

# **Improving school practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: The voices of their parents and carers**

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*Dare to Lead*

Mr. Giles-Brown is the National Schools Coordinator for the *Dare to Lead* project. *Dare to Lead* is run by the Principals Australia Institute and funded through DEEWR, State and Territory Jurisdictions and the support of individual schools. His role is to support staff in the development and implementation of professional development tools and strategies in all states and territories, as well as across all sectors and jurisdictions.

Mr Giles-Brown was a New South Wales Primary Principal holding the position at Coonamble, Riverstone and Moruya. During this period he chaired the NSWPPA Aboriginal Education reference group and sat on the Director Generals Advisory Committee for Aboriginal Education. He was the recipient of the NSWPPA Award for Excellence in Leadership of Aboriginal Education.

## **Gina Milgate**

*Australian Council for Australian Research (ACER)*

Ms. Gina Milgate is a Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri woman from New South Wales and is the Indigenous Liaison Officer (ILO) at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). She provides leadership and knowledge on a wide range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues across ACER. A key part of her role is to ensure that ACER's activities in Indigenous education are underpinned by its values and leadership behaviours, and that research undertaken in Indigenous communities is culturally respectful, responsive and based on integrity.

Ms Milgate has led and been involved in a range of projects in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education that have informed policy and practice. She has been

involved in research and projects that have involved a high level of consultation with urban, regional, remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. She has facilitated school and community based research and has presented her findings to a range of stakeholders. Ms Milgate led a major project that evaluated training in the delivery of health services to Indigenous people in Central Australia and was part of a research team that provided the Victorian state government with recommendations that informed policy on Indigenous education and employment.

Ms Milgate has experience in planning and implementing strategies that are responsive to fulfilling the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities in a culturally appropriate manner. She has been a consultant for Mindmatters and developed and delivered professional development to schools and communities in Queensland, Northern Territory, Victoria and New South Wales focusing on social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, family and communities.

In 2010 she was seconded to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria for six months, where she worked in the Aboriginal Early Years Branch as a Senior Policy and Project Advisor and Manager. Her work involved a high level of engagement with key stakeholders from the community level to the ministerial level to support Aboriginal children and families in early childhood. She was a member of the Aboriginal Inclusion Board and developed an Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy. Prior to her appointment at ACER, Ms Milgate was teaching and researching in the areas of marketing, organisational behaviour and strategic management at the University of New England.

## Abstract

**Imagine the vision that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers have for their child's education: what would it look like?**

'We expect the school to care for our children, treat them as individuals, to educate them and to keep us really informed about how well they are performing at school'

**What would the first teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students say about what they believe to be an effective school for their children?**

‘We want the school to cater for the individual needs of the kids and that means that they know the children they teach’

This paper illustrates the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers about their children and education. The *Dare to Lead* Collegial Snapshot Process (CSS) has been a vehicle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers to share their wisdom and provide answers to questions that schools regularly ask about improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

*Dare to Lead* in partnership with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has begun to mine and analyse the data that have been collected through the CSS by the former since 2007. This presentation will focus on the data collected from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers in 2011. A key purpose of this paper is to identify the factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers are identifying as important to creating an effective school for their children and the whole school community.

## Introduction

Improving the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students continues to be a high priority for national and state governments and jurisdictions. The consistent thread across all governments is to reduce the gap in education attainment and achievement from early childhood to adult learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The key centres that play a role in addressing this priority are places of learning; early learning centres, schools and post-school education institutions. It is critical that these places of learning are equipped with the skills and resources needed to meet this challenge. The engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers can assist these places of learning to implement policies and practices that meet the needs of their students and, as a result, assist in meeting this national priority.

The aspirations that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers have for their children are similar to those of other parents and carers.

‘We want our children to be happy and want to come to school’

This presentation will focus on data collected from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers in 2011 through the CSS undertaken by *Dare to Lead*. The CSS is an avenue for stakeholders in the school community to share openly their vision, perspectives and suggestions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in their school communities. The presentation will highlight the strategies that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers have recognised as important and believe can support school communities.

## Dare to Lead

*Dare to Lead* is a project funded by the Australian Government with the support of the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth with a focus on improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through school leadership development. The *Dare to Lead* project began in 2000 when representatives of the four peak principals' associations met at a national forum and agreed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education would be their highest priority. It is an initiative of the profession and specifically of Principals Australia Institute acting on behalf of its members and their associations. The *Dare to Lead* program is now in its fourth phase, with currently over 50 per cent, (more than 5600), of all Australian schools signed on as coalition members.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 identifies six domains of priority, including:

- Readiness for School,
- Engagement and Connections,
- Attendance,
- Literacy and Numeracy,
- Leadership,
- Quality Teaching and Workforce Development and
- Pathways to Real Post-School Options to contribute to improving outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education at a local, systemic and national level (MCEECDYA).

At the heart of the local level are families and communities. Families and communities are the people that can provide schools with an understanding of their child's needs and aspirations and a picture of their vision for their child's education. Furthermore, each state and territory has developed strategic plans to inform policy and practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

## Collegial Snapshot Process

The CSS is the medium that *Dare to Lead* uses to collect data from the school community in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The CSS is a point in time 'snapshot' of the school and is a confidential and collegial process for the profession by the profession. The school principal invites *Dare to Lead* into their school to gather both evidence-based and anecdotal data to make informed decisions about planning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in their school. The information is collected from eight groups including:

- 1 School leaders
- 2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers
- 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff
- 5 Teachers
- 6 Other students
- 7 Other parents
- 8 Support staff

Each group are asked similar questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in the school relating to school leadership, cultural environment, quality teaching, curriculum, community engagement, student health and wellbeing, curriculum and governance and processes. In addition to interviewing each group of stakeholders, *Dare to Lead* collects and analyses school data relating to enrolment, attendance, suspensions, NAPLAN, management plans, curriculum documents and newsletter. Upon completion of the visit and data collection, *Dare to Lead* provides the school principal with feedback through a formal report. The recommendations and commendations resulting from the report can lead to follow-up professional development and a return CSS process two years after the initial one.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers

In 2011, *Dare to Lead* conducted 173 Collegial Snapshots across Australia, including 49 urban schools, 73 provincial schools, 18 rural schools and 33 remote schools. There were 510 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers participating in these Snapshots. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers shared openly their thinking, ideas and the aspirations they have for their children and how schools can embed and bring their ideas to life throughout the school community.

## Findings

Since the conception of the *Dare to Lead* program, coalition member school communities have participated in the CSS, engaged in professional learning and embedded practice into their school fabric to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through school leadership development. The aforementioned eight groups identified seven broad key themes that can support the improvement of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students including cultural environment, quality teachers, community engagement, student health and wellbeing, curriculum, school leadership and governance and processes. The following sections illustrate the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers.

### **Cultural environment**

*‘NAIDOC Week is a big thing in the school, kangaroo stew, boomerangs – it is a joyous celebration of being Aboriginal’*

The cultural environment of a school was identified as a key theme to create an effective school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the school community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included the observation of protocols, celebrating special cultural events, cultural respect, community connection, cultural awareness and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as important factors in contributing to providing an effective school for their children and the school community.

### **Quality teachers**

*'I want the passions from the teachers to be within – that this is important to our state, our country, being challenged by their values'*

The quality of teaching was another key theme in creating an effective school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the whole school community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included the role of AEWs, teacher cultural awareness, social management, educational expectations, knowing the students, parent and teacher relationships, personalised learning plans, staff professional learning/training, and student and teacher relationships.

### **Community engagement**

*'I am often asked to come into school – that makes me feel valued'*

The engagement with the community and what this engagement looks like, feels like and sounds like was recognised as a key theme to build relationships and partnerships between the school and broader community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included the inclusion of community role models and mentors in schools, Elders, parents and carers participating in school activities, community being involved in decision making, schools providing a welcoming environment for the community and the school being aware of and understanding local family and community issues.

### **Student health and wellbeing**

*'My child is very happy at school, he won't even give the gate time to open, but he has to wait to 8.30 am'*

The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was another theme identified across the eight groups as contributing to creating an effective school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the whole school community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included strategies to support students, aspirations and career development, behaviour, feeling safe and happy, sense of acceptance and belonging, cultural pride and identity, self-confidence and transitions.

### **Curriculum**

*'All students could learn more about the local Aboriginal culture and history'*

The curriculum in schools was a further key theme identified throughout the CSS. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted when developing curriculum frameworks included embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum for all students, embedding cultural programs and activities, the school offering good educational opportunities, the school providing student-centred learning and the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

### **School leadership**

*'The best thing about the school is that the principal knows all the parents (he knows their names).'*

The leadership of the school was another key theme emerging from the Collegial Snapshot Process. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included effective communication, educational expectations, established standards and policies, understanding and respecting parental views of school atmosphere, comfort and environment, developing positive staff and student relations and parent and staff relations and the visible presence of the principal throughout the school community.

### **Governance and processes**

*'Parents and community need to be more involved in school decision making and being involved in the school Aboriginal Education Team will be a good way to facilitate this'*

The school governance and processes for decision making also emerged as highly important. Key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted in relation to governance arrangements and processes for decision making included governance structures in schools, funding, communication, involving the community in decision making, embedding established standards and policies, involving parents and carers in school committees and the rate of staff turnover.

## **Conclusion**

The Dare to Lead Collegial Snapshot Process has been a culturally safe, engaging and empowering way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers to share their knowledge and ideas about what makes an effective school for their children. The wealth of information from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and



carers in 2011 complemented by the school data has provided an evidence-base to inform future analysis of the Collegial Snapshot Process.

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