Premier's Essential Energy Indigenous Education Scholarship

Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students

Peter Nichols

Walgett Community School Secondary Campus

Sponsored by



Brief description of study tour

The focus of my tour was to look at successful programs and strategies for the engagement, attainment and overall success at school for Indigenous students, with a particular focus on secondary students. This involved looking at school organisational practices, curriculum delivery, school to work and vocational programs, literacy programs, cultural programs including language revival and specific initiatives for students at risk of not completing school.

Context of Walgett Community School

Walgett Community School is located 280 km north of Dubbo in north-west New South Wales, Australia. It has enrolment of around 250 students pre-school to year 12 (P-12), split across two sites. Ninety-five per cent of the students identify as Aboriginal. The school community faces great challenges including significant socioeconomic disadvantage across all key indicators in terms of employment, health, criminal justice, and housing; family mobility and student transience; and relative isolation.

This school and community context has a significant impact on educational outcomes, when compared to New South Wales (NSW) state averages. Although in recent years the school has made significant improvements in attendance, suspension and literacy / numeracy data, this data remains below state averages for the general population. Attendance rates are around 15% lower than state averages for secondary students and around 10% lower than state averages for primary students. Suspension rates have been consistently higher than state averages for a significant period of time. Literacy and numeracy data as shown by the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) indicates that, on average, students at the school are performing below state averages, although the school has demonstrated well above average growth in NAPLAN data in recent years.

The school has an established Gamilaraay / Yuwaalaraay Language program. It has developed excellent links with TAFE NSW to widen student subject choice. There is a strong focus on vocational education and partnerships have been developed with local employers. The school works closely with other agencies to provide support for student health and welfare needs and works closely with the Dharriwaa Elders on curriculum development.

The school has undergone numerous management restructures over the past 15 years and is currently transitioning to the ‘Connected Communities’ strategy.

My role has been as Deputy Principal of the secondary school site since 2008 and I have worked at the school since 1997. In 2012 for a six month period I was the relieving Principal of the school.

Summary of educational institutions visited

As part of the Premier’s Essential Energy Indigenous Education Scholarship I investigated a number of educational institutions relevant to the education of Indigenous students. They include:

**Alexandria Park Community College, Sydney**

Alexandria Park is a Kindergarten-Year 12, partially selective, split-site school in inner Sydney of 400 students (20% are Aboriginal). All primary students had laptops provided by National Partnerships funding (provided by the Federal government to support low socioeconomic status communities), which were maintained at the school. There was a major focus on improving students writing skills and encouraging students to ‘take risks’ with their writing. In the secondary school, National Partnerships funds had been spent employing ‘Learning Success Teachers’ who supported at risk secondary students. Each Tuesday afternoon the school ran the SEAR program (Student Engagement & Retention). This involved students in Years 7-10 participating in activities coordinated by the school but delivered by many and varied non-government organisations (NGO’s) and tertiary providers which were located nearby.

**National Centre for Indigenous Excellence (NCIE), Sydney**

Located on the site of the former Redfern Public School, the NCIE is a world class facility which facilitates Arts and Culture, Health and Wellness, Educational, and Sport & Recreational programs. The NCIE has several ‘Pathway Partners’ who deliver programs through the centre. The following programs and organisations are worthy of further exploration for potential use for Walgett (not all are based at NCIE):

[*National Sporting Chance Academy*](http://www.nasca.com.au) *(NASCA)* – NASCA is an Aboriginal owned and governed, not for profit organisation dedicated to creating better lives for young Aboriginal Australians through engaging personal development programs. NASCA offers ‘Careers and Aspirations’ camps for students, which are fully funded.

[*Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience*](http://www.aimementoring.com/) *(AIME)* – AIME is a structured program where university student volunteers provide mentoring, tutoring and support to Indigenous high schools students. The program has improved retention to year 12 and achievement for students.

 [*Aboriginal Employment Strategy*](https://aes.org.au/) – The Aboriginal Employment Strategy provides career preparatory programs, recruitment services, cadetship programs, graduate programs, and consultancy services all specifically targeted at supporting Aboriginal people access employment opportunities.

[*Weave Youth Family Community*](http://www.weave.org.au/) – Weave is a not for profit organisation based in South Sydney which provides support programs for Aboriginal youth including ‘Kool Kids Club’, tutoring programs, ‘Links to Learning’, and various other programs which support experiencing mental health issues and disengagement from society.

[*Clontarf Foundation*](https://clontarf.org.au/) – Clontarf Academies are established in 54 schools across Australia. The Clontarf Foundation is a charitable, not for profit group that combines educational and personal development programs with student’s love of football.

*Koori Communications –* Koori Communications offers employment and economic development advice to Aboriginal people. They have run programs in schools such as ‘Racing to the Top’ where students build their own remote control cars.

**Kia Aroha College, Auckland, New Zealand**

Located in Otara, South Auckland, Kia Aroha College has an enrolment of 350 students (100% Maori and Pasifika Islander). Cultural enrichment and bilingualism are central to the school’s operation and significant amounts of school time were spent on cultural activities including dance, music, language and arts. The goal of the school is to produce students who are ‘warrior-scholars’, students who confidently understand and use their cultural knowledge, heritage, language and beliefs to achieve their potential. Students worked in very large well-resourced open learning areas divided into separate distinct learning teaching and learning spaces with numerous classes sharing the available space. Teachers said after initial reluctance they found the set up very workable and liked it. All the whiteboards and computers within this area were mobile. The approach was very much student centred approach with the teacher as the learning facilitator. Incorporated in the school was ‘Clubhouse 274’ – an after school youth centre (funded externally) which included a computer lab / recording studio that was very well patronised.

I must especially thank the students and staff at Kia Aroha College for the welcome I received, which was in the form of dances, songs and speeches entirely in Maori Language. This amazing experience was one of the highlights of my tour.

**New Zealand Ministry of Education, Auckland**

Mr John Rutherford, Student Achievement Practioner, was generous enough to provide 2 hours of his time at very short notice, as the school I had originally planned to visit had to cancel. Mr Rutherford had previously been a Principal of an intensive behaviour residential school which made him a very relevant interviewee. Mr Rutherford spoke about the following sources which would all be highly relevant to the Walgett context and can be recommended for further exploration:

[*Wrap Around Program*](https://www.pbis.org/) – Wraparound is a philosophy of care which uses defined planning processes to build support networks and constructive relationships for students with emotional and behavioural disabilities and their families.

[*The Incredible Years*](http://www.incredibleyears.com/)– The Incredible Years are research-based, proven effective programs for reducing children’s aggression and behaviour problems and increasing social competence at home and school.

The following books were recommended reading:

* *Scaling up Education Reform, Russell Bishop, NZCER Press, 2010*
* *Designing Better Schools for Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Children, Stewart McNaughton, Routledge, 2011*

**Hillwood High School, Nashville**

This was a High School (grades 9-12) for 1200 students, of which 57% are economically disadvantaged. Students at Hillwood in Grades 10-12 elect to be part of one of 3 ‘academies’ - either Art, Design & Communications; Business & Hospitality; or Health Sciences. Each academy has partnerships with relevant businesses, government departments and tertiary institutions. The academies system is part of a wider Nashville Public Schools approach to engagement of high schools students, different schools offer academies in different disciplines. At Hillwood there are no school captains or prefects. All senior students (Grade 12) are expected to be school leaders and can participate in an ambassadors program to develop their leadership skills.

**MNPS Virtual School, Nashville**

This was a very new school which was in fact Metropolitan Nashville Public School’s ‘virtual school’ where students completed work at home and liaised with their teachers via technology. Unlike Distance Education in NSW, where students with behavioural issues is the major growth area, prospective enrolments at MNPS had to commit to an academically rigorous program and were electing to study at home for various reasons.

**The Academy at Old Cockrill, Nashville**

This school was a centre for students from surrounding Nashville High Schools who were ‘failing’ or had ‘failed’ at their regular school. It was effectively a second chance at a High School diploma. Student attendance was flexible to cater for the needs of the many students with significant personal issues. Learning was virtually entirely student centred using on line programs, with the teacher facilitating. Students could graduate at any time throughout the year. The school regularly held graduating ceremonies for individual students who finished at various times through the years.

**The Academy at Opry Mills, Nashville**

This school for Grade 12 students existed in a large room at a Simons Shopping centre (the equivalent of a Westfield’s in NSW), and is funded by the Simons Youth Foundation. The school ran a similar open learning plan to that used at Kia Aroha in Auckland. Students applied to enrol at this school generally because they were not happy at their local schools or faced significant personal issues making finishing high school difficult in a traditional format.

**Sequoyah School, Tahlequah, Oklahoma**

This is a P-12 private school located in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, 120 km east of Tulsa. 100% of enrolments and virtually all staff identify as Native American. The high school section has an enrolment of 370. The school is funded by the revenues of the Cherokee Nation, whose business interests include casinos and banks. The school runs girls and boys clubs after school which are well attended using additional funding. Spelling is a big focus and all students sit weekly spelling tests across the school. There is one teaching position which works to remove students for intensive literacy work. The school makes good use of PLATO online teaching programs. Using Cherokee revenue sources, students are paid for successful completion of courses. This has an excellent motivating factor and builds a real work ethic among students.

**Oklahoma Indian Education Department, Tulsa**

The role of this department was to coordinate programs for Native American students across a wide range of schools. This involved a very wide variety of roles including liaising with schools regarding any issues involving Native American students, community liaison, tutoring programs that worked across a number of schools, after school tutoring programs, coordination of cultural activities, supporting families, language programs, and assisting with provision of basic school supplies for needy students.

**East High School, Anchorage, Alaska.**

This school was home to around 2200 students (grades9-12), of whom around 365 identified as Alaska Native. The school employed an Indian Education community counsellor to work with all Alaska Native students to support graduation rates. There had been 2 counsellors employed but budget cuts had resulted in the loss of one. The school’s Alaska Native students faced similar issues relating to high levels of mobility and socioeconomic factors to students in Walgett.

**Alaska Native Cultural School, Anchorage, Alaska**

This is a charter school which opened in 2008 and is located in a disused furniture warehouse. It has around 220 enrolments (P-7), of which 70% identify as Alaska Native. Charter schools are in effect privately run schools which are 100% publicly funded. Anyone can start a charter school, however there is around an 18 month accreditation process. The school had a major focus on cultural aspects including language and using individual student data to support teaching and learning. The school (as do many schools in US) relied heavily on funding gained through grants, many schools employed grant writers for this purpose.

**Nenana K-12 School, Nenana, Alaska**

Nenana School is a K-12 school of 200 students in Nenana, Alaska, 500 km north of Anchorage. It has a unique enrolment demographic in that its Primary aged enrolments are largely local students and it also serves as a High School for 85 Alaska Native boarders who come from Alaska’s most remote villages. The school has invested in the Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) program, which is a project based integrated approach to these subject areas. Nenana School has also invested heavily in the use of Lego Robotics for teaching and learning, which has been very successful at engaging students of all levels and ages. The school also used MIMIO devices, which function as a Smartboard, but are much cheaper.

**Hilo High School, Hilo, Hawaii**

Hilo High is located on the “Big” Island of Hawaii. It has a population of 1300 students of which 40% identify as Hawaiian Native. The agricultural economic base which employed many Hawaiian Natives had virtually disappeared, contributing to socioeconomic problems in the community. The school faced issues in ensuring all students saw the relevance of succeeding at school, and supporting parents in this goal. The competitive nature of Western schooling and obsessions with testing were very much at odds with the values of many Hawaiian natives, creating a barrier to engagement at school.

**Kaimuki High School, Honolulu, Hawaii**

This school was located in inner-city Honolulu. It had a population of 900 students, of which 400 could be considered at risk of not graduating without additional support and flexible approaches. The school faced the challenges of rapidly changing demographics, including a big increase in enrolments of Micronesian immigrant students, and overall enrolments had been declining at a rate of around 100 students per year. Teachers were provided additional release time, which was used to meet in teams to develop curriculum and support student welfare. For students experiencing difficulty the school ran the IMUA program (IMUA is Hawaiian for progress), which included remedial lessons on Saturdays. In 2012 the school was moving to a system of academies similar to the ones described in Nashville.

**Ke Kula Kaiapuni ‘o Ānuenue School, Honolulu, Hawaii**

This school is a K-12 Hawaiian Language immersion school, of around 360 students, some of whom travel over an hour each way to attend. It is one of only 2 Hawaiian Language immersion schools on the island of O’ahu. Only a very small percentage of Hawaiian Native people speak their traditional language in the home, and this school is part of a push for language revival. All lessons up until Grade 4 are delivered in totally Hawaiian language and Hawaiian native culture was integral to all aspects of the school’s environment and curriculum delivery.

General observations between studied educational institutions in the United States of America and Australia

Although I only visited 4 states and a tiny percentage of the schools in US, these factors appear to be common systemic differences.

* + 1. All high schools have multiple on ground security staff who manage any issues involving violent behaviour or general safety. Executive and teaching staff are not expected to manage these incidents in the critical phase, security are called in the first instance.
		2. Promotions system – to gain promotion in the US additional certification must be attained. After 5 years minimum teaching experience and gaining your Principal’s recommendation as a suitable applicant, accreditation involves 2 years of tertiary coursework while also doing full time internships. After accreditation you can apply for promotion positions.
		3. Free lunches are provided for students who qualify via socioeconomic status.
		4. All Principals are employed on contracts usually renewed annually.
		5. In Grades 9-12, all courses undertaken count for credit points toward the High School Diploma. There are no external exams for subjects like the NSW Higher School Certificate, but school based grades based on assessment.
		6. Tardiness (lateness to school or class) is a problem for most schools, which had very similar ways of managing to our own including – monitoring, parental contact, and withdrawal of school privileges for persistent offenders.
		7. The US has mandatory 365 day suspension for firearms offences.
		8. Schools could implement suspensions of up to 92 days for drug offences or possession of a weapon of any description.
		9. School uniforms – In general public school students in the US do not wear uniforms. The Nashville Public Schools have now moved toward students wearing uniforms with very positive feedback.
		10. All High Schools have full time non-teaching Athletic directors. High school sports, particularly football are an integral part of school life.
		11. Counsellors have much wider roles with multiple counsellors per school
		12. The challenges facing small, rural, isolated schools meeting demands for improved data are not unique to Australia.

Considerations and recommendations for further discussion and implementation at Walgett Community School

* 1. Staffing – Employment of additional local Aboriginal person/s with expertise in art and local culture to work with targeted students. One benefit of the Local Schools, Local Decisions proposal (LSLD) may be greater flexibility in this area.
	2. Teaching allocations: Reduce face-to-face teaching load of teachers. This can be done by slightly reducing subject offerings, combining some classes within stages and having vertically integrated Year 9-12 classes for some courses. Additional time can be used to form teams for the purposes of -
		1. Curriculum planning. Most teachers in Walgett are early career teachers and are often the only teacher of their KLA in the school.
		2. Implementation of Personalised Learning Plans (PLP’s), sharing this role across all staff.
	3. Curriculum design for Years 9-12 – formation of mini-academies. This would obviously be on a much smaller scale than those in Nashville, but would provide students with direction and a sense of belonging, and be used to strengthen existing links with local employers.
	4. Attendance: High rates of mobility and transience account for a significant proportion of attendance rates being below state averages. To combat this, students who are absent from school because they have moved to another town, or whose current whereabouts are unknown, could be placed immediately on an INACTIVE students list. Their status can still be followed up by regional / school personnel with the goal of ensuring their immediate enrolment elsewhere. Meanwhile, their absences would not count against the host school. This would immediately cause an increase in the school attendance rate.
	5. Expansion of flexible approaches to individual student’s attendance. Negotiated attendance plan for all senior students that takes into account curriculum requirements but allows greater flexibility for students with significant issues and responsibilities – for example babies.
	6. Combatting isolation – Building links to Aboriginal organisations and programs delivered from Sydney, such as the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence et al. The school should maximise student’s exposure to wider opportunities.
	7. Making culture central – One day per week or fortnight timetabled as culture day purely for students and staff to work on creative and performing arts and other extra-curricular activities.
	8. Student recognition and reward – For many students the completion of Years 9, 10, and 11 are a major achievement. The school can recognise this achievement by holding events for parents of students who compete each of these years successfully. This should support retention rates as short term achievements are better recognised and celebrated. This would also ensure Years 9-11 ‘counted’ as achievements in themselves rather than just stepping stones.
	9. Technology: Our school is generally well resourced technologically. Possible options to look at would include having computers in every classroom, an additional computer lab, more IPADS for student use, purchase of Lego Robotics, MIMIO technology.
	10. Student Leadership: Instead of having elected school captains, make all Year 12 students equal school leaders with shared responsibilities.
	11. School Promotional materials – To combat negative public images of the school, the school should invest in professional quality promotional materials to showcase the many excellent achievements and programs the school runs.
	12. Student reward – Options looked at for the financial reward of students in Years 9-12 for completion of courses (not just for attendance). Such a system would be more directly successful (and easier to manage) than other merit / reward systems, cheaper than other interventions to support student retention (e.g. employing more staff), would build a work ethic in students, and empower teachers by making the courses they teach more ‘valued’.
	13. School should look at what on-line learning options are available. This allows students to work at their own pace and catch up more effectively, and be able to complete work at home. It would also be very beneficial in assisting teachers cater for highly mobile students.
	14. School uniforms. – Currently the school provides uniforms to its students free of charge. Would suggest school looks at designing a new uniform using student ideas. Look into the possibility of ties for senior students. Private schools are perceived as having greater prestige and having Walgett students wearing ties to school would have a visible impact on the community perception and self-esteem of the school.
	15. Violence – Serious school violence should be treated purely for what it is – highly dangerous and potentially life threatening behaviour. Offenders need intensive support and alternative options provided, but not at the expense of the safety of their peers or staff.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Premier of New South Wales, the Honourable Barry O’Farrell MP and to Essential Energy for their support of this Scholarship.

Thank you to the following people who afforded me their time and expertise:

* *Alexandria Park Community College* – Robert Bruce (relieving Principal), Julie Myers (Deputy Principal), Julie Strachan (Head Teacher), Laura Medway and Rochelle Foley (teachers)
* *National Centre for Indigenous Excellence* – Stewart Okell (NASCA Project Officer) and NCIE staff.
* Kia Aroha College – Ann Milne (Principal) and staff
* *NZ Education Ministry* – John Rutherford
* *Tennessee Department of Education* – Lori Paisley (Director of Special Projects) and her support staff
* *Hillwood High School* – Emily Hughes (Academy Coach), Steve Chauncy (Principal)
* *MNPS Virtual School* – James Whitty (Principal)
* *Academy at Old Cockrill* – Elaine Fahrner (Principal)
* *Academy at Opry Mills* – Carmon Brown (Principal)
* *Sequoyah School* – Jolyn Rose (Principal), Samantha Benn-Duke (Compliance Manager)
* *Oklahoma Indian Education Department –* Lillian William (Cultural Advisor)
* *East High School, Anchorage* – Angela Hartvigson (Counselor)
* *Alaska Native Charter School* – Pasty Shaha (Principal)
* *Nenana School* – Ralph Crosslin (Principal), Jens Jacobsen (teacher)
* *Hilo High School* – Casey Carpenter (Counselor)
* *Kaimuki High School* – Gary Harada (Vice Principal), Holly Honbo (student activities coordinator)
* *Ke Kula Kaiapuni ‘o Ānuenue School* – Lehua Brown and Lehua Ornelles (Vice Principals)