

Strong strides together

Illustrations of practice

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

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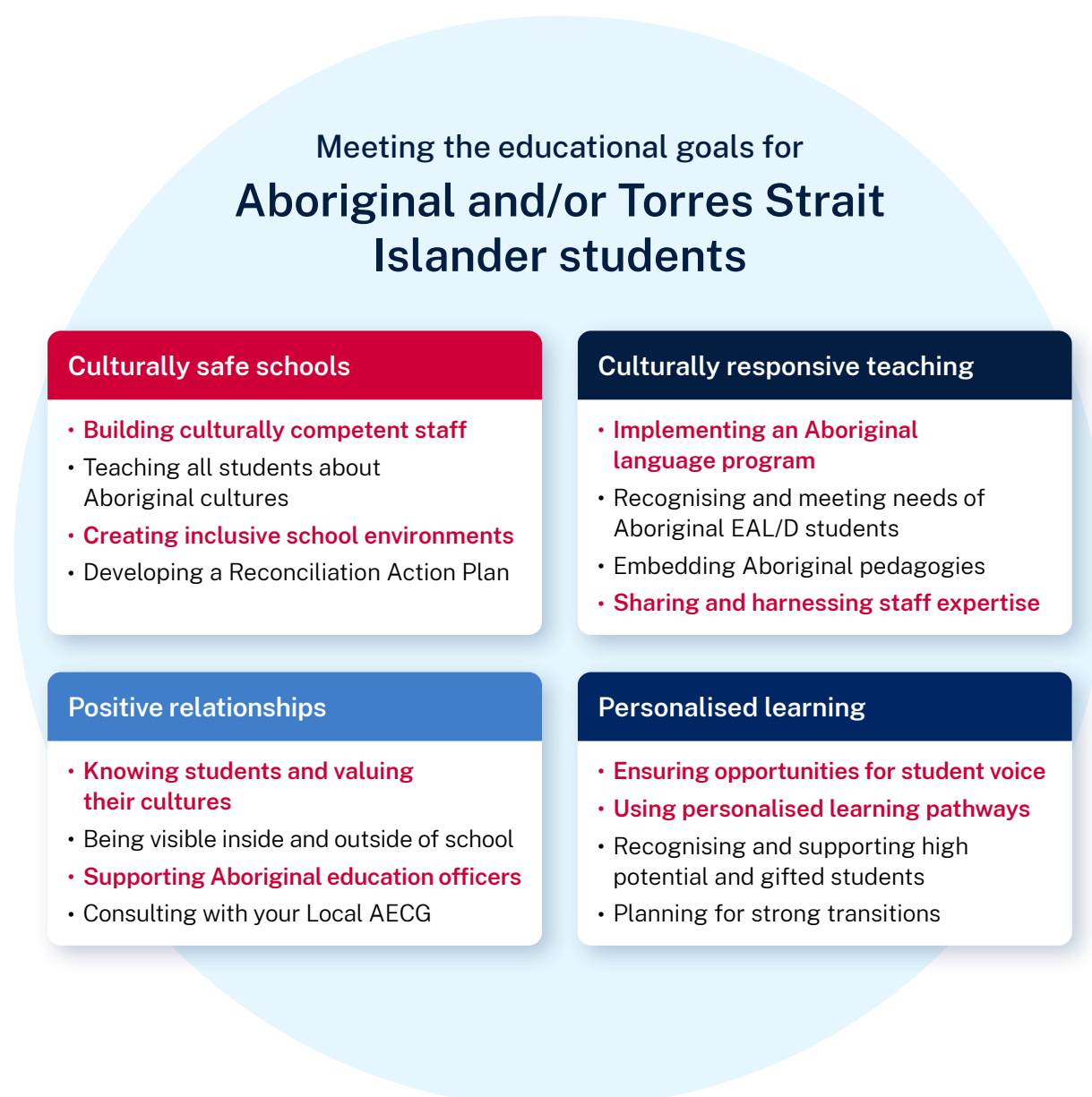
Introduction

This resource is designed to support school leaders and teachers to implement the key pathways in the Strong strides together – Meeting the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students evidence paper (CESE 2022). The key pathways are practical strategies that can be used in schools to support the creation of high-quality learning environments for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, to meet their educational goals.

Each key pathway sits under one of 4 themes from the evidence paper, and this resource explores what 8 of the key pathways (Figure 1, points in red bold text) look like in practice across a diverse range of NSW public schools.

Figure 1

Themes and key pathways from the Strong strides together evidence paper



School leaders and teachers can draw inspiration from the illustrations of practice in this resource by considering how the key pathways may be adapted and implemented in their school, with the support of other school staff. The Strong strides together evidence paper can be consulted for further information about the themes and the key pathways, including the key pathways that are not discussed in this resource.

For advice about how the key pathways can be implemented in your school, contact the Aboriginal Education and Communities directorate:

AOPcorrespondence@det.nsw.edu.au.





Culturally safe schools

Culturally safe schools recognise that individual students have distinct cultural identities that shape their school experience. They use whole-of-school practices to make students feel welcome and supported, and families and communities feel connected to the school.

This resource explores 2 key pathways for the culturally safe schools theme:

- **building culturally competent staff** – Briar Road Public School
- **creating inclusive school environments** – Coffs Harbour Learning Centre.

Briar Road Public School – Building culturally competent staff

School context

Briar Road Public School is a preschool to Year 6 school located on Dharawal Country in Campbelltown, south-west Sydney. There are currently 285 students enrolled at the school, and around half of the students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The school has 75 staff members and 12 are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The dynamic and research-driven school is considered a hub of the local Aboriginal community, a reputation that has taken many years to build through active community engagement and a commitment to continuous improvement. The school supports all staff to build their cultural competency, with the aim of contributing to a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Prioritising regular and relevant professional learning for all staff

School leaders at Briar Road Public School view professional learning as a powerful tool for building cultural competency. They invest in and prioritise relevant professional learning and have created a culture where professional learning is valued and appreciated among staff. The school schedules mandatory professional learning about Aboriginal education into the school calendar at a minimum of once a term. The Aboriginal Education team (which consists of teaching, executive and support staff, and community members) leads the planning of this professional learning, supported by the school's leaders and guided by the priorities identified in the school plan.

Professional learning at Briar Road Public School is designed to engage staff in critical reflection about matters that are relevant to their students and their families, and is delivered by Aboriginal staff members or community members as appropriate. It may include content about local Aboriginal histories and cultures, as well as contemporary issues and debates that impact the day-to-day experiences of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. This approach supports staff to relate to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander colleagues, students, families and communities with respect and understanding. For example, Briar Road Public School holds deep dives with staff about the historical and ongoing significance of milestone dates before the school holds events to commemorate the date. By doing so, school leaders try to ensure that staff participation in cultural events is informed rather than tokenistic. There is an emphasis on ensuring cultural, academic, and social and emotional professional learning is evidence-based and community endorsed.





“ We try and make sure that our people get those experiences and they aren’t just superficial, tokenistic – but it does give you a really deepened understanding of who we are as a people and what it is that we need them to do as teachers, whether it’s in connecting or commitment.”

Tammy Anderson, Principal

During professional learning sessions at Briar Road Public School, school leaders ensure that staff are in a non-judgemental environment, and that everyone is there to learn and contribute. They encourage staff to ask questions and speak up if there is anything they do not understand or agree with. School leaders challenge unconscious bias during professional learning and ensure the sessions are culturally safe. This opens the floor for discussion and enables everyone to engage deeply with the content and challenge each other without harming collegial relationships.

Implementing a shoulder-to-shoulder approach to share and develop expertise

School leaders at Briar Road Public School have developed a structured ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ approach that supports staff to build their cultural competency. This approach centres around harnessing the expertise of the school’s 2 ACCTs, and school leaders using their Resource Allocation Model funding strategically to provide additional release time for teaching staff to work alongside the ACCTs.

The curriculum leads of all key learning areas take advantage of this time by working with the ACCTs to lead the process of embedding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the curriculum, along with structuring the school’s cultural competency framework. Classroom teachers also work with ACCTs to co-design units, develop resources and plan lessons. ACCTs provide personalised support and feedback opportunities for teachers through co-planning and co-teaching lessons. Giving teachers additional release time to work with ACCTs has contributed to a positive staff culture where teachers are committed to continuous improvement, collaboration and helping one another to build the cultural competence of all students in the school. Teachers and school leaders also report that the shoulder-to-shoulder approach has led to an increase in teacher competence and confidence to embed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their everyday practice.



“ I know right across every key learning area in our school from preschool all the way to Year 6 that there is a level of cultural competency being built in our kids because we have a structure that allows for that.”

Jason Sampson, Aboriginal Culture and Curriculum Teacher

“ I feel a lot more confident to do a lot of things that I probably would've have done at other schools, just purely because I was worried about not doing it right.”

Tarryn Scarfe, Classroom Teacher

Another way that Briar Road Public School staff builds cultural competency is by working alongside Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff to organise events such as NAIDOC Week and National Reconciliation Week. The events are coordinated by the Aboriginal Education team to ensure they align with the school's goals and Aboriginal Education action plan, but all staff are involved in the planning and delivery of the events. This approach encourages all staff to develop ideas and use their own skillsets while being guided by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.

Briar Road Public School's shoulder-to-shoulder approach has helped to develop a trusting and collaborative school culture where all staff feel comfortable to ask for support to embed Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their practice. It has also contributed to a shared belief among staff that there is collective responsibility for building cultural competency across the school. Teachers at Briar Road Public School report that they are more confident to try new things because they know they have the support and expertise of other staff behind them. Briar Road Public School's approach also includes co-evaluation, which gives staff an opportunity to reflect on and improve both their own their practices and whole-school practices.

Coffs Harbour Learning Centre – Creating inclusive school environments

School context

Coffs Harbour Learning Centre is a school for specific purposes for Year 7 to 10 students located on Gumbaynggirr Country in Boambee East, on the Mid North Coast of NSW. The school supports students with behavioural disorders by providing them with an inclusive school environment, individualised support and meaningful learning opportunities. There are currently 28 students enrolled at Coffs Harbour Learning Centre, with around 40% of the students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. One staff member identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The inclusive school culture, focus on understanding students as individuals, and commitment to building strong relationships with students' families and wraparound supports, extends to the school's dedication to meeting the educational goals for its Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.



Visually foregrounding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures in the school environment

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures feature prominently in the physical environment of Coffs Harbour Learning Centre, which helps to create a welcoming and culturally safe space where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, families and visitors can feel like they belong and are valued. Coffs Harbour Learning Centre displays posters about Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander pedagogies in its hallways and features Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander art in mosaics and murals throughout the school. One powerful example is a yarning circle in the front of the school, with seats made of 8 tree stumps. Gumbaynggirr Elders stamped the seats during NAIDOC Week, so that each stump displays a symbol representing one of the 8 Aboriginal pedagogies.¹ The stumps serve as a reminder to students and staff to use the 8 pedagogies in their teaching and learning, and engagement with one another.

“You’re not just putting plans on paper and putting that in the file, you’re actually following through with actions with students and listening to them.”

Tony Wilson, Principal

¹ More information about Aboriginal pedagogies can be found at [8 Aboriginal ways of learning](#).

The school uniforms at Coffs Harbour Learning Centre also showcase and recognise Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander culture. The school introduced uniforms in 2021 in response to student feedback that they were proud of their school and wanted to feel a sense belonging to the school community, while also representing their school in the wider community. The following year, students voiced their desire for a school shirt with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art like they had seen at other schools, to reflect the high number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students at Coffs Harbour Learning Centre. School leaders responded favourably to the students' suggestion. The design for the new school shirt features art designed by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and is provided to students free of charge. All students have the option to wear the school shirt with student art or the standard blue shirt as part of their uniform.



Embedding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education in all aspects of the school day

Coffs Harbour Learning Centre creates an inclusive environment for its Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their families by embedding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and perspectives in its curriculum and co-curricular programs. The school explicitly teaches Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives across all key learning areas. For example, in recent years PDHPE teachers dedicated one term to playing Aboriginal sports and ordered a possum skin football so students could play the traditional football game popularly known as Marn Grook. In a Stage 5 History unit of work titled 'Rights, Freedoms and Protest,' teachers modified curriculum content based on student feedback to look at current issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples such as loss and regeneration of language, and Aboriginal deaths in custody. In 2023, the school also ran an Aboriginal culture program that was delivered by local Elder, Uncle Tony Perkins. Teachers at Coffs Harbour Learning Centre are provided with regular opportunities for professional learning that focuses on equipping them with appropriate knowledge, skills and confidence to explicitly teach Aboriginal perspectives in their subject area, such as the [Aboriginal Pedagogy](#) course.

“ I think it's small steps and doing little things every day ... and try[ing] and embed them. Let's do something. Let's decide we're going to raise the Aboriginal flag every day and let's do it with integrity. ... Let's say Ginagay every single time we walk into the class in the morning: Ginagay, jarjums. Lots of little things.”

Andy Robb, Assistant Principal



Coffs Harbour Learning Centre embeds Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education in its co-curricular activities and works with local organisations to provide culturally responsive programs. For example, language tutors from the local Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation run fortnightly Gumbaynggirr language classes at the school. Members of OneMob Radio, a First Nations radio platform based in Coffs Harbour, run workshops with students to teach literacy skills such as interviewing and notetaking. School leaders and teachers consult with students and their families when developing teaching and learning programs and co-curricular activities, to better understand and respond to the cultural needs of their students. They also consult with community Elders, Aboriginal NSW Department of Education staff and

the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) where appropriate to gain additional Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander perspectives and ensure the school follows culturally safe processes. By taking the time to listen to students, their families and the local community, the school can tailor their environment to meet the goals of each individual student.





Culturally responsive teaching

Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges that students' cultural backgrounds influence their ways of knowing, thinking and communicating. By understanding and responding to these cultural influences, teachers can promote student learning.

This resource explores 2 key pathways from the culturally responsive teaching theme:

- **implementing an Aboriginal language program** – Casino West Public School
- **sharing and harnessing staff expertise** – Menindee Central School.

Casino West Public School – Implementing an Aboriginal language program

School context

Casino West Public School is a preschool to Year 6 school located on Bundjalung Country in Far North NSW. There are 265 students enrolled at the school and on-site preschool. Two-thirds of the students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 9 of the 54 staff members are Aboriginal. Staff describe Casino West Public School as a respectful and culturally safe school that strives to bring the local Aboriginal community into the school and celebrate Bundjalung culture. One of the ways that Casino West Public School ensures that Bundjalung language and culture is valued and promoted in the school is through its Bundjalung Language and Culture Program.



Integrating Bundjalung language into the school curriculum

Bundjalung language is taught to all students in Casino West Public School through weekly language and culture lessons that are integrated into the curriculum. Each of the 13 classes at the school receives a 1-hour standalone Bundjalung language and culture lesson once a week. The Bundjalung Language and Culture Program has been running at Casino West Public School for over 2 decades, and the school has continued to invest resources in the program to strengthen and improve it. For example, from 2023 the school scaled up the program so it is delivered every week throughout the whole school year, rather than for only half the year as it had previously been delivered.



“I go in there and just teach. The kids, they’re ever ready. It’s a good feeling, especially when you bring the didgeridoo, play the didge and you get ready to dance, they just relax. I brought that onboard, the didgeridoo, it’s part of our culture. With the language and stuff, they’re all onboard with it and they just love it.”

Uncle Charlie, Aboriginal language tutor

Casino West Public School's language and culture program is taught by an Aboriginal language tutor who also works as a school learning support officer (SLSO) at the school. The lessons he delivers include Bundjalung language instruction, songs in language, stories, art, dance and music, and lessons on weapons, tools, medicine and bush foods. The Aboriginal language tutor also shares with students Bundjalung teachings about the significance of the land and environment to Aboriginal people, law and lore, kinship and family, and respect for Elders, which includes a local perspective from Gallibul land and Gallibul people of the Casino area. The Aboriginal language tutor tailors the lessons so that they are integrated into units of work students are undertaking for other key learning areas and align with the topics that students are learning about that week. For example, if a class is learning about the environment, the language and culture lesson for that week might be structured around the ways that Gallibul people care for their environment and promote sustainable ways of living. The Aboriginal language tutor communicates with classroom teachers to facilitate this integration.

The Bundjalung Language and Culture Program at Casino West Public School is overseen by a support teacher, who is an Aboriginal classroom teacher at the school. Together, they integrate the language and culture program into the curriculum, including a meeting once a term to discuss the scope and sequencing of the lessons for the upcoming term and how to best align the program with key learning areas in the curriculum. There is a Language and Culture Committee which meets for one hour each week to review the language and culture program. This team consists of the language tutor and supporting teacher, the Aboriginal

education officer (AEO), the principal and an Aboriginal preschool tutor. The school also has an Aboriginal Education Committee which meets 3 times a term and is chaired by the AEO. All interested staff are welcome to attend these meetings.

Maintaining the program through capacity building and leadership development

Much of the success of the Bundjalung Language and Culture Program stems from the efforts of school leaders at Casino West Public School to build the capacity and knowledge of all school staff about Bundjalung culture. School leaders have worked hard to build staff understanding of Bundjalung culture and language through professional learning delivered by the Stronger Smarter Institute to all school staff over several years.² Staff reported that the school's engagement with the Stronger Smarter Institute was a turning point for the school – as staff knowledge and confidence increased, so too did their commitment to elevating the status of Bundjalung culture and knowledge in the school. School leaders have continued to build capacity among school staff, for example organising for all staff to participate in the Local AECG's Connecting to Country professional learning.

“If you're thinking about implementing this in other schools, you can't just give it to one person and say, 'That's your job.' Because that will not work. It's a shared responsibility, you need succession training and the capacity for someone else to pick it up.”

Dean Campbell, Assistant Principal

² The [Stronger Smarter Institute](#) works with educators around Australia to equip them to support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students meet their educational goals. They do this by providing professional development opportunities around leadership, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander knowledges and cultural safety, using the 'Strong and Smart' approach developed by Dr Chris Sarra.



“I contribute a Word of the Week or Phrase of the Week to the newsletter so the kids can take that home, teach their parents or their cousins. Or bring that language out into the community ... so if I say to the kids, ‘Can you turn your binungs on,’ they know exactly what I’m talking about. That’s the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal kids. It’s like, ‘Turn your ears on.’”

Haley Connors,
Aboriginal Education Officer

The cultural competence of school staff at Casino West Public School has been critical for the maintenance of whole-school practices to embed Bundjalung language and culture in the school. Bundjalung language is used in morning assemblies, classrooms and signs throughout the school, and students say an Acknowledgment of Country in Bundjalung and in English at the start of each day. Bundjalung culture is evident in murals throughout the school as well as the music used to signal the end of lunch and recess breaks. The professional learning that staff have received equips non-Aboriginal staff with the confidence and knowledge to support the day-to-day practices that thoroughly embed Bundjalung language and culture in the school.

School leaders at Casino West Public School invest in building leadership capabilities among all Aboriginal staff members, including those involved in the language and culture program. They provide Aboriginal

staff with professional development opportunities in leadership and facilitation through the Stronger Smarter Institute. The principal also works to boost the status of Aboriginal staff in the school and local community by giving them leadership opportunities where possible. Staff members involved in delivering the language program are given opportunities to lead in different aspects of the program, so leadership is distributed throughout the team rather than sitting with one individual. For example, while the program convenor oversees the running of the program and its integration into the curriculum, the Aboriginal language tutor leads the process of developing the content and tailoring it to individual classes.

As they are seen as leaders in the school, staff involved in the Bundjalung Language and Culture Program have a greater platform from which to support non-Aboriginal teachers and help build their capacity in Aboriginal education. For example, the Aboriginal language tutor teaches non-Aboriginal classroom teachers about Bundjalung language, culture and history when collaborating with teachers to develop content for the language and culture lessons. Another key benefit of distributing leadership throughout the language and culture team is that if one person were to leave the school, the program could continue to function with strong leadership from remaining team members. This approach to leadership has enabled the succession planning that has been key to the continuation of the program over 2 decades.

Menindee Central School – Sharing and harnessing staff expertise

School context

Menindee Central School is a Kindergarten to Year 12 Connected Communities school located on the land of the Barkindji people in remote Far West NSW. Staff describe the small school as tight-knit and inclusive, with strong links to people, businesses and organisations in the Menindee community. Of the 80 students enrolled at Menindee Central School, approximately 75% are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Of the 30 staff employed at the school, around 40% are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. School leaders understand the vital role that all school staff play in supporting culturally responsive teaching and work hard to identify, harness and share their staff members' strengths.

Identifying and sharing staff expertise within the school

School leaders at Menindee Central School draw on the collective expertise and cultural competence of their staff to improve culturally responsive teaching practices across the school. Culturally responsive teaching promotes learning through validating and harnessing how cultural backgrounds influence students' ways of knowing, thinking and communicating. School leaders identify individual staff members' strengths and allocate staff who are skilled at culturally responsive teaching to projects, classes or other tasks with colleagues who may benefit from their expertise. For example, staff with strong culturally responsive interpersonal skills are tasked with taking teachers who are new to the school to meet with students' families. During these visits, Menindee Central

School staff model culturally responsive communication styles and etiquette that new teachers can use in their classrooms and when communicating with parents and/or carers. The visits are also an opportunity for new teachers to learn cultural knowledge that they can integrate into their teaching practice. Giving staff the chance to share their cultural expertise is particularly helpful in a geographically remote town like Menindee, as many of the school's teaching staff are recruited from outside the community and may be unfamiliar with local customs and culture.

“ We all have our position titles and everything, but I think we're much more than that ... identifying where people's strengths are and then using that to help another teacher.”

Fiona Kelly, Executive Principal



Menindee Central School also builds teacher cultural competency by utilising the expertise of school learning support officers (SLSOs). SLSOs form around one-third of the staff at Menindee Central School and are employed for their skills in student learning support as well as their knowledge of the local community and culture. School leaders have worked hard to raise the status of SLSOs in the school so that they are viewed as important members of staff who can help to develop teachers' culturally responsive teaching approaches in addition to supporting students with additional learning needs. School leaders emphasise to all school staff the value of the expertise that SLSOs bring to the school beyond the skills directly related to their job title, as some teachers are not accustomed to seeing SLSOs taking on different roles in the classroom.

The majority of SLSOs at Menindee Central School identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and they represent most family groups in the school community. School leaders report that SLSOs have in-depth knowledge of students' families and that they are trusted members of the local community. In addition to supporting teachers to develop their cultural and local knowledge, SLSOs also use their expertise to model positive relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. In the classroom, SLSOs model their strategies for building and maintaining positive relationships with students by treating all students with respect, taking an interest in their lives beyond the classroom and showing concern for their wellbeing. Menindee Central School has found this informal approach to modelling to be effective in building teacher competency as it has provided teachers with practical strategies they can use to understand how cultural influences may impact the educational experiences of their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

“We're always seeking advice, harnessing strengths, and really promoting the idea that SLSOs have a lot of information, they have a lot of potential support for you as a teacher in the classroom.”

Danielle Hunt, Deputy Principal

Sharing staff expertise with other schools

School leaders at Menindee Central School recognise that effective collaboration is the key to sharing successful practice and building expertise in culturally responsive teaching in their region. They provide opportunities for their staff to share this expertise with other schools that want to upskill their staff in this area. Regarded as leaders in Aboriginal education in NSW, Menindee Central School generously provides other schools with advice, information and support when requested. For example, the senior leader, community engagement at Menindee Central School has been visiting a school in the region which recently joined the Connected Communities Strategy, a joint initiative by the department and the NSW AECG Inc. He supports the school to establish the structures and processes set out in the Connected Communities Strategy by drawing from his own experience with the strategy. He also provides staff in non-teaching roles with advice on how they can implement culturally responsive teaching in the classroom through their own practices and work with students. In this way, Menindee Central School engages in collaborative practice with the aim of improving the quality of culturally responsive teaching in other schools in their region.



Another way that staff at Menindee Central School share their expertise is through their culturally immersive school exchange program. As part of the program, staff and students from metropolitan NSW schools visit Menindee Central School for 3 days to learn from the expertise and cultural knowledge of Menindee Central School staff. Visiting teachers take the knowledge and skills learned during the exchange back to their schools and use it in their classrooms to inform their culturally responsive teaching approaches. In return, students and staff from Menindee Central School have opportunities to visit metropolitan schools. This strengthens Menindee Central School's relationships with a variety of metropolitan schools that they would otherwise be unlikely to collaborate with. In particular, it provides opportunities to share resources and ask for assistance in areas that Menindee Central School has identified as focus areas, such as curriculum implementation.

“Effective collaboration enables us to remove assumptions, develop deep understandings of community and individual strengths and then support continued growth with confidence.”

Maryanne Rosenberg, Assistant Principal, Curriculum and Instruction



Positive relationships

Positive relationships between school staff, students, families and communities are built on shared trust, respect and understanding. They are developed over time, reciprocal and facilitated by school staff through engagement with students, their families and communities.

This resource explores 2 key pathways from the positive relationships theme:

- **knowing students and valuing their culture** – Soldiers' Settlement Public School
- **supporting Aboriginal education officers** – Narrandera High School.

Soldiers' Settlement Public School – Knowing students and valuing their culture

School context

Soldiers' Settlement Public School is a preschool to Year 6 school located on Bidjigal Country in Matraville in the south-east suburbs of Sydney. It is an inclusive school that strives to cultivate a sense of belonging among its students. The school has around 170 students. A quarter of the students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and the school has one Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff member. Soldiers' Settlement Public School prioritises developing positive relationships with students and their families by getting to know them and demonstrating that their culture is valued.



Seeking regular opportunities to learn about students and their families

Staff at Soldiers' Settlement Public School regularly dedicate time and effort to learning about their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. They are genuinely interested in students' culture and opinions, initiating conversations with students based on their interests and building rapport and relationships with students inside and outside the classroom. For example, members of staff and executive have an open-door policy and students frequently visit them to talk about a variety of topics. Members of staff and executive observe that even though schools are busy places, the 'gift of time' is one of the most important things staff can give students and their families. By creating regular opportunities to get to know students beyond teaching and learning in the classroom, teachers and school leaders foster positive relationships where students feel known, valued and respected.

“ You’ve got to educate yourself about Aboriginal culture and history, and how you can be the best possible teacher you can be for Aboriginal students and families. It starts off with just being open to learning. Then learning. And then building those relationships as well, but allowing that time so it’s not just a tokenistic thing where you just tick off the box. It’s genuine relationships.”

Akeisha Kelly,
Aboriginal Education Officer

“I believe that authentic connections form the foundation of cultural significance. It’s about bringing community together and fostering an environment where families find reassurance within the confines of the educational space. It’s about cultivating a sense of security and trust for students, enabling them to thrive in their learning, wellbeing, and social connections. The magic unfolds when this atmosphere of safety is established, paving the way for student development and growth.”

Polly Palaitas, Principal

Knowing students also means knowing their families, communities and cultures. Teachers and school leaders at Soldiers’ Settlement Public School use different methods to learn about their students’ families, such as personalised learning pathway (PLP) meetings, phone calls to parents and/or carers, and regular conversations at the school gate. They check in with families by asking them “How are you going?” rather than beginning conversations with questions that may be perceived as intrusive. Making time for regular conversations where staff show a genuine interest in students and their families has helped to build a culture of trust and understanding in the school community.

Soldiers’ Settlement Public School emphasises the need to give relationships time to form through consistent engagement. Staff suggest that when families feel like they can trust school staff they are more likely to share information about their culture and community, and to engage meaningfully in difficult conversations to support the educational outcomes of their children. Some families have prior negative experiences with the education system that may make it more challenging for school staff to build rapport and trust. In these situations, Soldiers’ Settlement Public School staff work with the school’s Aboriginal Education team who can help by initiating and leading the contact with families who are more comfortable engaging with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff.

Staff at Soldiers’ Settlement Public School also seek out opportunities to engage with students and their families beyond the school gate and out of school hours. Some staff attend performances by the school’s Koori dance group or go to their students’ sporting events on weekends. These gestures help to create positive relationships because they signal to students that their teachers care about and value them in a holistic way.

Valuing culture by supporting cultural maintenance

School leaders at Soldiers’ Settlement Public School use their knowledge of students to support them to strengthen and maintain their culture at school, by embedding Aboriginal languages, pedagogies, beliefs and cultures into the school’s day-to-day practices. At the whole-school level, school leaders include Language in the national anthem and Acknowledgement of Country, have class names in Language, and run weekly lessons on the Dreaming taught by the AEO with the support of classroom teachers. Soldiers’ Settlement Public School’s whole-school approach to cultural maintenance shows students and their families that their cultures are valued by the school, which supports their sense of belonging and identity in the school.

School leaders are also responsive to the specific cultural needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students as they arise. For example, staff noticed that some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students seemed more disconnected from their culture after returning to school following disruptions to face-to-face teaching caused by COVID-19. Staff identified that male students were particularly disconnected and would benefit from additional cultural support beyond what the school already offered to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. School leaders responded to these students' cultural needs by supporting the AEO to start the Koori Boys Cultural Program in 2022. The program brings Aboriginal male role models from the community into the school for one hour a week over several weeks to teach Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander boys in Years 2 to 6 about their culture. The program, which is reviewed and refined regularly to ensure that it continues to meet the evolving needs of all participating students, includes sessions on cultural values, art, dance and music. The AEO reports that the program has been successful in supporting students to reconnect with their culture and that it has also led to higher levels of student engagement at school.

“ We came up with a program for our Koori boys from Year 2 to Year 6. It's called the Koori Boys Cultural Program. There's Aboriginal men who have a lot of respect from the community that are coming in and working with these boys once a week ... [during the sessions] the boys are so respectful, and just wanting to learn. They were all engaged. It's fantastic to see.”

Akeisha Kelly,
Aboriginal Education Officer

Soldiers' Settlement Public School supports the passing of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next by inviting family members to deliver or participate in cultural programs at the school. The school welcomes family involvement in regular, established programs like the Koori dance program, and also gives families opportunities to be a part of culturally significant events. These include the school's NAIDOC Week celebrations. For example, one year several of the students' mothers ran a beading workshop. In addition to reinforcing how much the school values students' culture and strengthening cultural safety, inviting family members to deliver or participate in cultural programs also drives Aboriginal-led education and provides opportunities for staff to learn more about their students' culture.



Narrandera High School – Supporting Aboriginal education officers

School context

Narrandera High School is a secondary school in the Riverina region of NSW, situated on Wiradjuri Country. Staff describe it as a diverse and tight-knit school. It is home to an Aboriginal Learning and Engagement Centre.³ Narrandera High School has a student population of 360. Around 30% of students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and 7 of the 56 staff are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The Aboriginal education officers (AEOs) and other Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff play a pivotal role in fostering positive relationships within and outside of the school.

Valuing the expertise of AEOs and providing development opportunities

The knowledge and relationships that AEOs bring to Narrandera High School are highly valued by school leaders, who consult regularly with AEOs to learn more about students, their families and communities. AEOs report that the trust and support of the principal is the number one enabler for them to successfully support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. School leaders give AEOs at Narrandera High School autonomy to determine their processes, practices and priorities in response to the changing needs of students.



³ A key focus of Aboriginal Learning and Engagement Centres is to improve student engagement through the provision of wellbeing, academic and cultural support. The centres aim to increase outcomes for secondary Aboriginal students to enable them to reach their full potential, with a focus on improving student engagement, attendance, retention, HSC attainment and support for students at key transitional points.

“Your principal has to be there, has to have an understanding that this is what we need to do within the community, within the school, and within families – that’s number one support I think, each other [and the] principal.”

Joy O’Hara, Aboriginal Education Officer

Building capacity and developing leadership skills is another way that Narrandera High School supports AEOs in their roles. AEOs have opportunities to attend relevant professional learning, conferences and meetings with other AEOs from the region to discuss their experiences in schools, collectively solve problems and share advice. School leaders encourage AEOs to participate in community meetings and organisations as part of their role. For example, AEOs at Narrandera High School are members of the Aboriginal Elders Council and the Local AECG, alongside other Aboriginal school staff.

School leaders promote AEOs to the school community as leaders of their field by giving them the opportunity to share their expertise with other school staff. Narrandera High School’s AEOs lead a professional learning session for all staff at the beginning of the year to describe their role, talk about the school’s Aboriginal community, and explain how other staff can engage with them to best support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. By sharing their local knowledge, AEOs can help school leaders and teachers to better understand community dynamics, family connections between students, and significant local events that may have affected students over the school holidays.

Ensuring community support for AEOs

AEOs at Narrandera High School are a vital link between the school and its Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, their families and their communities. Staff at Narrandera High School highlight the importance of AEOs being recognised, supported and trusted by the community, as community buy-in can make all the difference to how students and families engage with the school. AEOs work hard to develop and maintain positive relationships with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students by engaging with them, building rapport and supporting them inside and outside of the classroom. This has helped to build community trust and respect for the AEO position because it demonstrates that the school genuinely cares about each student and their wellbeing.





School leaders at Narrandera High School are in the early stages of developing a new process that they hope will result in high levels of community support for newly appointed AEOs from their first day in the role. The new process involves an added step for community consultation in the recruitment of AEOs. This process began in response to feedback from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff at Narrandera High School, families and the local community that they value the opportunity to provide input on matters that relate to the education of their students, and they would welcome additional opportunities. Despite acknowledging the complexities and time involved in developing such a process, school leaders believe it will be worthwhile as it will help to build even greater trust between the community and AEOs who have a significant role to play in supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

“ Get to know your Aboriginal community. ... It’s that building of a relationship, mutual trust, respect. You just can’t walk in without knowing a person and expect a relationship like that. Work with the staff, work with the students, get to know a little bit about the family. That all helps. That certainly does help.”

Monica Lyons, Head Teacher Aboriginal Learning and Engagement Centre



Personalised learning

Personalised learning approaches tailor learning based on individual student strengths, needs, interests, culture, progress and/or goals. These approaches are grounded in providing students with learning environments that support them to achieve to a high standard.

This resource explores 2 key pathways from the personalised learning theme:

- **ensuring opportunities for student voice** – Dubbo College Senior Campus
- **using personalised learning pathways** – Toukley Public School.

Dubbo College Senior Campus – Ensuring opportunities for student voice

School context

Dubbo College Senior Campus is a school for Year 11 and 12 students located on Wiradjuri Country in the Orana region of NSW. Staff and students describe Dubbo College Senior Campus as an inclusive, respectful and welcoming school. It is home to a successful Clontarf Academy.⁴ There are 536 students enrolled at the senior campus. Around 32% identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 16 of the 86 staff members at the senior campus are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Dubbo College Senior Campus creates personalised learning experiences for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students by listening, valuing and responding to student voice.



Facilitating student cultural leadership through the Dyiraamalang captaincy

One way that Dubbo College Senior Campus ensures opportunities for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student voice is through their Dyiraamalang cultural captaincy program. The Dyiraamalang captains are 2 elected positions that are part of the Year 12 student leadership team, and are elected by all students alongside other school captains. Dyiraamalang means leader or 'influencer of good' in Wiradjuri language. Dyiraamalang captains listen to the concerns and suggestions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and work with school staff to meet students' cultural needs and goals.

“I’m in the cultural captain position, I’ve seen how culturally safe the environment in the school is. We’ve really worked to achieve that. Through the past years I’ve heard the improvement and I think it has a lot to do with the programs run, the staff, and also the inclusion of the school students. So, we worked really hard to create a more culturally safe environment and to bring not just Indigenous culture but other cultural recognition in our school.”

Llaney Webb,
2022 Dyiraamalang Captain

⁴ The [Clontarf Foundation](#) partners with schools and communities to create 'Clontarf Academies' which are embedded within the school grounds and education program. Full-time, locally based Clontarf staff mentor and counsel students on a range of behavioural and lifestyle issues while the school caters for their education needs. Any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander male enrolled at the school is eligible to participate in the Clontarf Academy.



The school has protocols to ensure that cultural processes are followed and reflect the esteemed nature of the Dyiraamalang captaincy. The position was established through a process of consultation with the school's Koori education team, the local community and the Local AECG. During the ceremony to announce new school captains, the new Dyiraamalang captains are badged by the outgoing Dyiraamalang captains directly after the school vice-captain is badged. This badging order was established following student feedback that the Dyiraamalang captaincy should be revered. When a Dyiraamalang captain is not Wiradjuri, a smoking ceremony is performed to smoke the badges by a local Elder in adherence to cultural protocol.

Dyiraamalang captains have a direct line of communication to the senior executive. They have weekly meetings with the deputy principal where they exercise their voice in decisions that matter to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students while seeking advice and support about key identified issues. The Dyiraamalang captains also sit on the Koori education team, which is responsible for leading Aboriginal education in the school.

The Dyiraamalang captains represent Dubbo College Senior Campus's student voice in the community. The captains regularly attend Local AECG meetings, where they share what has been happening in their school, showcase Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students' achievements, advertise events and participate in community discussions. They attend local interagency meetings to share their voice with community organisations and they are involved in local events, including NAIDOC Week celebrations, Sorry Day events and award committees.

“ Gets our students out in the communities as well with a voice, with a fairly loud voice. ... Particularly with the AECG. They're off to Anzac. They're off to all sorts of public events and also within the school events, speaking to the students that are coming up as well.”

Donna Williams,
Aboriginal Education Officer

Giving students opportunities to shape their Stage 6 experience

As a senior campus, the school places a strong emphasis on students' plans after high school and how the school can facilitate their success. When a student enters Year 11, the student and their family meet with a member of the senior executive and a careers adviser to discuss their subject choices. The interview informs the personalised learning pathway for these students. It gives students the chance to explain their post-school aspirations and work with school staff to develop a tailored plan that will support them to meet their goals. An Aboriginal student learning support officer (SLSO) contacts the student's family to set up the interview. If the student's parent, carer or family is not available, they can choose to bring an advocate instead, with students sometimes bringing a National Aboriginal Sporting Chance Academy (NASCA) or Clontarf Foundation staff member who works in the school, or a teacher.

The interview gives students a structured way to voice their own visions for their future. It helps teachers and families understand the student's subject choices in the context of their post-school aspirations and learn how to help them reach their goals. The interviews involve explaining the HSC process and careers pathways to students. They also provide opportunities for careers counselling and assistance with subject selection that is customised to individual students based on their interests, post-school aspirations and teacher feedback. This data is fed back to their teachers so they can develop a plan to support the student to thrive.

Each student leaves the interview with an attendance, cultural and educational goal, and an implementation plan that is integrated into their personalised learning pathway. The school supports them to reach their goals by assisting with decision-making about university courses, monitoring students' attendance and facilitating apprenticeships. One of the 2022 Dyiraamalang captains, musician Llaney Webb, reported that Dubbo College Senior Campus organised for her to perform her music on the local radio station. She said that despite not choosing the most traditional career path, Dubbo College Senior Campus supported her journey, and that her platform as a musician now was boosted by their efforts.

“It's then bringing them together. It's just amazing, because what Mum had a dream of that they thought that the child was going to be, was totally different to what the child was stating at the meeting. The parents were listening to what their child's achievements are.”

Annette Peachey,
Student Learning and Support Officer

Toukley Public School – Using personalised learning pathways

School context

Toukley Public School is a preschool to Year 6 school located on the land of the Darkinjung people on the Central Coast of NSW. The school strives to build and maintain positive relationships with its students, their families and the local community. Toukley Public School currently has 502 students. Around 32% of the Kindergarten to Year 6 students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and around 75% of the preschool students. Of the school's 59 staff, 7 identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Personalised learning pathways (PLPs) play a pivotal role in how Toukley Public School engages with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their families.

Creating a PLP template in partnership with the school community and local AECG

As recommended in the department's PLP guidelines, Toukley Public School developed its own PLP template to meet the needs of its Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. The PLP template was developed in partnership with the school community and Local AECG. The process to develop the template was led by the Aboriginal Education committee, which consists of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff who are responsible for promoting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander education in the school.



The Aboriginal Education committee began the process by hosting a yarn up for families to get their input on what should be included in the PLP template. The committee also led focus group sessions to investigate what questions Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families wanted included and what questions should be left out because the information was considered too sensitive. The committee then sought feedback from the Muru Bulbi Local AECG who endorsed the template and confirmed that it was culturally appropriate. The consultation process was not only successful in developing a PLP template that was contextualised to the community and students, but it also helped to solidify relationships between the school and local community by providing an opportunity for conversations about why schools need to gather specific information and how it will be used to support the PLP process.

The template that Toukley Public School developed in partnership with their local community ensures a whole-person approach to the PLP process that focuses on getting to know each student and their family. It includes sections about each student's family, culture, interests, strengths, needs, aspirations and learning goals. This includes academic, social or wellbeing and cultural goals. Staff work closely with each student and their family/ carers to ensure that each goal is a 'SMART' goal – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. The same PLP template is used for students in all year groups. While the template is saved as a soft copy on the school's server, the school ensures that all PLPs are easily accessible as suggested in the department's PLP guidelines. Each PLP is printed out and housed in folders in the relevant classroom with the student's name and photo on the front so that they are readily available for students, families and school staff to view and update at any time. PLPs from previous years are printed and stored in the same folder to promote continuity of learning.

“They're not hidden away. They're not tucked in a drawer. They're visible. They can see them ... I can walk in and find their PLP straight away. See where the kids are. They're not just a dust collector. They're sitting right there ready to go.”

Kara Walker, Aboriginal Education Officer

At the start of each year, Toukley Public School initiates the process of filling out the PLP template by inviting families to the school for a conversation with the student's classroom teacher. One year, this initial conversation was facilitated through a casual yarn up barbecue that was open to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their families. In previous years, the AEO arranged meetings with families and invited classroom teachers, or the teachers organised the meeting and gave families the option of inviting the AEO. After meeting with families, classroom teachers schedule a time to meet with each student individually and work with them to fill out the PLP template. The PLP is then sent to the student's family to seek their input before finalisation. Families are invited to write notes on the physical document, but teachers also use other personalised approaches to engage the family, such as phone calls.

Regularly monitoring and reviewing individual PLPs and the school's PLP processes

Toukley Public School treats PLPs as living documents that are reviewed and updated regularly. Throughout the year, teachers collect samples of student achievement to include in their PLP folder as evidence that they are working towards or meeting their learning goals. These may include photographs, work samples or written journal reflections from the student. This evidence is used to celebrate student success and to promote student reflection.

One of the outcomes of regular monitoring and reviewing of individual PLPs is that goals are constantly updated and refined so that they remain current and meaningful for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. For example, a student who completed his goal of doing an Acknowledgement of Country at a Stage 3 assembly wanted to extend this goal by doing an Acknowledgement of Country at a whole-school assembly. His teacher documented these events with photographs and placed them in his PLP folder. Teachers at Toukley Public School report that using photographs to document student progress has been an effective strategy as it has led to higher levels of student engagement with the PLP process.

In addition to ongoing monitoring and review of individual PLPs, Toukley Public School is also committed to regularly reviewing its PLP processes. The school reviews its processes against the department's PLP guidelines and prioritises professional learning so that all staff feel confident to support the effective development and implementation of PLPs for their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students. As a result of this review process, school leaders identified communication to staff about what is expected of them when embedding PLPs as part of their everyday practice as an area for improvement. They subsequently delivered a professional learning session that focused on staff roles and responsibilities in the PLP process and they have developed a practical resource for staff to refer to as required. They are also working on formalising their system for classroom teachers to review students' PLPs throughout the year by adding regular review weeks to the centralised school calendar.

Toukley Public School also identifies areas for improvement in its PLP processes by asking for feedback from students and their families. The school invites ongoing feedback through surveys and focus groups, and also collects feedback informally through yarn ups, phone

calls, and conversations at the school gate and in the community. In response to feedback from students and their families, the school now offers a variety of ways to input into a student's PLP. Being responsive to families' preferences has helped the school to connect, build trust and sustain positive relationships with the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, which is something that has taken time to achieve.

“The teachers are well aware that the relationships are the key. Forming those relationships with the kids in the first instance, and having those discussions, and having the information that they need to be able to have these discussions with kids, and then bringing in the families to talk about their aspirations, and what they think in terms of the PLP goals.”

Jacqui Buchanan, Principal

“... it's a really good opportunity to sit down with your kids one on one. It's timetabled into our day – it's not like it's squeezed in there, it's like, 'I'm spending this week to make sure that I've made a plan with these children,' and you get to know a lot about them ...”

**Nicole McKinnon,
Stage 1 Assistant Principal**



About the artworks



E Williams

Coniston Public School

'Mt Keira Mob' – all the mobs gathering on Mt Keira at sunset.



AJ Bangura

Wilkins Public School

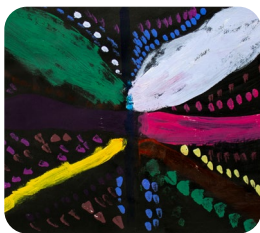
Land + Ocean – 'Wajarr and Gaagal' – I am a young Gumbaynggirr boy and my painting represents that I come from the place of the ocean and live on the land in the city and have people around me to connect me to my culture.



M Roberts

Ashcroft High School

Traditional food from my tribe 'Bundjalung'. Black beans off the coast of Lismore.



M Brindle

Ashfield Public School

Connections – the small marks are people and the larger bands are those people coming together. It is about connections.



W Conrick

Redhead Public School

'Yimaliko' which means 'encourage' in Awabakal language. Whether I'm at school with my friends, at home with my mob or in the community I encourage everyone to talk, listen and be kind. This drawing represents where I live on 'Awabakal Country'. The sand, water and Redhead Bluff are drawn with a central meeting place in the middle.

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