

Summary and discussion guide

Strong strides together

Meeting the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



This summary and discussion guide provides a high-level overview of the **Strong strides together** evidence paper, and questions designed to prompt reflection and promote conversations among school leaders and teachers.





The **Strong strides together** evidence paper outlines the evidence for 4 themes that can support school leaders and teachers to meet the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students (Kindergarten to Year 12), and practical pathways that school leaders and teachers can implement in their schools. The 4 themes are:

- culturally safe schools
- culturally responsive teaching
- positive relationships
- personalised learning.

When these 4 themes are used to inform school processes and practices, they can assist school leaders and teachers to meet their commitments to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students under the NSW Department of Education **Aboriginal Education Policy** (the policy) and the NSW Department of Education and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) Inc. **Partnership Agreement 2020-2030: Walking Together, Working Together** (the partnership agreement).

School leaders and teachers can use this paper in combination with the School Excellence Framework, the Turning Policy into Action guide, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, and the What works best 2020 update to inform continuous school improvement planning around enacting the policy and the partnership agreement.



Know every student, know your classroom, know your school

An important consideration when using this resource is the varying experiences and backgrounds of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in NSW schools. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples belong to diverse cultural groups with different languages and cultural customs. Students may belong to one or more of these cultural groups, and may attend school on Country (on the lands of their cultural group) or off Country (on the lands of a different cultural group).

The themes outlined in this paper are overarching approaches that can collectively be used to inform school practice. The pathways within each theme can best support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students when teachers and school leaders flexibly implement the practices in response to the specific contexts of individual Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and their school or classroom.



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.

What the evidence says

Cultural competency is the foundation for a culturally safe school

All members of the school community should be supported in strengthening their cultural competency skills, and be actively involved in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, histories and cultures into everyday school practices.

Culturally safe schools create a place of connection

Building stronger connections with families and community allows schools to develop a greater understanding of each student and their culture.

Valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and knowledges can promote student self-identity

Culturally safe schools support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to be proud of their cultural identity by positioning their cultural identity as a strength and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and knowledges.



Key pathways



Building culturally competent staff

Culturally competent staff critically reflect on their own perceptions of culture and actively build their understanding and knowledge of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Continually building cultural competency requires commitment from individual staff and the school community.

School staff should engage in professional learning that is specific to the Aboriginal cultures of the land on which the school is located, and which is delivered by local Aboriginal people.

Reflection questions

What strategies does your school use to develop the cultural competency of the wider school community?

What goals might you include in your professional development plan to help build your cultural competency?



Teaching all students about Aboriginal cultures

The NSW AECG Inc. Partnership Agreement 2020-2030 includes a commitment that every student gains an understanding of local Aboriginal heritage, culture and history.

Local Aboriginal histories and cultures should be included when schools implement syllabus content related to Aboriginal peoples and histories.

Schools should obtain permission from members of the Aboriginal community whose knowledge or history is being shared, and ensure materials are culturally appropriate.

Reflection questions

How are local Aboriginal histories and cultures currently included in syllabus content in your school?

How might you incorporate some of the resources provided in the evidence paper into your classes?

Creating inclusive school environments

Inclusive school environments embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture into the school and make the physical and social environment welcoming to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities.

Strategies to build an inclusive environment should always be considered in partnership with the local community and Local AECG.

Schools can emphasise that creating an inclusive environment is a shared responsibility so that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff are not solely undertaking this work.

Reflection questions

What strategies does your school use to create an inclusive environment for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities, and how effective do you think they are?

What else could your school do to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment?

Developing a Reconciliation Action Plan

A Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) is a statement of a school's commitment to reconciliation.

It offers school leaders and teachers a formalised way to understand and measure school progress on reconciliation.

A RAP aims to drive progress across the 5 interrelated dimensions of reconciliation: race relations, equality and equity, institutional integrity, unity and historical acceptance.

Reflection questions

What key benefits do you see to having a RAP in your school?

How could a RAP help your school drive ongoing progress in addressing the NSW Department of Education Aboriginal Education Policy and reconciliation?

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.

What the evidence says

Critical reflection is central to culturally responsive teaching

When teachers critically reflect on and adjust their beliefs about learning, classroom communication and what knowledge is considered legitimate, they are more empowered to facilitate an equitable learning environment.

Understanding students' language and dialect backgrounds enhances communication and learning

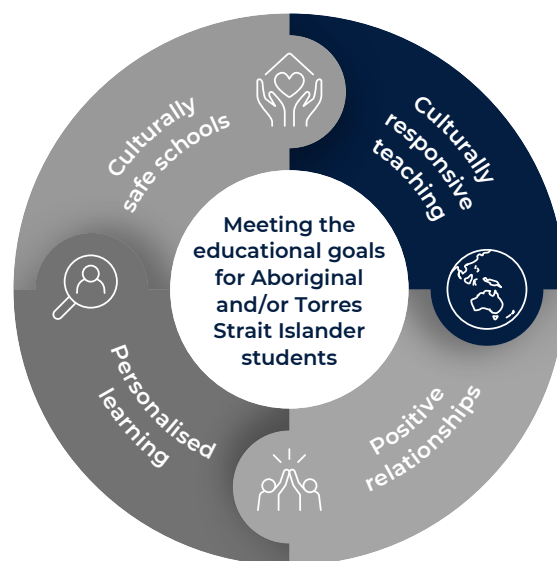
Some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students have first or 'home' languages that are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander languages, creole languages, and Aboriginal English. This influences communication and access to learning in the classroom.

Culturally responsive teaching respectfully embeds Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives

This demonstrates to students the value of different ways of knowing and learning.

Teachers need to be empowered to use culturally responsive teaching approaches

Teachers often report a low sense of cultural competency which can undermine confidence in using culturally responsive teaching approaches for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.



Key pathways



Implementing an Aboriginal language program

Aboriginal languages can be taught as part of a language program.

Before implementing an Aboriginal language program, you need to understand and follow cultural protocols for who can learn and who can teach the language.

Aboriginal language programs provide opportunities to explicitly teach students about language features.

Reflection questions

What are some of the Aboriginal languages spoken by students in your classroom or school?

What steps could you take to establish an Aboriginal language program in your school?



Recognising and meeting needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander EAL/D students

By recognising and meeting the needs of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), teachers can support them to access instruction and demonstrate success in the classroom.

As academic language demands increase in the curriculum, proficiency in Standard Australian English (SAE) becomes more critical for students to understand and demonstrate their understanding.

Differences between a student's proficiency in their home language and SAE can be subtle, but still affect their ability to engage with learning materials.

Reflection questions

What are the needs of your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students who are EAL/D learners?

What are some ways that you can create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments for these learners?

Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies refer to teaching practices that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing.

Embedding an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander pedagogy requires teachers to seek permission from the owners of the knowledge and collaborate with them.

This can assist teachers to gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and knowledges, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community members to gain a greater understanding of curriculum.

Reflection questions

What do you know about the pedagogical practices of the local Aboriginal community in your area?

What challenges might you face when embedding Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander pedagogies at your school, and how could you address them?

Sharing and harnessing staff expertise

Culturally responsive teaching approaches are more likely to be successful if staff understand that promoting outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students is a collective responsibility, and have opportunities to share and harness their expertise.

School leaders can play an integral role in facilitating these opportunities by providing dedicated staff collaboration time and instructional leadership activities.

Professional conversations about culturally responsive teaching can increase teacher confidence and ensure ongoing professional development.

Reflection questions

How does your school share culturally responsive teaching knowledge and skills?

How could you start a conversation about culturally responsive teaching among staff at your school?

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.

What the evidence says

The teacher-student relationship is a critical relationship for students at school

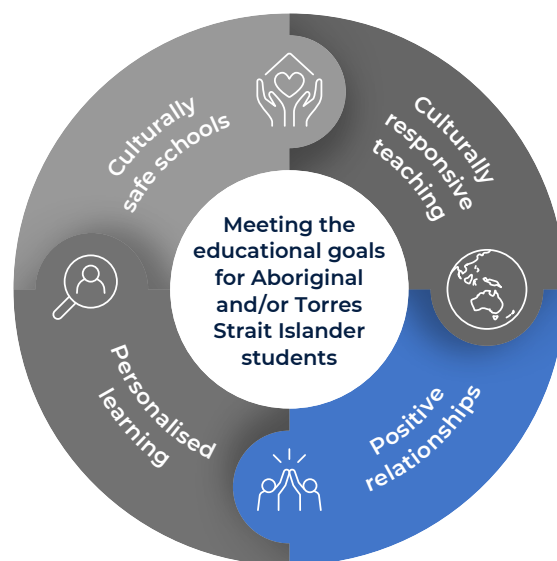
A positive teacher-student relationship can demonstrate to students and their families that their teachers are invested in their educational success.

Positive relationships drive engagement between families, communities and school

They are crucial for the ongoing engagement of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities in school, and can help overcome barriers to engagement.

A strong learning community is built through positive relationships with families and communities

Positive relationships between families, communities and schools can facilitate active involvement in and a shared understanding about education, which can help develop a sense of belonging to school.



Key pathways



Knowing students and valuing their cultures

Establishing and maintaining an understanding of each student and their context is critical to building positive relationships.

Teachers can build their understanding of each student by providing opportunities for students to share their interests and activities in the classroom.

Getting to know students outside of the classroom provides further opportunities for teachers and school leaders to understand students' skills, interests and strengths.

Reflection questions

How do you build your understanding of each student's skills, interests and strengths in and out of the classroom?

What are some actions you could take to increase your understanding of each student and their context?



Being visible inside and outside of school

Staff making time to be visible can help make school a safe and welcoming place for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities.

Staff can be visible in school by inviting families and community members into the school and classroom for events and activities.

Reaching out to families and communities by being visible at the school gate, sharing positive aspects of student learning with families, and attending community events and meetings where appropriate also increases staff visibility.

Reflection questions

What opportunities does your school provide to be visible to students, families and communities?

How do you and other staff make opportunities to be visible in school, and reach out to families and communities?

Supporting Aboriginal education officers

It is important that school leaders and teachers understand the vital roles Aboriginal education officers (AEOs) play, and support them to carry out their role effectively.

School leaders can support AEOs by providing mentoring and coaching, and facilitating their involvement in development networks.

School leaders can also support AEOs by ensuring all school staff develop and maintain their skills and knowledge in supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities.

Reflection questions

How do you collaborate with AEOs on classroom content?

How does your school build the capacity of all staff in Aboriginal education and connections with community?

Consulting with your Local AECG

Consultation with local Aboriginal communities and organisations, including the Local AECG, is central to building positive relationships.

A Local AECG can provide advice and guidance for school leaders and teachers about the curriculum, teaching activities and educational issues.

When working with a Local AECG, schools should adhere to the principles outlined in the partnership agreement with the NSW AECG Inc.

Reflection questions

How does your school consult with your Local AECG?

How could your school work on strengthening your relationship with your Local AECG?

Personalised learning



Personalised learning approaches aim to increase engagement and achievement by tailoring 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.

What the evidence says

A holistic understanding of each student underpins effective personalised learning

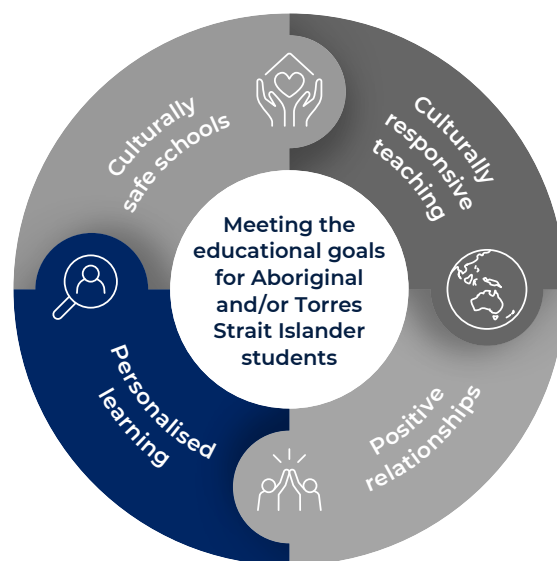
Using multiple sources of student-centred data, such as assessments, observations and conversations with students and families, allows teachers to gain a more accurate picture of the learning of their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students.

Personalised learning can facilitate a culture of high expectations

A culture of high expectations in schools has been identified as an important element for promoting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes.

Strengths-based approaches support all students to learn to a high standard

Personalised learning with a strengths-based approach provides appropriate conditions so that all students can achieve to a high standard and can facilitate positive self-identity for learners.



Key pathways



Ensuring opportunities for student voice

Providing opportunities and support for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to use their voice within and beyond the school can promote identity and confidence as role models and leaders.

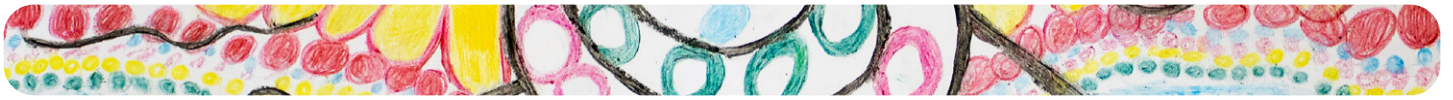
Student voice can increase engagement, promote positive learning relationships, build a sense of belonging, and help develop students' personal and social capabilities.

Student voice sees students actively participating in decision-making, and schools acting on the perspectives of students.

Reflection questions

What are the ways that your school provides opportunities for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student voice?

How could your school ensure there are ongoing opportunities for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student voice?



Using personalised learning pathways

Effective personalised learning pathway (PLP) processes involve Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and families in decision-making to build shared understanding about student learning.

PLPs can assist continuity of learning at transition points, and support gifted and talented students.

The department recommends PLPs for all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to record their goals and aspirations, and the learning pathways required to pursue these.

Reflection questions

What do you know about the PLP process for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students at your school?

How could your school make the PLP process more effective for your Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students?

Recognising and supporting high potential and gifted students

Understandings of high potential and giftedness can vary between and within cultures.

Schools can work in partnership with the local community and Local AECG to develop a common understanding of giftedness and learning opportunities for gifted students.

Schools should seek out and discuss relevant gifted programs and opportunities with students and families.

Reflection questions

Does your school community have a shared understanding of what gifted looks like for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students? How do you know?

How can you support and challenge the learning of your high potential and gifted Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students?

Planning for strong transitions

Schools play a critical role in strong transitions by using practices that make the school ready for the student and that also facilitate student and family readiness for the transition.

Common transitions include the transitions into primary school, high school and post-school pathways, between year levels, and geographical relocation.

A strong transition occurs when an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student is socially, emotionally and cognitively prepared and ready.

Reflection questions

How has your school collaborated with all stakeholders in your transition program?

How can the transition process be strengthened in your school?