

INLLEN Case Study

Thornbury High School Community Demonstration Project

1. Introduction

The “Thornbury High School and Community Demonstration Project aimed to establish and develop a Community Action Team that will work together to support young Indigenous student learning at school and develop a Parents, Family and Community Engagement strategy. The strategy was to help the school to actively involve parents to support student learning and engagement at school. The central plank of the Community Action Team model was to include indigenous parents from the school community in the action team to increase interest, participation and decision-making by parents in the education of their children and the school.

The employment of an Indigenous Project Officer provided the School Community Action Team with the resources to implement the two main tasks of the Demonstration project. Firstly to scope out a “*Parent, Family and Community Engagement Strategy*” using a community consultation approach to engage parents about how they currently were and would like to be involved in their child’s learning. Secondly the Indigenous Project Officer was able to Case Manage up to 12 Indigenous students’ to improve attendance and student engagement at school.

The key objectives are to:

- Actively engage parents in students learning and in the school community
- Undertake consultation with parents, family, students and teachers to develop a parent and family engagement strategy
- Build parental and family capacity to nurture and encourage successful learning practices

School Background

The schools enrolment in 2013 was 1009 students. There are currently 59 Indigenous students, from 38 families, including eleven students at Year 11 and 12. The schools indigenous population makes up 5.8% of the students.

The Evidence

The Thornbury School and Community Demonstration Pilot was developed as a response to one of the recommendations from the Darebin Under 16 ‘Improving Education Engagement’ Project Report commissioned by the Darebin Youth Commitment in 2012. The report finding’s identified the number of young people found not engaged in full time education in the Darebin region, the type of support available to them and what is required to re-engage these young people or minimize the process of disengagement.

Koorie Student Attendance

During the Under 16 project Thornbury High School identified that 55% of the Year 9 Indigenous students were missing one day or more per week. The remaining 45% were all above 90% attendance. The school has thirty eight (38) families in total, 8 families (21%) have demonstrated difficulty with attending school on a regular basis and often miss two or more days per week. These families were identified to be involved in the Demonstration Pilot.

The Role of the INLLEN Partnership Broker

Thornbury High School initially invited INLLEN to discuss ways to assist with the issues they were currently facing with their Indigenous students. The initial meeting with the school principal and key staff members openly discussed the issues and all parties agreed to meet again after some initial scoping of ideas was undertaken. Initially the school response to the situation was to seek funding to employ a Project Officer to work with the identified students. INLLEN was able to influence the school to consider engaging parents in their child’s education using the Schools Community Action Team model. INLLEN assisted the school to develop and implement the Schools Community Action team model which

involved identifying key organisations to establish a working group. This group guided by the INLLEN developed a “Project Brief” and “Terms of Reference” in the early stages. During this phase the working group identified further partners that should be invited to in the Action Team. The INLLEN Partnership Broker undertook further work to brief the identified partners and secure their commitment to join the School Community Action Team.

INLLEN Partnership Brokers also supported the consultation phase by facilitating a small parent consultation meeting; this was conducted with the Indigenous Project Officer present to observe the consultation process. This capacity building activity was designed to help develop the Project Officer’s consultation skill base. The INLLEN Partnership Brokers facilitated the teacher consultation with nine (9) Thornbury HS staff participating in the session where they were asked a range of questions related to engagement with indigenous parents.

Funding

In 2013 Thornbury High School with the support of the School Community Action Team sought funding to employ an Indigenous Project Officer to engage Indigenous families and Community and to work with our most disengaged student’s re-engaging them back into education. Funding was provided through DEEWR PACE (Parent and Community Engagement) and Inner Northern Youth Connections Consortia.

2. Scope

Project Design

At the first Thornbury School Community Action Team meeting the Draft documents were presented for further discussion, this gave the new members of the Action Team the opportunity to contribute to the project scope, after further consultation the Action Team endorsed the governance framework and project brief.

Following the guidelines outlined in the *National School-Families Partnerships Framework*, the project’s design was divided into three main phases:

- Consultation phase
- Activity phase
- Evaluation and reporting phase

Role of the Action Team

An Action Team was established to provide guidance and support to school staff in all three phases of the project. Members of the Action Team were called upon to share their expertise, skills and knowledge as needed. The Action Team met a total of nine times in an eight-month period. Meetings took place at the school and were usually chaired by the School Principal.

Action Team Members (Partners in action)

The Thornbury Schools Community Action Team has representatives from the school, community organisations and parents.

School Community	Educational organisations	Community organisations	Local Government	Community voice
Thornbury High School	Department Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)	Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network (INLLEN)	Darebin City Council	Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (LAECG)
Parents representatives	Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc. (VAEAI)	Youth Connections (NMIT & Mission Australia)		
		Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA)		

3. Consultation Phase

The LAEGC worked closely with the school during the recruitment stage to help develop and provide advice on the position description, selection process and interview stages.

A “Parent Survey” was developed collaboratively by representatives from the Thornbury High School staff including Indigenous Project Officer, DEECD Koorie Education Support Officers (KESO) and LAEGC.

4. Activity Phase

Engagement Programs Offered at School

The Indigenous Project Officer with support from the Community Action Team developed a number of community connections with organisations that could assist to engage the students in learning. A number of activities were designed to include a connection to culture, which was highly successful in engaging students.

Parental Engagement

Thornbury High School and the Indigenous Project Officer actively engaged parents through a number of activities and direct contact. The school held an evening to showcase student work, during the evening some preliminary consultation work was undertaken. The Parent Survey was completed by 16 parents and some follow up consultations was also undertaken to gather further information. Through the Parent Survey many of the parents commented they would like to learn how to better support their child’s learning by gain an understanding of what they were learning at school.

Teacher Consultation

The INLLEN Partnership Brokers used their extensive expertise to conduct the teacher consultation; nine (9) Thornbury HS staff participated in the consultation and were asked a range of questions. Many of the teachers believed they already did communicate with parents well but could do better in connecting our parents with the learning that is happening in the school. A number of coordinators felt they communicated with parents well, although usually at either the good or bad ends of the scale and not in the middle areas about the child’s education.

“I think engagement needs to happen before the creating or learning process rather than just in the showcasing of the end product. We can do more in this area as we seem to only engage parents when things are really good or at the other end when students are in trouble, there does not seem to be any middle ground where we involve parents.

“A comment form a Thornbury Teacher”

5. Evaluation Phase

Successful Outcomes

The employment of an Indigenous Project Officer was paramount to successful engagement with Indigenous families. The Indigenous Project Officer was an Indigenous man who has demonstrated an ability to connect with both the students and gained the trust of the parents and community. This was important as he presented to the Indigenous students as a key role model and a first point of call for many of these students.

Community Engagement

The Project Officer engaged 10 out of 12 families of the most disengaged students undertaking the program support. In collaboration with the parent, the Project Officer enabled a smooth transition back to school for a Year 9 student who was not attended school for all of term three in the fourth term. Attendance went from 0% to 85% and once returned to school intensive tutoring was utilised and the student will transition to Year 10 in 2014.

Reengagement and Transition

Positive relationships were built on trust and respect, allowing the Project Officer to explore alternate pathways where the current school practices were no longer suitable. Indigenous students and their families requested to be involved in the programs / activities the Project Officer developed. Students gained greater self-confidence and self- esteem and presented opportunities for them to be further engaged in education. The projects provided a tool for further parental and family engagement.

The Indigenous Project Officer worked closely with the Programs Coordinator for Indigenous students to ensure Projects immersed themselves within the school and not separate to Thornbury High School. A team approach to developing activities was undertaken and DEECD KESO advice was sought. Individualised Learning Plans and Pathways were considered when dealing with students and their families.

Community Collaboration

The development of strong partnerships with Thornbury High School and the LAECG is another example of a successful outcome. This was demonstrated through assistance with the appointment of the Indigenous Project Officer, their contributions to the Community Action Team, advice and the collaboration to produce a “Parent Survey” that was culturally sensitive. The school highly values the input from the LAECG.

Identified Barriers

A number of families identified they did not have access to the Internet in the family home. This barrier reduced the effectiveness of communication and information flow provided from the school to families. Parents were forced to either access information either through face-to face contact and phone calls. Many found this affected the number of times they either went to the school or phoned the school due to past personal experiences they themselves had at school

Referrals for a few students for complex reasons were also required:

- The young person needing more individual support to re engage back into school and the family needed support to ensure they were able to get their child to attend school.
- Mandatory DHS notifications were made out of concern for the young person’s safety and/or alarming low attendance at school.
- Low communication between parents and students
- Poverty, addictions, grief, and family issues were contributing factors to isolating students and families from engaging with education.

6. Conclusions

The feedback from the community engagement evening encouraged the School Community Action Team to develop a parental survey to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the school could support parent engagement in their children’s learning. Developing the survey in collaboration between Thornbury High School, DEECD KESO’s and the LAECG representative was extremely valuable in developing community links and cultural understanding. The survey identified the parents have a keen interest in parental engagement. Further exploration of the “How to” establish a Family; Community Partnership with Thornbury High School is required.

The following conclusions were reached after the activity phase of the demonstration pilot, these conclusion could be picked up in Phase Two of the demonstration pilot.

1. Parents vary in how much they presently are involved.
2. Parents are very concerned about their children’s success in school.
3. Students need multiple sources of support to succeed in school and in life.
4. Schools must reach out in order to involve all families.
5. Teachers and administrators in schools need in-service education and cultural programs to strengthen and sustain goal-linked programs of family and community involvement.

Strong evidence exists that the Indigenous community, families and Thornbury High School have willingness for the Project to continue into 2014 and beyond. The Schools Community Action Team will be ongoing with a clear and goal orientated approach to improving outcomes for the school and Indigenous community partnerships.

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