "exempt" students is also taken into account when calculating the proportion of students meeting national minimum standards.

Value-added scores

Raw attainment measures are important measures of student achievement and should be the ultimate goal of schooling. All students are expected to leave school with the skills they need to enter further education or to enter the workforce. However, attainment measures are also highly correlated with factors that are outside the control of the school (e.g. family and socio-economic factors). Attainment levels therefore tend to be lower in schools that enrol a lot of children from low-income families. A fairer way to use NAPLAN data to examine the effectiveness of schools is to use value-added (VA) measures, which indicate the contribution that a school makes to student learning after these important contextual factors have been accounted for (see Lu & Rickard 2014 for a more detailed explanation of VA modelling).

Figure 20 plots the VA 3-5 scores for Connected Communities schools relative to all NSW Government schools with greater than 20 per cent Aboriginal students¹². The top panel in Figure 20 shows the contribution schools made to student growth in 2013 and 2014 (combined). The bottom panel shows the growth the same schools made in 2011 and 2012 (i.e. prior to the introduction of Connected Communities). VA measures use pooled data from two consecutive periods to reduce the year-on-year volatility in the data. In the case of the measures presented in the top panel of Figure 20, this means that Year 5 NAPLAN data from 2013 and 2014 and Year 3 NAPLAN data from 2011 and 2012 have been pooled¹³.

The caterpillar plots show that some schools have VA scores above the average for similar schools and some have scores below the average. The vertical lines represent the 95 per cent confidence, which gives a measure of how certain we can be that a school's score is truly different from the average or whether the difference could have come about by chance variation alone. If the confidence interval encompasses the school average (represented by the horizontal axis at zero), we cannot conclude that the school's VA score is different to the average for all similar schools.

In 2013 and 2014, all Connected Communities schools had confidence intervals that overlapped with the average (Figure 20). This suggests that Connected Communities schools have added the same amount of value to student learning in Years 3-5 as the average NSW Government school with greater than 20 per cent Aboriginal students. Therefore, despite gaps in the percentage of students achieving at or above the NMS relative to all NSW Government schools, Connected Communities schools are contributing the same amount of growth in NAPLAN as are comparable schools. This highlights the issue that much of the educational disadvantage facing students at Connected Communities schools relates to contextual factors outside of the direct control of the school.

Results were similar in 2011-12 (i.e. prior to Connected Communities) with one exception. Figure 20 shows that in 2011-12, one school was estimated to be adding significantly less growth to student learning relative to comparator schools. Results had improved in this school in 2013-14, where it was estimated to be adding growth that was not statistically different to the average school¹⁴. While this might sound like a modest achievement, it takes a considerable amount of good work to turn around school achievement, particularly among highly disadvantaged populations.

Figure 21 presents the VA 7-9 scores for Connected Communities schools relative to all NSW Government schools with greater than 20 per cent Aboriginal students. None of the schools were found to be significantly above or below average on this measure before the introduction of Connected Communities. However, one school was estimated to be adding significantly less growth to student learning relative to comparator schools across 2013-2014.

12 The sample has been restricted to this subset of schools to account for any student- and school-level factors that are currently excluded from the VA models used for School Excellence Framework reporting that could impact schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students. The rationale is that this might give more precision to the VA estimates among this subset of school and also allows us to estimate the mean for the subset of 'like' schools.

13 VA scores are measured in standard deviations for the later year measured. For example a VA score of 0.2 in a VA 3-5 measure indicates that a school contributes an additional one-fifth of one standard deviation to the achievement of its students in Year 5 NAPLAN.

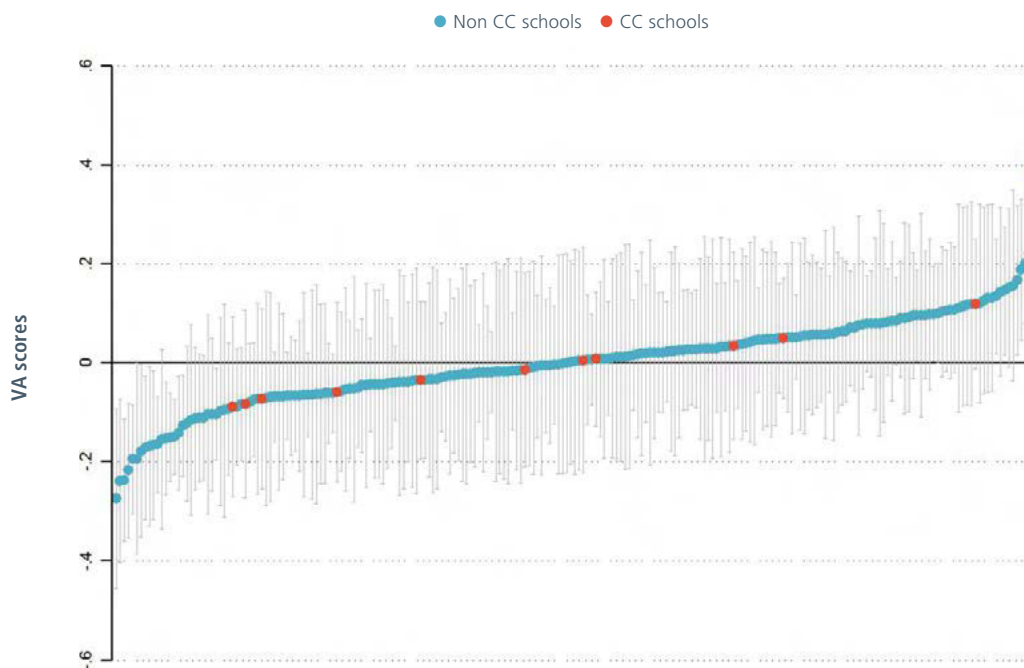
14 It is important to note that negative VA scores do not suggest that schools are reducing growth on NAPLAN. All schools add value to student learning from one time point to the next. Negative VA scores simply indicate that the school is adding less value than comparable schools. Because VA is an inherently relative measure, some schools will always have positive scores and some schools will always have negative scores.

Figure 20:

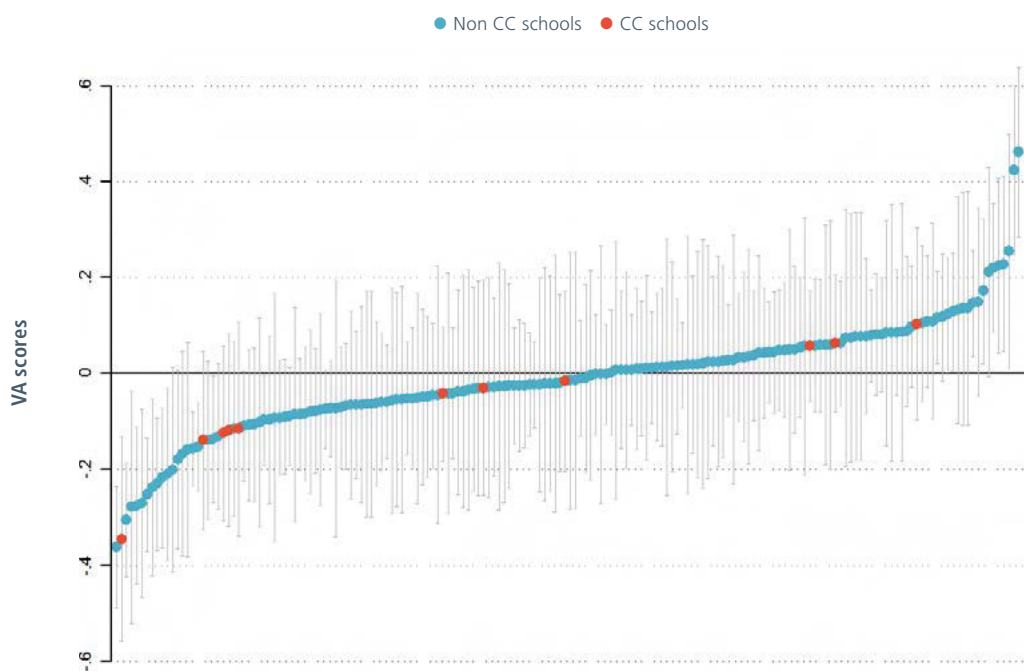
Year 3-5 value-added scores for NSW Government schools

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). NAPLAN data extracted from student-level NAPLAN data stored in the Statistics Unit's database.

2013-2014 pooled



2011-2012 pooled



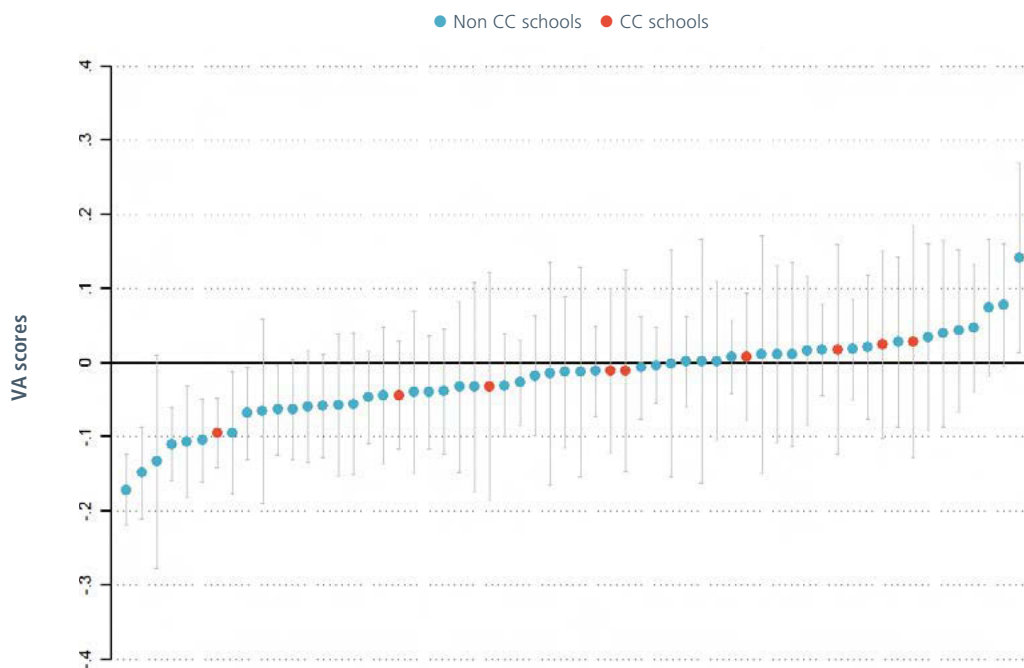
***Note:** The results provided in the above figures are based on the number of students in consecutive NAPLAN assessments at the same school.

Figure 21:

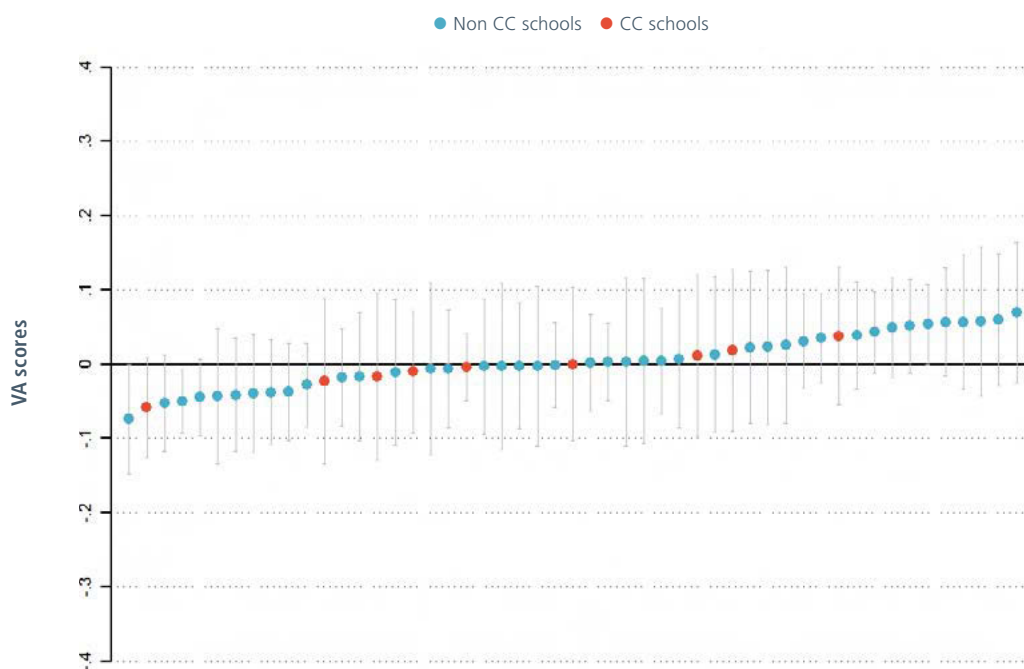
Year 7-9 value-added scores for NSW Government schools

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). NAPLAN data extracted from student-level NAPLAN data stored in the Statistics Unit's database.

2013-2014 pooled



2011-2012 pooled



***Note:** The results provided in the above figures are based on the number of students in consecutive NAPLAN assessments at the same school.

Teacher reported changes in instructional leadership and approaches to literacy and numeracy

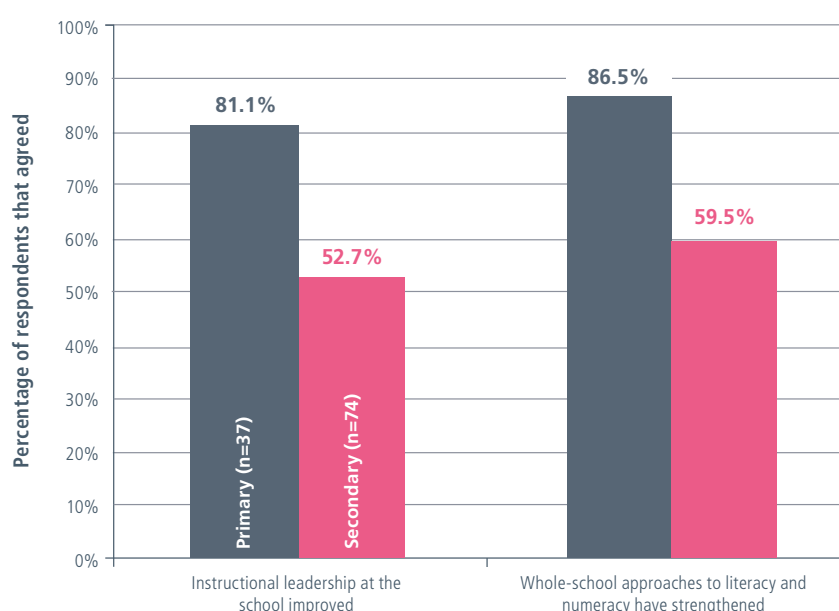
Teachers who were at their current Connected Communities school prior to 2013 were asked as part of the survey of teachers whether instructional leadership and whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy have strengthened at their school since the start of Connected Communities. Figure 22 shows that more than 80 per cent of primary school teachers believe that instructional leadership at their school has improved and whole school approaches to literacy and numeracy have strengthened. This supports teacher views during site visits to Connected Communities schools that the Instructional Leaders under Early Action for Success are having a positive impact on the quality of literacy and numeracy teaching.

Approximately half (52 per cent) of secondary teachers believed that instructional leadership has improved at their school and 59 per cent believed that whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy has improved at their school. It is of particular note that 100 per cent of secondary teacher respondents from Brewarrina Central School (n=7) believe the approach to literacy and numeracy at their school has strengthened since the start of Connected Communities. Based on discussions with teachers at this school during site visits, this could be due to the introduction of the project-based Big Picture Education in 2014¹⁵.

Figure 22:

Changes in instructional leadership and approaches to literacy and numeracy

Source: Survey of teachers in Connected Communities schools, 2015



¹⁵ More information on Big Picture Education can be found at the following link: <http://www.bigpicture.org.au/>.

4.4 Retention until Year 12 and HSC

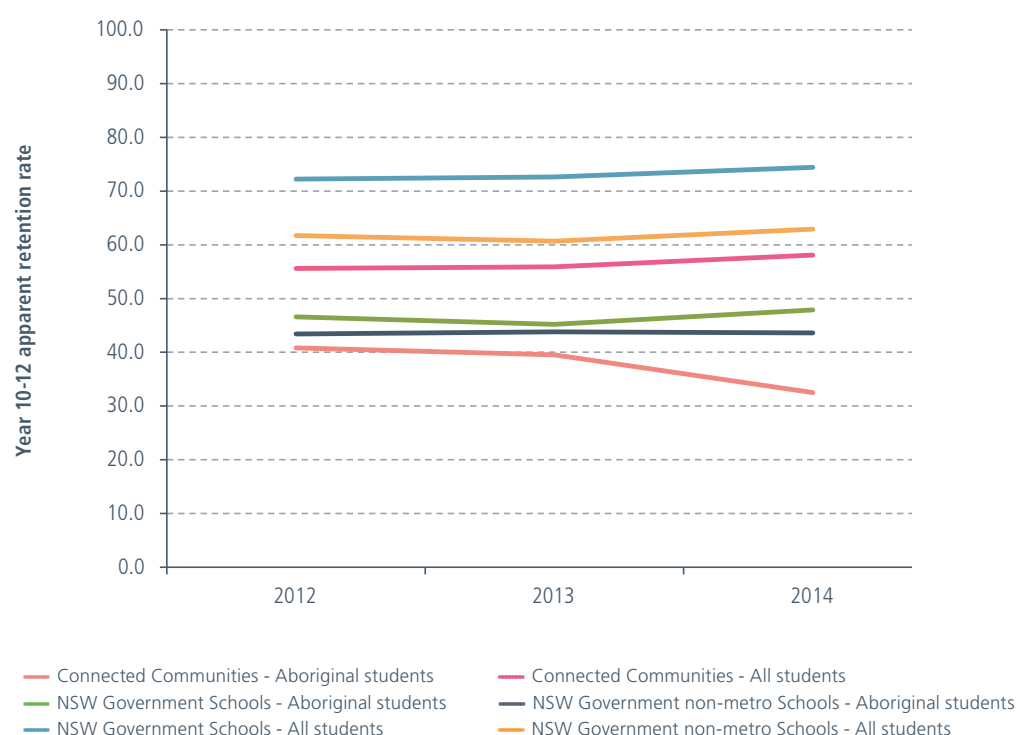
Figure 23 compares the Year 10-12 apparent retention rate (ARR) across Connected Communities schools from 2012 to 2014. Only this period is shown because legislation came into effect in NSW in January 2010 raising the school leaving age. Therefore, the Year 12 cohort in 2012 was the first group of students who were required to complete Year 10. This means that the Year 10 enrolment figure across NSW was higher from 2010 than in previous years, resulting in a relative decline in year 10 to 12 apparent retention from 2011 to 2013. The Year 10-12 ARR is shown rather than the Year 7-12 ARR to minimise the impact of high student mobility associated with Connected Communities schools. The Year 10-12 ARRs of students across all NSW government schools and all non-metropolitan NSW government schools are shown for comparison.

Due to the low number of data points, it is difficult to identify a trend in Year 12 ARRs at this stage. However, there has been a concerning 8.3 percentage point decline in Aboriginal ARRs at Connected Communities schools between 2012 and 2014. The majority of this decrease was observed between 2013 and 2014 (7.0 percentage points). It is too soon to determine whether this is the beginning of a trend or whether 2014 was an anomalous year, but this is a concerning outcome.

Figure 23:

Full-time equivalent (FTE) Year 10-12 Apparent Retention rates (ARRs) across Connected Communities schools, 2012-2014

Source: Statistics Unit, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). Enrolment data (including those used in the calculations of Apparent Retention Rates) extracted from Statistics Unit's NSSC data cube, populated with National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC) data.



***Note:** NSSC enrolments collected as at the first Friday in August every year. All NSSC enrolments are full-time equivalent (FTE) figures. Retention rates are “apparent” as they do not track individual students through their final years of secondary schooling. What they measure is the ratio of the total FTE of students in a designated year (i.e. Year 12 in 2014) divided by the total FTE of students in a previous year (i.e. Year 10 in 2012). Care should be exercised in the interpretation of apparent retention rates as the method of calculation does not take into account a range of factors including students repeating a year, movements of students between States and Territories, and between school sectors, the impact of full-fee paying overseas students, and varying enrolment patterns in which students choose to complete their secondary schooling at TAFE.

Secondary student aspirations

Figure 24 estimates the aspirations of Year 7-10 students at Connected Communities schools to finish Year 12 and go onto University or undertake an apprenticeship or TAFE course. Estimates are based on responses to items within the *Tell Them From Me* student survey conducted in 2014 and 2015 (for more information refer to Willms 2014). The findings suggest that from 2014 to 2015 the percentage of non-Aboriginal students aspiring to finish Year 12 across Connected Communities schools as a group has remained steady at approximately 80 per cent. The percentage has declined by 4.4 percentage points for Aboriginal students to be approximately 75 per cent in 2015. However, despite the decline, the difference with non-Aboriginal students in 2015 is not statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 2.27, p=0.13$). The responses also suggest that in both 2014 and 2015, a lower percentage of Year 7-10 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students across Connected Communities were aspiring to finish Year 12 compared to all Year 7-10 students across participating NSW Government schools.

With regards to the post-school aspirations of Year 7-10 students, in 2015 approximately 73.5 per cent of Aboriginal students and 76.8 per cent of non-Aboriginal students reported aspirations to participate in post school education or training. For Aboriginal students this has remained steady since 2014 but has increased by 5.0 percentage points for non-Aboriginal students. However, despite the increase the difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in 2015 is not statistically significant ($\chi^2(1) = 1.17, p=0.28$). In both 2014 and 2015 lower percentages of Years 7-10 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students across Connected Communities reported aspirations to participate in post-school education or training compared to all Year 7-10 students who took the survey across NSW Government schools.

Figure 24:

Aspirations for Year 7-10 students across Connected Communities schools, 2014-2015

Source: Student responses to TTFM secondary student survey conducted in T1 and T2 2014, and T1 2015



HSC Awards

Table 12 shows the number of students across Connected Communities schools who received an HSC Award from 2009 to 2014. Data for individual schools is not shown due to the low number of Year 12 students at some schools. At this stage there are no clear trends across Connected Communities schools as a group. While there was a decrease in the number of Aboriginal students who received an HSC Award from 2013 to 2014, the number returned to pre-2012 levels suggesting that 2012 and 2013 could be anomalies. However, it is clear from the data that Aboriginal students in Connected Communities schools are continuing to receive an HSC Award at a much lower rate than non-Aboriginal students. The ratio of non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal secondary students is approximately 1.2 to 1.0 across Connected Communities schools, yet in 2014 non-Aboriginal students received almost five times as many HSC awards as Aboriginal students.

Table 12:
Students across
Connected Communities
schools receiving an HSC
Award, 2009-12

Source: HSC data are
derived from the NSW
Board of Studies, Teaching
and Educational Standards
(BOSTES) each year in
February

HSC Awards	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Aboriginal students	37	35	31	48	53	36
Non-Aboriginal students	178	157	174	170	169	177

Table 13 shows HSC Awards excluding those awarded to students at Taree High School, which being substantially the largest Connected Communities school can skew the data. When Taree High School is excluded, there are still no clear trends in the number of students receiving an HSC Award across the remaining Connected Communities schools as a group. However, the ratio of non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal students receiving an HSC Award is decreased to approximately two to one.

Table 13:
Students across
Connected Communities
schools (excluding Taree
High School) receiving an
HSC Award, 2009-12

Source: HSC data are
derived from the NSW
Board of Studies, Teaching
and Educational Standards
(BOSTES) each year in
February

HSC Awards	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Aboriginal students	34	31	31	39	49	31
Non-Aboriginal students	64	45	57	65	75	63

4.5 Families and community members are actively engaged in the schools

During site visits to Connected Communities schools, teachers at all schools reported that a substantial percentage of parents and carers (or guardians) of Aboriginal students are difficult to engage. This appeared to be more of an issue for parents and guardians of secondary students. This was further explored as part of the 2015 survey of teachers in Connected Communities schools.

Table 14 presents the level of agreement by teachers across Connected Communities schools to two survey items regarding their engagement with parents and carers and their perceptions of parent and guardian support for their children to do well at school. Teachers were asked separately for the parents and carers of their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. A significantly greater percentage of primary (59.2 per cent vs 38.4 per cent) and secondary teachers (50.4 per cent vs 17.1 per cent) indicated greater contact with the parents and carers of non-Aboriginal students compared to Aboriginal students. Primary teachers were also substantially more likely to indicate contact around student learning with parents and carers of Aboriginal students than secondary teachers. The difference was not as large for parents and carers of non-Aboriginal students.

A significantly higher percentage of primary and secondary teachers also responded that they strongly agree or agree that the parents and carers of their non-Aboriginal students better support their children to do well at school compared to those of their Aboriginal students. Again the responses indicate that the parents or carers of Aboriginal primary students are more supportive of their children's education than the parents and carers of Aboriginal secondary students. The difference was not as large for the parents and carers of non-Aboriginal students.

Table 14:

Teacher perceptions of parent and carer engagement with the school and the education of their children.

Source: Survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools, 2015.

	Percentage of teachers that strongly agree or agree			
	Primary teachers		Secondary teachers	
	non-Aboriginal (n=76)	Aboriginal (n=86)	non-Aboriginal (n=117)	Aboriginal (n=123)
Parents/carers of the students I teach contact me when their children are having a problem with learning	59.2%	38.4%* ($\chi^2(1) = 7.02$)	50.4%	17.1%* ($\chi^2(1) = 30.02$)
Parents/carers of the students I teach support their children to do well at school	80.0%	53.5%* ($\chi^2(1) = 12.52$)	75.9%	36.6%* ($\chi^2(1) = 37.31$)

* $p < .05$

Figure 25 reports teacher estimates for the percentage of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents attending parent-teacher interviews. The responses suggest that a lower percentage of parents/carers of Aboriginal students attend parent-teacher meetings compared to parents/carers of non-Aboriginal students. For primary teachers, 48.8 per cent of survey respondents estimated that a quarter or less of Aboriginal parents/carers attended parent-teacher meetings. This compared to 36.2 per cent who estimated that a quarter or less of non-Aboriginal parents attended parent-teacher meetings. The difference is even greater for secondary teachers where 81.3 per cent of respondents estimated that a quarter or less of Aboriginal parents/carers attended parent-teacher meetings compared to an estimate of 41.2 per cent for non-Aboriginal parents/carers.

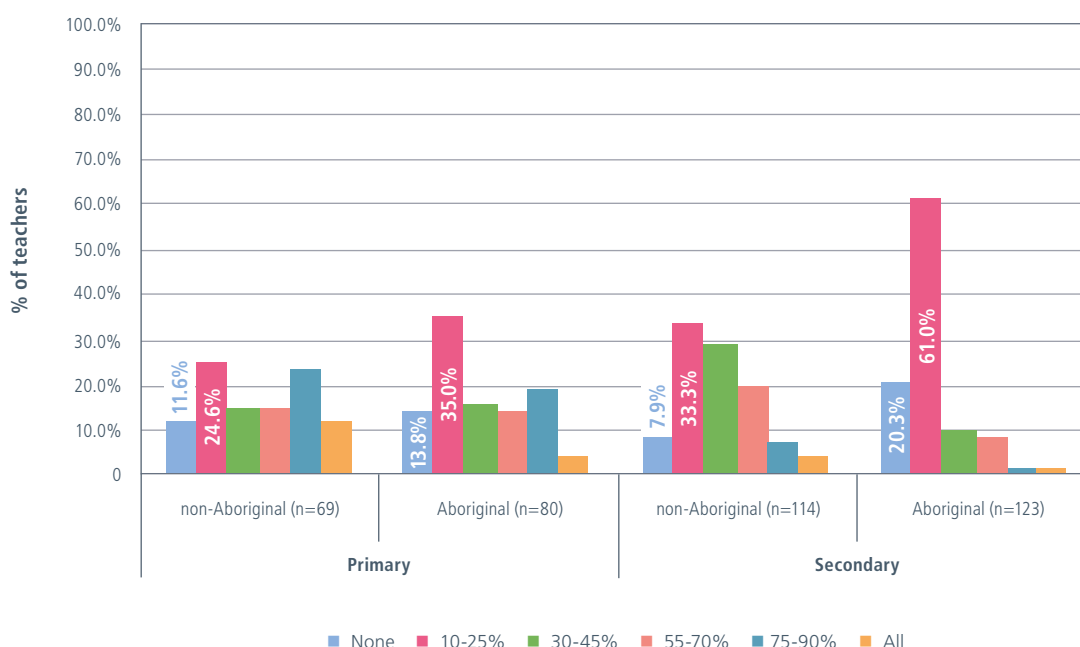
The survey responses also indicate that overall a greater percentage of parents/carers of primary school students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, attend parent-teacher meetings compared to parents/carers of secondary students.

A notable example where teachers reported strong attendance by Aboriginal parents/carers at parent-teacher meetings is Bourke Public School, where 65 per cent of teachers estimated that 55 per cent or more of their Aboriginal parents/carers attend parent-teacher meetings.

Figure 25:

Teacher estimates of the percentage of parents attending parent-teacher meetings

Source: Survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools, 2015.

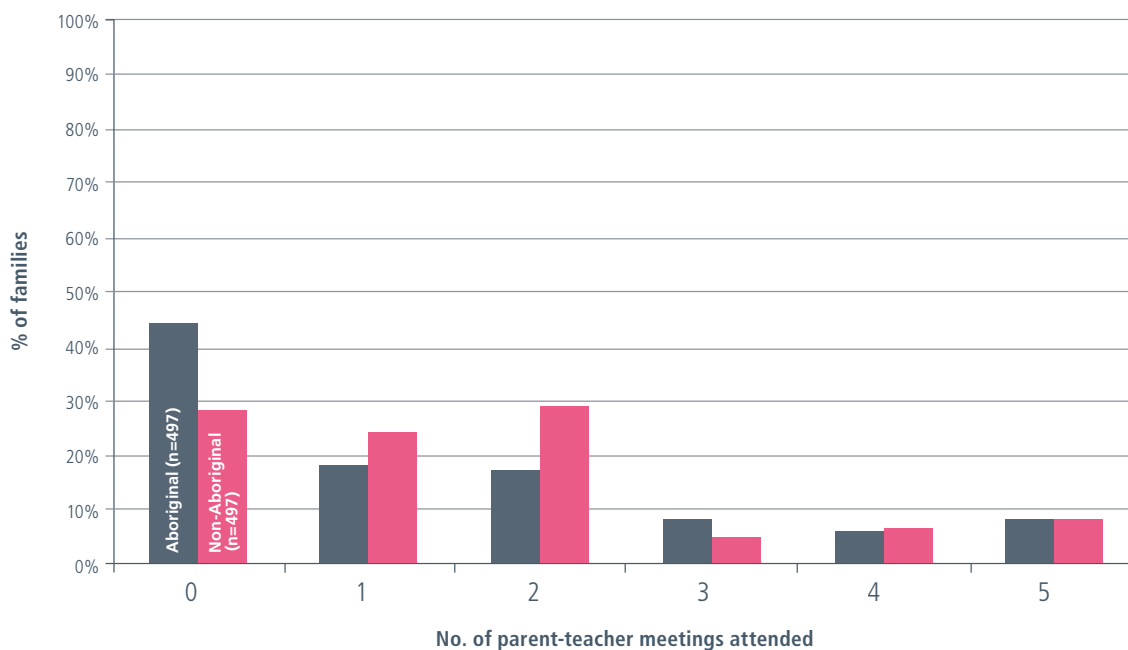


The survey of parents and guardians provided further evidence that indicates that a greater percentage of non-Aboriginal parents/carers attend parent-teacher meetings compared to Aboriginal parents-carers. The responses from parents and guardians indicate that 44 per cent of Aboriginal families surveyed did not attend a parent-teacher meeting in 2014 compared to 28 per cent of non-Aboriginal families (Figure 26).

Figure 26:

The percentage of families attending parent-teacher meetings across Connected Communities schools as a group in 2014

Source: Survey of parents and guardians of students at Connected Communities schools conducted over Term 4 of 2014 and T1 of 2015.

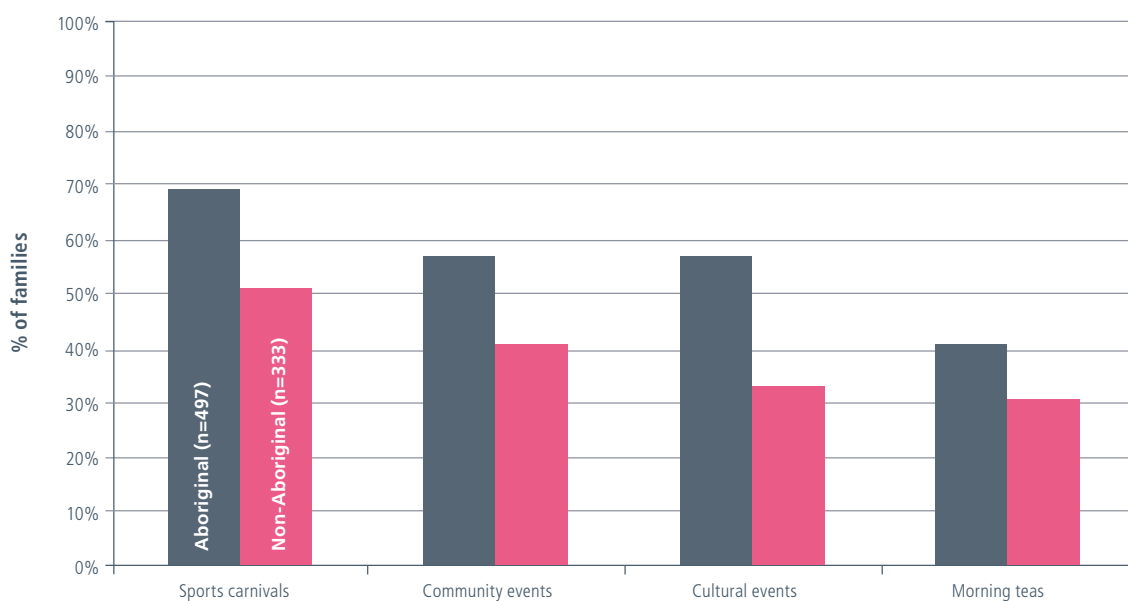


During site visits, teachers across all Connected Communities schools indicated that Aboriginal parents were more likely to attend a school event rather than a parent-teacher meeting. Findings from the survey of parents and guardians support this with more than 50 percent of Aboriginal families reporting attending sports carnivals, community events and cultural events at the school in 2014 (Figure 27). Aboriginal parents and guardians were more likely than non-Aboriginal parents to report attending each of the events shown in Figure 27.

Figure 27:

Percentage of families attending events at Connected Communities schools

Source: Survey of parents and guardians of students at Connected Communities schools conducted over Term 4 of 2014 and T1 of 2015.



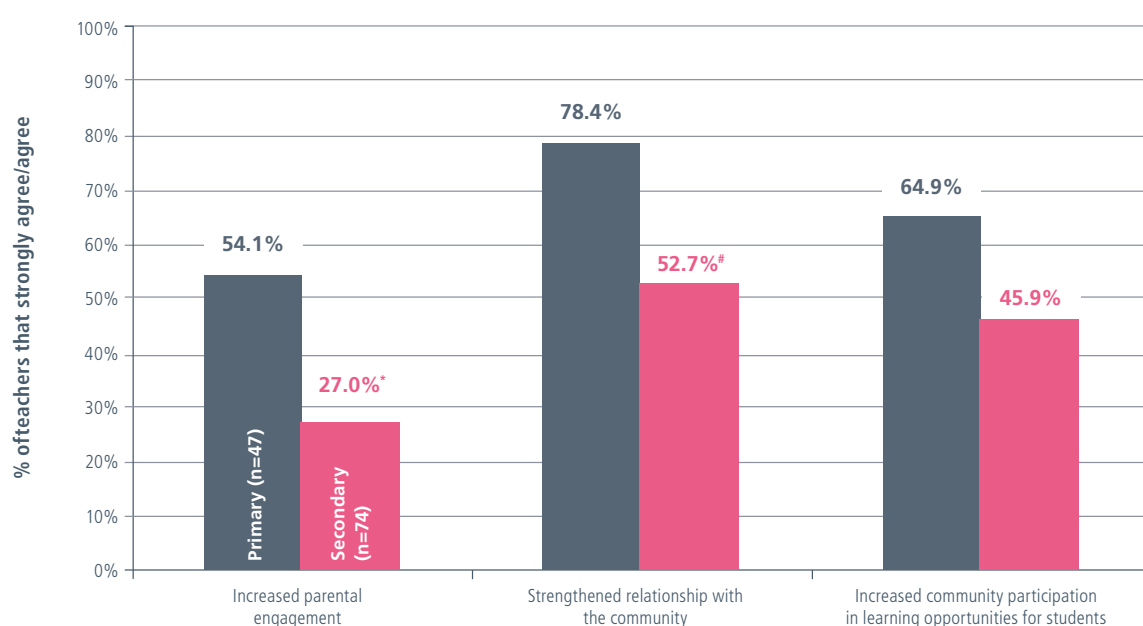
As part of the teacher survey, teachers that have been at their schools since before the start of Connected Communities were asked whether parent and community engagement has improved since the Strategy began. More than half (54.1 percent) of primary teachers and 27.0 per cent of secondary teachers strongly agree or agree that parents and carers have become more engaged in the school and their children's education since the start of Connected Communities. Just over three-quarters of these primary teachers also agreed that their school's relationship with the community has improved and almost 65 per cent agreed that there was increased participation from the community in learning opportunities for students. The percentage of pre-2013 secondary teachers who agreed with these statements was lower than for primary teachers but the differences were only significant for increased parental engagement and a strengthened relationship with the community at a five percent level of significance (Figure 28).

Reports of increased parental engagement and a strengthened community relationship were not universal across schools. Teachers at Bourke Public School, Brewarrina Central School, Hillvue Public School, Coonamble Public School, Taree Public School and Taree High School reported the strongest agreement with the statements.

Figure 28:

Teacher perceptions of improved parent and community engagement since the start of Connected Communities

Source: Survey of teachers at Connected Communities schools, 2015.



* $\chi^2(1) = 8.42, p = .0037$ # $\chi^2(1) = 7.71, p = .0054$

Taken together the findings presented in this section suggest that across Connected Communities schools as a group, there is good engagement of Aboriginal parents/carers with school events, apparently better than engagement of non-Aboriginal parents/carers. However, a lower percentage of Aboriginal parents/carers appear to be engaged in meetings about their children's learning, particularly for the parents/carers of secondary students. There is also evidence that since the start of Connected Communities parental engagement has increased at some schools, although predominantly in primary schools. The strength of the relationship with the community appears to have improved at the majority of primary schools and less so across secondary schools.

4.6 Students and communities report that schools value their identity, culture, goals and aspirations.

Figure 29 shows the percentage of Aboriginal secondary students at Connected Communities schools reporting in the 2014 and 2015 *Tell Them From Me* surveys that they feel good about their culture when they are at school. The responses are shown for each individual school, maintaining the anonymity of schools.

The data shows that the percentage of Aboriginal secondary students who reported feeling good about their culture at school increased from 2014 to 2015 at five Connected Communities schools or campuses with secondary students, and remained steady at one school. However, chi-squared tests indicate that the increases observed at the five schools or campuses are not significant at a five per cent level of significance.

Data from 2014 is not available for two of the schools or campuses, but at one of those schools no students who took the survey in 2015 reported feeling good about their culture at school. Students can respond flippantly to anonymous surveys of this kind so the responses should be treated with some degree of caution. The responses indicate that in 2015, at least 60 per cent of Aboriginal secondary students at eight of the schools or campuses reported feeling good about their culture at school.

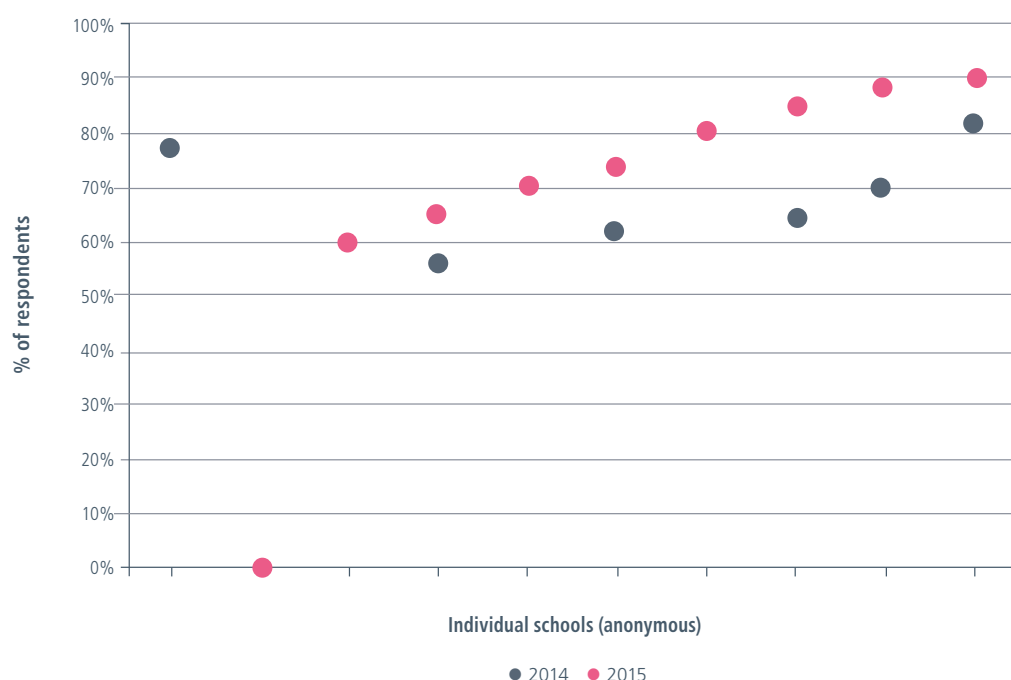
Data from 2015 is not available at one school but 77.3 per cent of respondents reported feeling good about their culture at school in 2014¹⁶.

Importantly, in both 2014 and 2015 less than 15 per cent of non-Aboriginal secondary students across Connected Communities schools reported that they don't feel good about their culture at school (data not shown). This suggests that Connected Communities is not having an adverse effect on how non-Aboriginal secondary students feel at school.

Figure 29:

Percentage of secondary students at Connected Communities schools reporting that they feel good about their culture at school

Source: Student responses to TTFM secondary student survey conducted in T1 and T2 2014, and T1 2015.



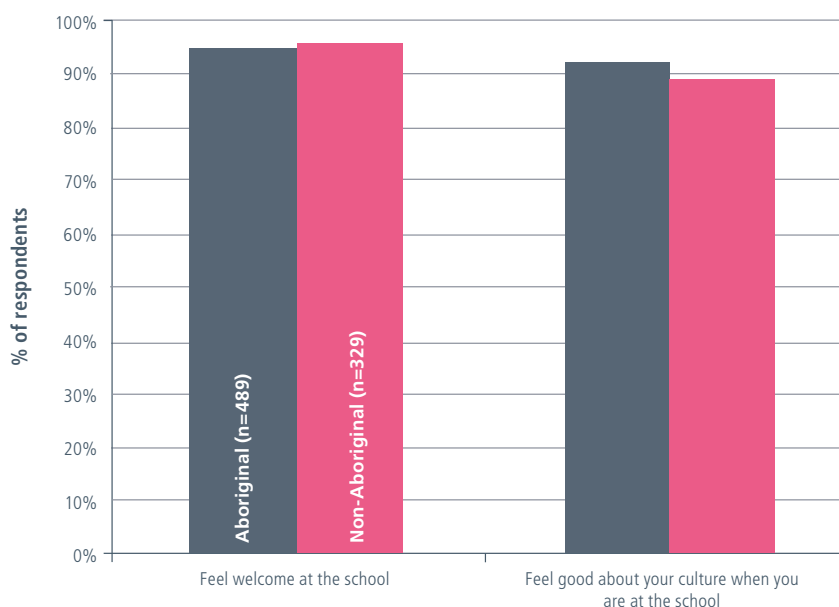
Parents/carers were also asked about culture at their child's school as part of the parents and guardians survey. Figure 30 shows that the majority of surveyed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents and guardians feel welcome and good about their culture at their child's school. The responses to the items by non-Aboriginal parents and guardians were almost identical, which suggests that Connected Communities has had no had any unintended adverse effects on parents and guardians of non-Aboriginal students.

16 At one school only one Year 7-12 student responded to the survey. Therefore, the results from this school have been excluded from the analysis.

Figure 30:

Percentage of parents that feel welcome and good about their culture across Connected Communities schools

Source: Survey of parents and guardians of students at Connected Communities schools conducted over Term 4 of 2014 and T1 of 2015.



Finally, teachers who have been at their school since before the start of Connected Communities were asked their agreement with the statement that the emphasis on students' Aboriginal and cultural identity has increased since the start of Connected Communities. Almost 82 per cent of teachers strongly agreed or agreed (n=111) (data not shown).

Together these data suggest that the increased emphasis on students' culture may be having an impact on how Aboriginal students feel about their culture. The majority of parents also feel welcomed and good about their culture when at their child's school. Unfortunately, because pre-Connected Communities baseline data from parents and guardians is not available, our conclusions about the impact of the Strategy on students' feelings about Aboriginal culture will always be tentative. Importantly, the combined survey data suggests that Connected Communities is having no unintended adverse effects on non-Aboriginal students, and parents and guardians.

5. Discussion

5.1 Impacts to date

At this stage of implementation it is too early to conclude that Connected Communities is having an impact on student academic outcomes, although it is important to note that the data presented in this report only covers the first two years of a five-year strategy. As Connected Communities continues to be implemented and data is collected over subsequent years, our levels of certainty in the attributions we can make about the impact of the Strategy will improve.

Changes have been observed on some non-academic indicators since the baseline period. For example, since 2012 there have been increases in the number of kindergarten students assessed for Best Start in a number of important aspects, such that the assessment gap with all kindergarten students across NSW Government schools has closed. There has also been an increase in the percentage of Kindergarten students assessed at cluster 2 for key literacy aspects. Much of this increase has occurred from 2014 to 2015, so it remains unclear if this is the beginnings of a trend or whether 2015 is an outlying year. Some schools have increased their early years focus through enhanced transition to school programs. Of particular note are Bourke Public School, Hillvue Public School and Toomelah Public School, with teachers at the former two schools reporting higher developmental readiness for school amongst Stage 1 students than teachers at other schools. Preschool participation in Bourke also appears to be increasing, which may be a result of Bourke Public School's early years transition program.

Attendance rates for primary students across Connected Communities schools as a group have increased since the start of Connected Communities, although this appears to be the continuation of an upwards trend since at least 2009. Attendance rates for secondary students across the schools as a group have shown no improvement. This corroborates findings from site visits to Connected Communities schools where the majority of primary schools have been implementing class and individual rewards-based attendance initiatives, and morning bus runs for a number of years. The main attendance incentive for secondary students at Connected Communities schools appears to be rewards-based incentives provided through Clontarf Academies and equivalent girls groups such as the Girl's Academy at Coonamble High School and the Girri Girri Girls at Brewarrina Central School. However, these programs are not delivered at all Connected Communities schools with secondary students. The lack of any identified increase in attendance suggests that these programs are yet to have any aggregate impact in schools where they operate. Moree Secondary College has recently implemented a multi-modal tiered rewards-based attendance strategy, "the Rise Up Wise Up Program", although it is too early to identify any aggregate impact on attendance.

NAPLAN participation and the number of students at or above the NMS for reading and numeracy have not shown clear signs of improvement since the start of Connected Communities. Depending on the year group being assessed participation and attainment have either increased or decreased since the start of Connected Communities. Year 3-5 and Year 7-9 VA scores pooled across 2013 and 2014 indicate that all but one Connected Communities school are adding an average level of growth to student attainment, relative to all NSW Government schools with 20 per cent or more Aboriginal students. Based on pooled 2011-2012 VA scores, this has remained largely unchanged since the start of Connected Communities with the exceptions of one school with improved performance and one school with declining performance.

The decline in the Year 10-12 ARR for Aboriginal students across Connected Communities schools in 2014 is a concern. Against a modest upwards trend for students across all NSW Government schools, the Year 10-12 ARR for Aboriginal students at across Connected Communities schools as a group has declined by 8.3 percentage points since 2012. It remains to be seen whether 2014 is an anomalous year or whether this is the start of a declining trend. However, it is particularly concerning given that 75 per cent or more of Years 7-10 Aboriginal students across Connected Communities schools as a group reported the aspiration to finish Year 12 in the 2014 and 2015 *Tell Them From Me* student surveys.

Furthermore, in both years approximately 73 per cent of Years 7-10 Aboriginal students across Connected Communities schools as a group reported the aspiration to undertake some form of post school education or training. However, Aboriginal students across Connected Communities schools as a group are at least four times less likely to be awarded an HSC compared to non-Aboriginal students suggesting that the aspirations of many Aboriginal students at Connected Communities schools are not being realised.

5.2 Implementation to date

While there are clearly many positive things happening in Connected Communities schools, at this stage schools appear to be having challenges implementing some features of the Strategy. In particular, schools appear to be having challenges establishing schools as hubs for service delivery and establishing genuine and productive school-community partnerships through SRGs. Other features such as local Aboriginal language and culture programs have either been implemented or schools are taking appropriate steps to work with their community and local TAFE Institutes to establish appropriate and sustainable programs. The AECG and BOSTES are also working on K-12 curricula for some of the Aboriginal language and cultural studies for all NSW Government schools. Connecting to Country programs have been delivered to all schools with plans for subsequent programs underway in some communities. Importantly given the evidence for the importance of preschool and the early school years as a platform for lifelong learning, a number of schools have substantially expanded their early years focus through enhanced transition to school programs.

When the majority of Executive Principals started their appointments, they found a number of issues that required immediate attention. This ranged from unacceptable physical appearance of schools, unacceptable behaviour from students and at some schools a lack of clear and rigorous frameworks for professional learning and quality teaching. At least for the first 12 months, Executive Principals at most schools have mainly focus on these issues. At some schools this focus is ongoing, particularly around the physical appearance of schools which is being resolved as the capital works projects progress. It was evident during site visits and from the survey responses by teachers that the quality of instructional leadership, professional learning frameworks and whole school approaches to literacy and numeracy, and the quality of the physical learning environment have strengthened under Connected Communities. This suggests that the appointment of Executive Principals and the injection of capital works funding have had a positive impact.

Establishing schools as service hubs

Theoretically establishing schools as service hubs is a mechanism to help student and their families overcome some of the contextual issues that are impeding student learning. Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015) highlight that Connected Communities locations are amongst the most persistently disadvantaged in NSW with an over-representation of issues such as adult and juvenile incarceration, long-term unemployment, domestic violence and mental health problems. Alcohol and other substance abuse are also over represented in Connected Communities locations. The original intent of Connected Communities appears to be that schools would lead the coordination of services for students and families to address these issues. However, Executive Principals have been unclear as to what the intended operational framework and objectives of this model are, resulting in the model not being implemented as indicated in the *Connected Communities Strategy* document at any of the 15 schools.

All schools are engaging various health and dental services to provide annual health and dental checks for their students. At most schools this was occurring prior to the start of Connected Communities and represents business-as-usual. Schools such as Bourke Public School and Taree Public School have expanded their health support for students by brokered agreements with local health services to provide daily nurse-led clinics at their schools. Supported by *Early Action for Success*, schools with primary students have also been able to expand the amount of speech pathology services they provide students. All schools are also providing a degree of trauma and mental health support for students through a combination of school counsellors and external agency support. Although it was clear that given the prevalence and severity of trauma-related mental health issues, the majority of schools are currently unable to meet the demand and will welcome any additional support provided under the Connected Communities Healing and Wellbeing Model once it is rolled out.

While schools are connecting students with services, there is little evidence that they are connecting adults with support services. It is clearly beyond the capacity of schools to engage parents and help them address issues such as domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse and legal issues. These issues appropriately fall under the remit of other specialist agencies and necessitate a whole-of-government response to community economic and social development. This raises questions about the appropriate involvement of schools in a community service hub model. This question should be clarified for Executive Principals so that they can plan appropriate models of service delivery, if this is an integral part of the model.

Depending on the community, schools are the largest and most stable government presence and are therefore well placed to lead a whole-of-government response to community issues. For example, the Executive Principal at Toomelah Public School chairs the Toomelah and Boggabilla Steering Committee. In addition to better positioning the school to secure support from other agencies, leading the Steering Committee helps ensure that all agencies are coordinating their responses to key issues in the community and are accountable for delivering on their obligations. In larger centres, a central agency such as the Department of Premier and Cabinet could be in a better position to lead a whole-of-government response with the school being an active participant in any governance and action groups. An example of this is the Coledale Steering Committee in Tamworth, where the Executive Principal and SLCE are involved in the Coledale Steering Committee and NOW Team, respectively. Collectively these groups have responsibility for implementing the Coledale Action Plan. At present, a number of Executive Principals appear to have positioned their schools with interagency groups and forums but this is not universal across all Connected Communities schools.

If the expectation is that implementation of the hub model means connecting students with services and coordinating or actively participating in interagency groups, then it is important that this is explicitly articulated to Executive Principals along with support and a framework for what is expected. However, this needs to be underpinned by an appropriate level of regional- and community-level support from key government and non-government agencies that has not existed to date in some communities. This has been recognised by the Department and has led to an interagency group of Senior Executives being formed. The impacts of this will become apparent over the coming years.

Establishing genuine school community partnerships

Empowering communities in decision-making about how services, including education, are delivered is viewed as important for building trust and ensuring that services meet the needs of the community. It is clear that the majority of Connected Communities schools are facing historical challenges effectively engaging their communities, in particular Aboriginal parents and carers. This lack of engagement has not been helped by the high turnover of principals and teachers over the years.

SRGs are the mechanism built into Connected Communities to establish genuine school-community partnerships around decision-making at the school. While the concept of SRGs appears sound, at this stage the model has been largely ineffective.

Role clarity is a particular issue and there is sometimes tension between Executive Principals and some members of SRGs around decision-making and information exchange. This could potentially be addressed through further governance training involving all SRG members, including Executive Principals. Additional governance training for SRGs is being planned by the Connected Communities Directorate. To maximise attendance it is recommended that this is conducted in each community rather than a couple of central locations.

SLCEs and LCEs, and community engagement

While SLCEs and LCEs have been involved in a wide range of activities at their schools, it is still too early to make a definitive judgement about how effective they have been around strategic community engagement. At this stage of implementation, the main impact SLCEs and LCEs have had in this area is coordinating SRGs. Some SLCEs and LCEs are involved in interagency groups and community working parties. The impact of this engagement will depend on the functionality of those groups which, anecdotally, is low in some cases. Furthermore, not all SLCEs and LCEs have the previous experience and demonstrated skills to operate strategically in these groups. With regards to broader community engagement there is evidence of increased participation by community members in opportunities for student learning across a number of schools. Although difficult to establish causality, SLCEs and LCEs have presumably been involved in helping to facilitate this. However, based on consultations with teachers and their responses to survey items, there is no evidence that the engagement of Aboriginal parents and carers in discussions about their children's learning has increased since the start of Connected Communities. The data suggests that the parents and carers of Aboriginal secondary students are particularly disengaged across the schools as a group.

It is clear that there is uncertainty from SLCEs and LCEs, and Executive Principals, about what the strategic focus of the role should be. There are ongoing efforts from the Connected Communities Directorate to clarify the intent of the role and their expectations about what the role will achieve. However, in the context of *Local Schools, Local Decisions* and large distances from Sydney, these efforts appear to be having limited success. It is imperative that for the remainder of the Strategy, the expected function of SLCEs and LCEs is clearly articulated and reiterated, and periodically measured against indicators of community engagement within their schools.

The view from stakeholders is that a considerable proportion of Aboriginal parents and carers did not have a positive experience themselves at school, making them uncomfortable coming to the school for one-on-one meetings with teachers. A considerable number of Aboriginal parents and carers have low levels of literacy and numeracy themselves, making it difficult for them to be actively engaged in their children's learning at home. There is a view from teachers at the majority of Connected Communities that many parents and carers view their children's education as the sole responsibility of the schools. This is perhaps over-simplifying the reality of the situation in the context of the abovementioned barriers. However, it is without question that increasing the engagement of parents and carers in discussion about student learning is a major challenge and is likely to take considerable time and effort from schools. Given this, it should be a major focus of SLCEs and LCEs.

The explicit focus on Aboriginal education articulated by Connected Communities and the efforts at some schools to make the physical appearance of their schools more culturally welcoming appears to have made the majority of Aboriginal parents and carers feel welcome at the schools. However, the fact that this has not translated into stronger engagement with teachers suggests that schools need to be innovative with their short-term engagement strategies. There are examples where schools are being innovative in their engagement strategies by holding school-community events that include free activities and barbeques. As indicated by the survey of parents and guardians and teacher comments during site visits, Aboriginal parents and carers are more likely to attend a school-community event than a parent-teacher meeting. At these events teachers take the opportunity to have informal discussions about student learning. A number of schools are also conducting home visits to have discussions about student learning. The views on this are mixed with some Executive Principals and teachers seeing this as taking valuable time away from lesson preparation and propagating an expectation that the school will come to parents and carers rather than vice versa.

5.3 Concluding comments

The appointment of Executive Principals has undoubtedly had a positive impact on the learning environment and quality teaching framework at the majority of schools. Executive Principals have also demanded high expectations from teachers and set clear and consistent expectations for student behaviour. However, a long-term solution to address the education disadvantage of many students across Connected Communities schools requires a whole-of-government response to the economic and social disadvantage experienced by the families of students. Social issues over-represented in low SES populations are also over-represented amongst the families of Connected Communities students, and in particular the families of Aboriginal students. Compounding this, there are declining economic opportunities in the majority of Connected Communities locales, with intergenerational unemployment becoming increasingly common. It was commented in several locations that this lack of opportunity has reduced confidence that education will lead to something worthwhile. Many of these issues are beyond the abilities of schools to address.

For Connected Communities to be successful there needs to be clarification about the intent and framework for the schools as hubs model. Given the current level of parent engagement, it is unlikely that schools will be able to successfully connect families with a range of services that they need. It is probably only realistic that the focus of service connection is around students, which is currently the case at most schools. However, as several schools are demonstrating, schools led by Executive Principals can have a leading role in working together with other agencies around community and social development. Whether these efforts will prove effective remains to be seen and there have been countless examples of ineffective multi-agency responses to social issues. Nonetheless in communities where the current level of interagency coordination is ineffective and accountability for outcomes poor, Connected Communities schools can play a leading role in improving the effectiveness of interagency coordination. If Connected Communities schools are to play a leading role in interagency coordination, it is imperative that other government and non-government agencies commit their support and that this is communicated to regional and local staff. Ideally these partnerships would be formalised to reflect the characteristics of strong partnerships including strategic information sharing, a commitment to pooling resources, negotiated shared goals and shared accountability for outcomes at a senior level (Department for Education and Child Development 2013). It is also important that Executive Principals are supported to lead strategic interagency engagement given the expanded skill set required.

The other challenge for addressing the educational disadvantage of students across Connected Communities schools is increasing the engagement of parents, and in particular Aboriginal parents, in their children's learning. Evidence indicates that active parental involvement in learning contributes to an increase of approximately 0.5 standard deviations in student academic outcomes and strongly influences other important factors such as attendance at preschool programs. This is comparable to the effects of schools and teachers (Hattie 2009). Given this, it is imperative that Connected Communities schools devise innovative strategies to engage more parents in both discussions with teachers and their children about learning. There is a strong case that this should be a major focus of SLCEs and LCEs, rather than some of the other activities that they are engaged in under the flexibility of the current accountabilities of their role. This should be clearly articulated to SLCEs and LCEs and Executive Principals.

5.4 Next steps

The evaluation will continue to monitor the implementation of key features and the achievement of student outcomes over the course of the evaluation. Site visits to all schools and another round of teacher and parent and guardian surveys are planned for 2017. The evaluation will also seek to continue to use student responses from the *Tell Them From Me Survey* annually.

6. Recommendations

Based on the observations from site visits, discussions with key stakeholders and survey data presented in this report, a number of actions are recommended to strengthen some of the key features of Connected Communities. All of the recommendations are considered important and are not presented in any particular order.

1. That the Executive Director Connected Communities develop and articulate a framework outlining the intent, processes and expectations for the schools as service hub model to Executive Principals, and monitor the local implementation of that framework. At present there is a lack of clarity across Executive Principals as a group about the expectations around schools as a service hub model. It is recommended that the framework focuses the attention of Executive Principals on:
 - Actively participating in existing interagency groups or leading the coordination of new interagency groups where no groups currently exist or existing groups are ineffective. In either scenario Executive Principals can help promote that interagency groups have shared goals, exchange strategic information, share resources and have accountability for outputs and outcomes.
 - Coordinating health and support services for students, and providing capacity building opportunities for adults such as adult literacy and numeracy, information technology and parenting programs.
2. That the Executive Director Connected Communities continue to convene the interagency group assembled in 2014, and that efforts be made by all agencies to ensure senior representation on that group continues. For Connected Communities to effectively address the barriers to learning and long-term success faced by students, it is essential that a coordinated and sustainable whole-of-Government response underpinned by Connected Communities is implemented in the eleven Connected Communities locales. It is important that Department continues efforts to maintain senior executive support from other Government agencies and promote accountability for that support.
3. That the Executive Director Connected Communities and Team Leader Community Engagement clarify and monitor the role and expectations of SLCEs and LCEs with Executive Principals. At present SLCEs and LCEs are undertaking a wide range of functions within the broad scope of their accountabilities as outlined in the role descriptions. This diversity is appropriate given the different skills each SLCE and LCE brings to schools. However, there is evidence that not all SLCEs and LCEs are effectively undertaking the core intent of their role around strategic community engagement. The role of SLCEs and LCEs needs to be refocused towards this, and in particular around leading the development and implementation of strategies to engage more parents in discussions about their children's learning.
4. That the Department implement the Connected Communities Healing and Wellbeing Model as a matter of urgency. The majority of Connected Communities schools are currently unable to meet the demand for counselling support given the prevalence and severity of trauma-related mental health issues in Connected Communities schools. It is imperative that all of the schools either have a full-time counsellor or have the funds to broker full-time counselling support from an external agency.
5. That the Executive Director Connected Communities and President of the NSW AECG clarify the purpose and parameters of SRGs with Executive Principals and local AECG Presidents. To date SRGs appear to have been largely ineffective and not obviously contributing to strategic decision-making at schools. The reason for this appears to be a lack of clarity from Executive Principals and SRG members about the expected role of SRGs. While the terms of reference for SRGs outlines these responsibilities, this needs to be reinforced. It is also recommended that the Connected Communities Directorate give consideration to redelivering governance training for SRGs in each Connected Communities locale rather than at a couple of central locations. This will increase the chance that all SRG members, including Executive Principals, will participate.

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Appendix 1. Stakeholders consulted

Connected Communities Directorate

Name	Role
Michele Hall	Executive Director
Geoff Muir	Professional Support Officer
Ray Ingrey	Team Leader, Community Engagement
Peter Sheargold	Director
NSW AECG	
Cindy Berwick	State President
Department of Premier and Cabinet	
Alison Morgan	Senior Regional Coordinator, Western NSW
Allison Magaffin	Regional Coordinator, Western NSW
Boggabilla Central School	
Gavin Khan	Executive Principal
Karen Brand	Assistant Principal
Noelene McIntosh	Student Learning and Support Officer
Brian Naylor	Student Learning and Support Officer
Julieanne Pflingst	Student Learning and Support Officer
Chris Day	Student Learning and Support Officer
Louise Dennison	Aboriginal Education Officer
Fran McGrady	Aboriginal Education Officer
Brooke McGrady	School Administrative Officer
Valda Missen	School Administrative Officer
Kerry Emerton	School Administrative Officer
Sally Rayner	School Administrative Officer
Patti Sharwood	Instructional Leader
Diarna Kalmanidis	Head Teacher
Elizabeth Meek	Head Teacher
Helen Spink	Teacher
Maree Farrow	Teacher
Cyriac Matthews	Teacher
Jessica Coster	Teacher
Sara McCoglan	Teacher
Nicole Gooding	Teacher
Malcolm Peckham	Remote School Attendance Strategy Coordinator
Kate Gleeson	Teacher
Denis Dennison	School Reference Group member
Bourke High School	
Name	Role
Robert Bourke	Executive Principal
Linda Jurotte	Senior Leader: Community Engagement

Denise Webb	School Reference Group Chair, Bourke AECG President
Angela Doggett	Head Teacher
Amanda Smith	Teacher
Lyn Hawkins	P&C President, School Reference Group
Andrew Rose	NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs; Maranguka team
Stephen Howarth	School Reference Group, NSW Office of Aboriginal Affairs
Melissa Prince	Student Learning and Support Officer
Bruce Turnbull	Aboriginal Education Officer
Melissa Kirby	Aboriginal Education Officer
Possum Winton	Centacare
Greg Moore	Police Superintendent, Bourke Local Area Command
Bourke Public School	
Name	Role
Kylie Pennell	Executive Principal
Troy Gordon	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Denise Webb	School Reference Group Chair, Bourke AECG President
Melanie Millgate	P&C President, School Reference Group
Lisa Eatmore	P&C Vice President
Jeanine Milgate	Deputy Principal
Sam Gaukroger	Teacher
Chelsea Duiz	Teacher
Rob Porter	Teacher
Emma Buckley	Teacher
Tristan Marshall	Teacher
Margaret Grimes	Aboriginal Education Officer
Thomasina Beecham	Student Learning and Support Officer
Jane Roe	Instructional Leader
Fiona Rankmore	School Administrative Officer
Anne-Marie Riches	Student Learning and Support Officer
Marg O'Brien	Aboriginal Education Officer
Dorothy Martin	School Reference Group, Local Aboriginal Lands Council, Community Working Party
Brian Willoughby	School Reference Group
Dean Martin	Parent, Bourke Aboriginal Health Service
Monique Driscoll	Early Years Transition Centre Coordinator
Lara Gordon	Parent
Katherine Robinson	Parent, Caseworker Family and Community Services
Brewarrina Central School	
Name	Role
Peter Morgan	Executive Principal
Sandra Hardy	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Anthony Rossi	Deputy Principal
Rebecca Williams	Deputy Principal
Tonya Kellett	Instructional Leader
Margaret Nichols	Assistant Principal
Missy Nicholls	Teacher
Sarah Trapman	Teacher
Kath Hertslet	Teacher
Wayne Gower	Teacher
Angie Skuthorpe	Teacher

Tom McNamara	Teacher
Sue Gordon	School Administration Officer
Dianne Kelly	Aboriginal Education Officer
Janice Fraill	School Learning Support Officer
Lynn Cochrane	Aboriginal Education Officer
Jenny Hammond	School Learning Support Officer
Kylie Gibson	School Administration Officer
Felicity Johnston	School Administration Manager
Lynette McHughes	School Reference Group
Doreen McHughes	School Reference Group
Mary Waites	School Reference Group
Chrissy Gordon	School Reference Group
Bruce Bennett	Parent
Janine Walsh	Parent
Raelene Eyre	Parent
Loo Broomfield	Parent
Lacey Boney	Parent
Stella McHughes	Student Representative Council
Kira Hart	Student Representative Council
Tegan Bennett	Student Representative Council
Shanna McHughes	Student Representative Council
Alii Pakutoa	Student Representative Council
Jai Sullivan	Student Representative Council
Tara Lea	Student Representative Council
Coonamble High School	
Name	Role
Margaret Mulcahy	Executive Principal
Kristie Pearson	Senior: Leader Community Engagement
Sam Turnbull	School Reference Group Chair, Coonamble AECG President
Lee O'Connor	P&C President, School Reference Group
John Walker	School Reference Group
Duncan Lovelock	Deputy Principal
Brooke Wall	Head Teacher Wellbeing
Corrine Underwood	Teacher
Russell Player	Teacher
Adam Batchelor	Teacher
Adam McCrae	Teacher
Naomi Barton	Teacher
Kim Wooding	Aboriginal Education Officer
Deanna Dixon	Student Support Officer
Cheryl Koop	Instructional Leader
Ann Klein	Student Learning and Support Officer
Imogen Shipley	Girl's Academy Director
Adam Cohen	Clontarf Academy Director
Lyall Gibbs	Regional Manager Casework, Family and Community Services
Vivian Hall	Case Worker, Family and Community Services
Brendon Harris	Deputy Mayor
Catherine Thompson	Burnside Uniting Care
Coonamble Public School	
Name	Role

Brian Giles-Browne	Executive Principal
Siobhan Fagan	Deputy Principal
Joshua Fernando	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Gloria Fernando	Cultural Mentor
Anthea Robinson	Instructional Leader
Tam Fletcher	Teacher
Vanessa McCann	Teacher
Emily Johnson	Teacher
Lauren Fernando	Teacher
Vanessa McCann	Teacher
Hayley Astill	Teacher
Shiralee Robinson	Student Learning Support Officer
Nardeen Farrell	Student Learning Support Officer
Brittany Baker	Student Learning Support Officer
Sam Turnbull	School Reference Group Chair, Coonamble AECG President
Ted Fernando	School Reference Group
Tony Boney	School Reference Group
Trina Ellis	McKillop Foundation
Hillvue Public School	
Name	Role
Chris Shaw	Executive Principal
Sara Chambers	Assistant Principal
Simon Taylor	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Tom Flanders	School Reference Group Chair
Lynette Grimes	Instructional Leader K-2
Vicki York	Instructional Leader 3-6
Jodie Craigie	Aboriginal Education Officer
Mel Craigie	Aboriginal Education Officer
Ian Woodley	Community Engagement Manager University of Newcastle, Department of Rural Health
Vicki Fischer	P&C President, School Reference Group
Jill Morphett	School Administrative Manager
Simon Munro	Opportunity Hub Coordinator
Fiona Snape	CEO Tamworth Aboriginal Lands Council
Emily Brooks	Teacher
Amy Strong	Teacher
Pip Johnson	Teacher
Lisa Kenneth	Teacher
Kerry O'Sullivan	Teacher
Dane James	Teacher
Charlie Jones	Teacher
Scott Hurn	Teacher
Wendy Fisher	Teacher
Melinda Townsend	Teacher
Menindee Central School	
Name	Role
Daryl Irvine	Executive Principal
Daniel Fusi	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Jan Kelly	School Reference Group Chair, Menindee AECG President
Cheryl Blore	Aboriginal Education Officer

Darlene Newman	School Reference Group
Amanda King	Student Learning and Support Officer
Pansy Williams	Student Learning and Support Officer
Rick Ball	Teacher
Amelia Yarwood	Teacher
Colin Foscett	Teacher
Jonathan Smith	Teacher
Michelle Kelly	Manager Client Services, Department of Family and Community Services, Broken Hill
Mick Stoltenberg	Police Inspector, Barrier Local Area Command
Moree East Public School	
Name	Role
Muriel Kelly	Executive Principal
Matthew Priestly	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Paula Duncan	Aboriginal Education Officer
Kirsty McDonald	Student Learning and Support Officer
Lloyd Munro	School Reference Group Chair, Moree AECG President
Barbara Cudmore	School Reference Group
Carol Duke	School Reference Group, Pius X Aboriginal Corporation
Paula Duncan-Munro	School Reference Group
Carla Boney	School Reference Group, Parent
Jess Foy	School Reference Group, Parent
Naomi Curtis	Parent
Stephanie Hayes	Parent
Dot Lines	Community member
Colleen Duke	Community member
Barbara Aisbett	Community member
Moree Secondary College	
Name	Role
Dennis Armstrong	Executive Principal
Paula Barton	Principal, Carol Ave
Crystal Duncan	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Angela Health	Deputy Principal, Albert St
Belinda Bagshaw	Deputy Principal, Albert St
Ian Thornton	Deputy Principal, Carol Ave
Lisa Bruton	Head Teacher Wellbeing
Cynthia Duncan	Aboriginal Education Officer
Rick Roberts	Aboriginal Education Officer
Sheree Carlee	Teacher
John O'Connor	Head Teacher
Betty Swan	Attendance Officer
Lloyd Munro	School Reference Group Chair, Moree AECG President
Lorilie Haines	P&C President, School Reference Group
Sandra O'Loughlin	School Reference Group
Noeline Briggs Smith OAM	School Reference Group
Alison Quirk	Student Representative Council
Elijah Shervey	Student Representative Council
Phoebe Smith	Student Representative Council
Beau Stevens	Student Representative Council
Alex Rush	Student Representative Council
Sean Bryant	Student Representative Council

Trisha Moore	Regional Program Manager, Program Design and Innovation Team, Family and Community Services
Taree High School	
Name	Role
Allison Alliston	Executive Principal
Jay Davis	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Nigel Reece	Deputy Principal
Raelene Starke	Head Teacher
John Deehan	Head Teacher
Benn Saunders	Aboriginal Education Officer
Glen Bowman	Careers Advisor
Glenda Hutchinson	Senior Mentor
Col Husband	Teacher
Beau Harper	Teacher
Barbara Tate	Teacher
Kathy Salmon	Teacher
Kim Husband	School Reference Group Chair, Taree AECG President
Annette O'Rourke	P&C President, School Reference Group
Lily Minihan	School Captain
Thomas Fletcher	School Captain
Taree Public School	
Name	Role
Karen Clarke	Executive Principal
Karen Bradley	Leader: Community Engagement
Di Murray	Instructional Leader
Gai Hickson	Teacher
Sherry Smith	Partnerships Officer
Kim Husband	School Reference Group Chair, Taree AECG President
Toomelah Public School	
Name	Role
Margaret Sloan	Executive Principal
Patti Sharwood	Instructional Leader
Arnold McGraoy	Student Learning and Support Officer
Tommy McGraoy	Student Learning and Support Officer
Erin Littlewood	Student Learning and Support Officer
Jen Schnitzerling	Student Learning and Support Officer
Charlotte Swan	Aboriginal Education Officer
Maree Conroy	Teacher
Sharlene Deamer	Teacher
Cleo Barnard	Teacher
Walgett Community College	
Name	Role
John Clayton	Deputy Principal - Programs
Jason Horan	Deputy Principal – Primary School
Roslyn McGregor	Senior Leader: Community Engagement
Anne Dennis	School Reference Group Chair, Walgett AECG President, NSW AECG Vice-President
Bill Kennedy	School Reference Group, Chair Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service

George McCormick	School Reference Group, Manager Community Development Walgett Shire Council
Annette Kennedy	P&C President, School Reference Group
Jo Kaser	School Reference Group
Lyn Rummery	School Reference Group
Deidre Kennedy	Aboriginal Education Officer
Janet Westcott	Instructional Leader
Jennadelle Lane	Head Teacher
Vanessa Coates	Head Teacher
Erika Lampe	Head Teacher
Sandy Hill	Head Teacher
Daphne Dennis	Teacher
Donna Dennis-Horan	Teacher
Wilcannia Central School	
Name	Role
Sandra Bradley	Executive Principal
Warlpa Thompson	Senior Leader: Community Engagement Officer
Sarah Dixon	Instructional Leader
Samantha Higgins	School Administrative Officer
Gordon Mitchell	Aboriginal Education Officer
Reginna Hunter	School Reference Group Chair, Aboriginal Education Officer, Wilcannia AECG President
Steven Harris	School Reference Group
Francis Lawson-Cohen	Head Teacher
David Wilson	Teacher
Rayleigh Charlton-Fitzgerald	Teacher
Karen Donaldson	Teacher
Leroy Johnson	Community Engagement Officer, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

Appendix 2. Parent and guardian survey

1a. Firstly, can I check you have a child or children in your care at PIPE SCHOOL NAME

CAN BE CHILD, GRANDCHILD, SIBLING, FOSTER CHILD, NEICE, NEPHEW OR SIMILAR

Yes 1 Skip to 1C

No 2 ASK 1B

1b. At which school do you have a child or children in your care?

CAN BE CHILD, GRANDCHILD, SIBLING, FOSTER CHILD, NEICE, NEPHEW OR SIMILAR

DO NOT READ OUT SINGLE RESPONSE SELECT REPLACEMENT SCHOOL AS SHOWN

Boggabilla Central School	1
Bourke High School	2
Bourke Public School	3
Brewarrina Central School	4
Coonamble High School	5
Coonamble Public School	6
Hillvue Public School	7
Menindee Central School	8
Moree East Public School	9
Moree Secondary College	10
Taree High School	11
Taree Public School	12
Toomelah Public School	13
Walgett Community College	14
Wilcannia Central School	15
None of these	TERMINATE

1c. How many CHECK RELATIONSHIP children/grandchildren do you have at PIPE SCHOOL NAME?

ENTER NUMERIC __ 1 – 9

ASK IF RELATIONSHIP NOT FATHER, MOTHER, GRANDFATHER or GRANDMOTHER ELSE GO TO Q2

1d. Can I check, are you aged 16 or over?

Yes 1

No 2

ASK FOR ALTERNATIVE GUARDIAN OR TERMINATE IF NOT AVAILABLE

2. Do you live with this child / these children?

Yes	1
No	2

3. About how far do you live from the school? Would that be...

Less than a kilometre	1
Between 1 and 2 kilometres	2
Two to five kilometres	3
Five to ten kilometres	4
More than 10 kilometres	5
Don't know (DO NOT READ OUT PROMPT What is your best guess?)	6

4. The first few questions are about how often you were involved in certain activities at the school **this year**. Firstly, this year how often have you **STATEMENT**, was that often, sometimes, rarely or never?

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
Been asked to have a say about school decisions	5	4	3	2	1
Feel your input has influenced school decisions	5	4	3	2	1
You or someone in your family volunteered at the school	5	4	3	2	1

5. Some schools can be used for other things besides teaching school children, like community events or classes for adults. This year, have you or other adults in your family gone to any of the following activities at the school?

	Yes	No	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
School fete	1	2	3
Sports carnivals	1	2	3
Morning teas	1	2	3
Classroom activities with the children	1	2	3
Adult sport and recreation	1	2	3
Cooking classes for adults	1	2	3
Language lessons	1	2	3
Cultural events or activities	1	2	3
Adult reading and writing classes	1	2	3
Adult education and training	1	2	3
Community events	1	2	3
Other (open question)	1	2	3

IF NO TO ALL IN Q5 SKIP TO Q6B

6a. How often did you go to these events or activities at the school this year?

Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
5	4	3	2	1

6b. **IF RARELY OR NEVER (CODES 2 OR 3) TO ABOVE ASK ELSE GO TO Q7a**

Why haven't you gone to school events or activities more often?

DO NOT READ OUT, CODE FROM BELOW MULTIPLES ALLOWED PROMPT

Any other reasons?

- The school doesn't have events and activities for parents and guardians 1
- Events and activities are not held at a convenient time 2
- Don't feel comfortable going to events and activities at the school 3
- Don't have transport to school events and activities 4
- Not really interested in the events and activities the school held 5
- Another adult / carer attends events at the school instead of me 6
- Other **PLEASE SPECIFY** 7

**CHECK NUMBER OF CHILDREN SHOWN IN BANNER WHERE THERE IS MORE THAN ONE CHILD
CONFIRM THEY ARE COUNTING TIMES FOR EACH CHILD SEPERATELY**

7a. How many times did you go to parent teacher meetings this year?

IF NECESSARY SAY, including all PIPE NUMBER OF CHILDREN FROM QUESTION 1A

ENTER NUMERIC

0 to 20

7b. **IF 7A RESPONSE <2 ASK 7B ELSE GO TO Q8A**

Why haven't you gone to parent teacher meetings more often?

DO NOT READ OUT, CODE FROM BELOW MULTIPLES ALLOWED PROMPT

Any other reasons?

- Parent teacher meetings have only been held once this year 1
- Did not know about them 2
- Another adult goes to parent teacher meetings for child(ren) 3
- Parent teacher meetings are held at a time when I can't attend 4
- Don't feel comfortable going to the meetings at the school 5
- Did not have transport to parent teacher meetings 6
- I don't want to go to the meetings (**PROBE WHY – ENTER BELOW**) 7
- Other **PLEASE SPECIFY** 8

8a. How often do you have problems getting your child(ren) to or from school?

- Frequently 1
- Occasionally 2
- Never 3

8b. IF 8A RESPONSE IS 1 OR 2 ASK 8B ELSE GO TO Q9

How often did the school help your child(ren) get to and from school this year? (EG School bus)

Every day	1
Most days	2
Some days	3
Never	4

9. How often did your children have a general health check at school this year?

At least twice	1
At least once	2
Never	3
Unsure	4

10. Did your child(ren) have their ITEM at school this year? ASK FOR EACH

	Yes	No	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
Teeth checked	1	2	3
Eyes checked	1	2	3
Hearing tested	1	2	3

10. IF NO (CODE 2) FOR ANY IN Q11 OR IF NEVER (CODE 3) FOR Q9, ASK FOR CORRESPONDING ACTIVITY ELSE SKIP

Did your child(ren) have their **ITEM outside of** school in the last year?

	Yes	No	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
General health check	1	2	3
Teeth checked	1	2	3
Eyes checked	1	2	3
Hearing tested	1	2	3

12a. Sometimes schools can help families access other services they might need. This might be through providing information about the service, making referrals or some other assistance.

Firstly, for which of the following services did PIPE SCHOOL NAME help you or your child(ren) connect with this service?

- 12b. FOR EACH NO (CODE 2) ASK** Was that because you did not need the service, used the service without the schools help, or needed help finding this service, but the school did not help?

	12a.			12b. If no, that was because you...		
	Yes	No	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT	Did not need this service	Used this service without the schools help	Needed help finding this service, but the school did not help
Doctor	1	2	3	1	2	3
Dentist	1	2	3	1	2	3
Employment services	1	2	3	1	2	3
Housing/accomodation support	1	2	3	1	2	3
Counselling/family support	1	2	3	1	2	3
Parenting programs	1	2	3	1	2	3
Legal services	1	2	3	1	2	3
Adult education and training	1	2	3	1	2	3

- 12c.** Did the school help you connect with any other service this year? What was that?

Yes **SPECIFY**

1

No

2

- 13.** I am now going to read out some statements. For each, can you tell me if you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree strongly or disagree somewhat.

	Agree strongly	Agree somewhat	Disagree somewhat	Disagree Strongly	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
You feel welcome at the school	5	4	3	2	1
The school provides a culturally safe place for parents, family and community members to meet	5	4	3	2	1
You feel good about your culture when you are at the school	5	4	3	2	1
Information from the school is easy to understand	5	4	3	2	1
It is important that your child(ren) attend school regularly	5	4	3	2	1
What your children learn at school is important	5	4	3	2	1
It is important that your child(ren) finish school in year 12	5	4	3	2	1
Teachers at the school are available to talk to you about your child(ren)	5	4	3	2	1

14. I am going to read another list of statements. Can you tell me whether each one occurred often, sometimes, rarely or never this year?

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Unsure DO NOT READ OUT
The school gave you information about how to help your child(ren) do well at school	5	4	3	2	1
The school gave you information about parenting	5	4	3	2	1
The school told you what is happening at the school	5	4	3	2	1
You looked at the schools website or Facebook page	5	4	3	2	1
You read newsletters from the school	5	4	3	2	1
Teachers talked to you about what they expect your child(ren) to learn	5	4	3	2	1

15. Before today, had you heard of the Connected Communities initiative?

Yes 1

No 2

16. Are you Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?

Yes, Aboriginal 1

Yes, Torres Strait Islander 2

Yes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 3

No 4

16. Do you have any further comments you'd like to add?

Appendix 3. Teacher survey

	Survey item	Response instruction	Response categories	Programming logic
1.	My school provides me with professional learning that builds my understanding of the local Aboriginal culture, context and history	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
2.	I incorporate local Aboriginal language and content into my lessons	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
3.	I feel confident incorporating Aboriginal language and content into my teaching	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
4.	Support is available to help me incorporate Aboriginal language and content into my teaching	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
5.	My school provides me with professional learning to help improve the quality of my teaching on literacy and numeracy	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
6.	My school provides me with professional learning to help me personalise my teaching to meet the needs of all students	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
7.	I feel confident implementing teaching strategies for all students	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
8.	Parents/carers of the Aboriginal students I teach contact me when their children are having a problem with learning	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
9.	Parents/carers of the non-Aboriginal students I teach contact me when their children are having a problem with learning	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
10.	Parents/carers of the Aboriginal students I teach support their children to do well at school	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
11.	Parents/carers of the non-Aboriginal students I teach support their children to do well at school	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
12.	My school supports parents to build their capacity to support their children's learning at home	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
13.	The students in my lessons are developmentally ready to benefit from schooling in the following areas: -physical health -socialisation -emotional maturity -language and communication skills -cognitive functioning	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	

14.	Students in my class(es) are engaged in what they are learning	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
15.	I set high expectations for student learning	Select one	Strongly disagree Disagree Agree Strongly agree	
16.	Please record your best estimate for how many of your students' parents/carers attend scheduled parent-teacher meetings	Matrix: Aboriginal students Non-aboriginal students	None 10-25% 30-45% 55-70% 75-90% All	
17.	Please rate your understanding of the Connected Communities Strategy and its objectives	Select one	I have no understanding of Connected Communities or its objectives I have a little understanding about Connected Communities and its objectives I have some understanding about Connected Communities and its objectives I fully understand Connected Communities and its objectives	
18.	Please rate your understanding of the Leader (or Senior Leader) Community Engagement at your school	Select one	I have no understanding of the role I have a little understanding about the role I have some understanding about the role I fully understand the role	
19.	What year levels do you teach?	Tick all that apply	Stage 1 Stage 2 or 3 Stages 4-6	
20.	What year did you start teaching at your current school?	Select one	2015 2014 2013 Before 2013	Skip to Q24 Skip to Q24 Skip to Q24
21.	Please rate your agreement with the following statements thinking about before and after Connected Communities came about.	Select one per item	Strongly disagree; disagree; agree; strongly agree Since the start of Connected Communities: Instructional leadership at the school has improved School leaders have higher expectations for student learning The professional learning framework at the school has been strengthened Students are more engaged in class The behaviour of students has improved The emphasis on Aboriginality and the cultural identity of students has strengthened The school is better able to connect students with services and support to help them overcome barriers to learning Parents/carers are more engaged in the school and their children's education	

			Staff are provided with more professional learning opportunities to build their understanding of the local Aboriginal culture, context and history Whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy have been strengthened and are more consistent The relationship between the school and the community has strengthened The community have become more involved in learning opportunities for students	
22.	Do you have any other comments regarding how your school is going or the Connected Communities Strategy in general?	<free text>		

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