



Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and the Needs of a System in Remote Western Australian Communities

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Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' attendance, retention and engagement in remote schools have been concerns for educators and successive governments. In many communities, students are encouraged to complete secondary education at boarding school, because of seemingly limited educational opportunities in their local communities. The vision of the Western Australian Department of Education's School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) is to provide learning opportunities for students, regardless of their circumstances, through high quality, inclusive and culturally responsive programs. Because vision statements are aspirational and need to be backed with strategies for implementation, SIDE established a Regional Teaching Team in 2024. The purpose of this team is to meet the unique needs of students in the Northern Goldfields and Kimberley regions which have a high representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Providing programs and pathways to meet the needs of Aboriginal students in these remote contexts is not possible without a deep understanding of the context and culture of the local communities, schools, and the students within them. The Regional Teaching Team works with local communities to deliver co-designed culturally responsive education.

Keywords: *remote schools, Aboriginal students, engagement, regional teaching, co-design, community consultation*

Introduction

Western Australia's School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) provides distance education for K–12 students who cannot attend school. In 2024, more than 4000 students were enrolled. SIDE students in regional, remote and metropolitan schools in Western Australia study using Webex and Moodle (online learning and communication platforms). They may also be travelling within Australia or overseas, or they might be elite athletes participating in sport or dance. In this paper, the focus is students in the Northern Goldfields, where schools with limited numbers of secondary teachers cannot offer a full secondary education. These schools choose SIDE to provide education for secondary students. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work for students in these schools. Low literacy and numeracy levels and irregular attendance suggest that student and community needs are not being met.

In 2023, SIDE received feedback from remote and regional schools that the programs were not culturally responsive. As a result, members of SIDE's leadership team visited a remote school on

the Mitchell Plateau, 2800 kilometres north of Perth, to discuss the education of students who were not engaged. Feedback from community Elders created a sense of urgency to do things differently. The SIDE leadership team decided to adopt an innovative approach to engaging Aboriginal students using a meaningful, culturally inclusive curriculum and prioritising relationships with students.

The team created a conceptual teaching and learning model (known as SIDE 3 Pillars) for students in the Northern Goldfields and Kimberley, and the Regional Teaching Team was created. The purpose of the SIDE 3 Pillars model was to enable a small team of teachers to develop strong local knowledge of contexts and develop effective relationships with students, teachers and local communities.

The Regional Teaching Team is a select group of teachers who are committed to a flexible co-designed pedagogy to meet the needs of students in remote communities in the Kimberley and Northern Goldfields. Teachers were required to apply for positions within the team. The challenges for the team include the requirement to travel extensively. To date in 2024, the Regional Teaching Team schools have received more than 300 days of SIDE teacher visits.

The SIDE 3 Pillars, which provide a framework for schools and communities to develop, are:

- Skills for Working in Community,
- Caring for Self and Community, and
- Culture and Community.

Skills for Working in Community is about providing students with practical, work-related skills that could lead to employment opportunities within their community. Caring for Self and Community is about providing students with the skills and knowledge to care for themselves and other members of their community. Culture and Community is about providing students with the knowledge to protect, preserve and promote their culture and country. Each pillar has clear objectives and associated qualifications or micro-credentials.

A key element of the SIDE 3 Pillars model was a co-designed teaching approach, to create culturally responsive learning opportunities that build on the knowledge, skills and prior experiences of students. The Department of Education's *Focus 2024* (Department of Education Western Australia, 2024) calls for the use of co-design approaches to establish partnerships between schools and their Aboriginal communities.

Student performance data were used to assist teachers with diagnosing student learning needs. In addition, vocational education and training teams were positioned to work with each school community, to build a pathway that reflected community aspirations for their students to stay On-Country or to enter broader opportunities in post-school training or employment.

Whilst in the early stages of implementation, feedback and uptake of the Regional Teaching Team model has been overwhelmingly positive. In the Goldfields and Kimberly regions, there are more than 300 students enrolled, with nine full-time staff allocated to the initiative. Student attendance and engagement has increased and feedback from co-teachers has been very positive, as shown by the quote from a SIDE supervising teacher in a remote Regional Teaching Team school:

This year SIDE set up the Regional Teaching Team and have provided us with four amazingly dedicated, responsive, skilled teachers who are all meeting the kids where they are at. They are all tailoring the content to be inherently interesting and relevant to our context, culture, language and community. The kids ARE interested! Not once have I had to coerce, convince or cajole anyone to log in and participate in the classes, or even to do the off-air work that comes through. This is vastly different to last year when I'd have to track students down and pull them in [to school] to login. Now they are asking ME when is it time to log in? The teachers are obviously also working together as much as they can, and many parts of our

schooling is now basically a Two-Way Learning approach. From my side of the computer, I really think it is working.

Northern Goldfields Context

The Northern Goldfields of Western Australia is a unique region, rich in natural resources and Aboriginal culture. Figure 1 shows a map of the region, which includes the small outback towns and communities of Leonora, Laverton, Wiluna, Menzies and Tjuntjuntjara. The schools have high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student populations, as shown in Table 1. In addition, the schools have Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage scores below average and between 58 and 100% of students have a language background that is not English.

Figure 1: Map of the Northern Goldfields

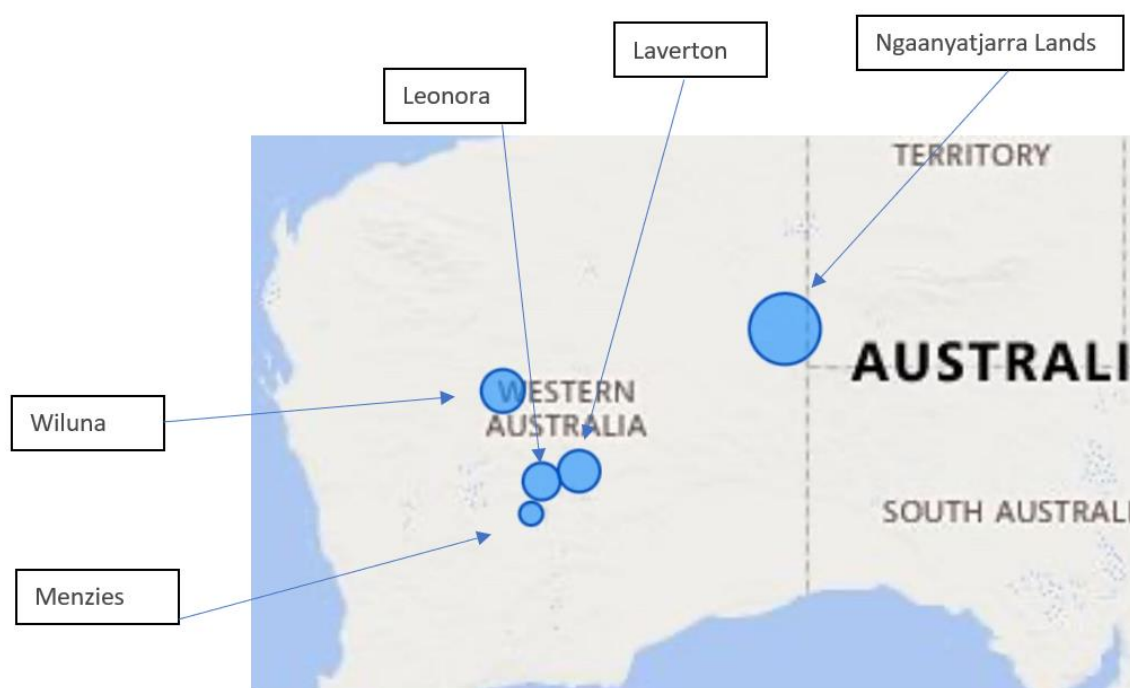


Table 1: Size of Community and School Populations

School	Community Population (Local Govt Area)	% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students	% Students with a Language Background other than English
Cosmo Newberry	62	100	100
Laverton	907	82	58
Leonora	1588	65	77
Menzies	103	91	95
Tjuntjuntjara	64	100	100
Wiluna	535	90	95

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2024)

Barriers to Learning

The main barriers to learning at school in the Northern Goldfields are irregular attendance, limited school support and student engagement.

Attendance

In 2023, secondary attendance across Western Australian public schools was 83%. The attendance rates in the Northern Goldfields schools were much lower: Laverton 66%, Leonora 64%, Wiluna 53%, Tjuntjuntjara 45% and Menzies 58%. The attendance of students in the Regional Teaching Team program will be tracked as one measure of its effectiveness.

School Support

Schools that enrol students at SIDE provide a SIDE supervisor to oversee students. A SIDE supervisor, who can create a welcoming SIDE learning space, co-teach with SIDE teachers and keep students on track, is vital to student success. Teaching staff and leadership turnover in regional schools, especially remote community schools, means that the SIDE supervisor is often changing and there can be a lack of consistency. A school may timetable many teachers to oversee the SIDE students. This can mean that there might be no teacher understanding or ownership of the SIDE learning space. This can be an issue, because the support of school leadership has a significant impact on the success of programs implemented in schools. Another barrier is a lack of local Aboriginal staff in schools, because they have the potential to bridge the cultural gap (Price et al., 2019).

In 2024, there were new SIDE supervisors in several Regional Teaching Team schools. Teachers were often new to Western Australia, new to remote contexts, and with limited experience of working with Aboriginal students. One of the schools was without a substantive principal for the first two terms of 2024. Without stable supportive leadership, the opportunities to implement changes are limited (Levin et al., 2020).

Disengagement

Disengagement among students in remote schools in Australia can stem from a variety of factors, including geographical isolation, limited resources, cultural differences, and socio-economic challenges. Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that considers the specific circumstances of remote communities.

Breaking the Barriers

Barriers can be broken in different ways. These include developing relationships and engaging the community through co-designed programs.

Relationships

Relationships are developed through SIDE's online platforms Webex and Moodle and through regular face-to-face visits. Unique interim progress reports were designed to capture the strengths of the students and give them something to be proud of. Regional Teaching Team teachers worked across learning areas and embedded two-way contextual learning into their planning.

The regular use of positive commendations has an impact on student engagement. This is illustrated by an email received from the SIDE supervisor in Menzies, who provided "a quick recount of something that happened in our Year 7 Health lesson this afternoon":

Tim (not real name) had to write down two things that happened at school this week that made him feel good. This was his response: "I felt good when Miss Maree emailed me to say: 'Fantastic work.' I feel good when I talk to my teachers in a Webex."

Ladies, we have a win. Thank you so much for making those adjustments for him. Really appreciate it. The relationships between the Regional Teaching Team students and the Team are having a positive impact.

Community Engagement and Co-Designed Programs

The Regional Teaching Team seeks to work closely with community leaders, parents and local organisations, to build strong relationships and foster a supportive learning environment. Engaging the community in the education process can increase student motivation, attendance and involvement.

In Term 3, members of the Team attended a three-day On-Country two-way science professional learning workshop with the Martu Traditional Owners of Matuwa Kurrara Kurrara on the edge of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia. Such opportunities, with rich time spent together On-Country, builds mutual respect, understanding and knowledge. This enables teachers to acknowledge and build on their students' prior learning and design learning programs that are relevant and engaging.

Regional Teaching Team schools offer a range of engagement programs, as shown in Table 2. These have been designed to engage students in learning and to make learning relevant to their lives. The skills gained through these programs need to be acknowledged and mapped to student employment passports. SIDE plays a key role in identifying what students are doing in school and in their communities and mapping such skills so that they are recognised in their leaving employment passport.

Table 2: Engagement Programs Operating in the Regional Teaching Team Schools

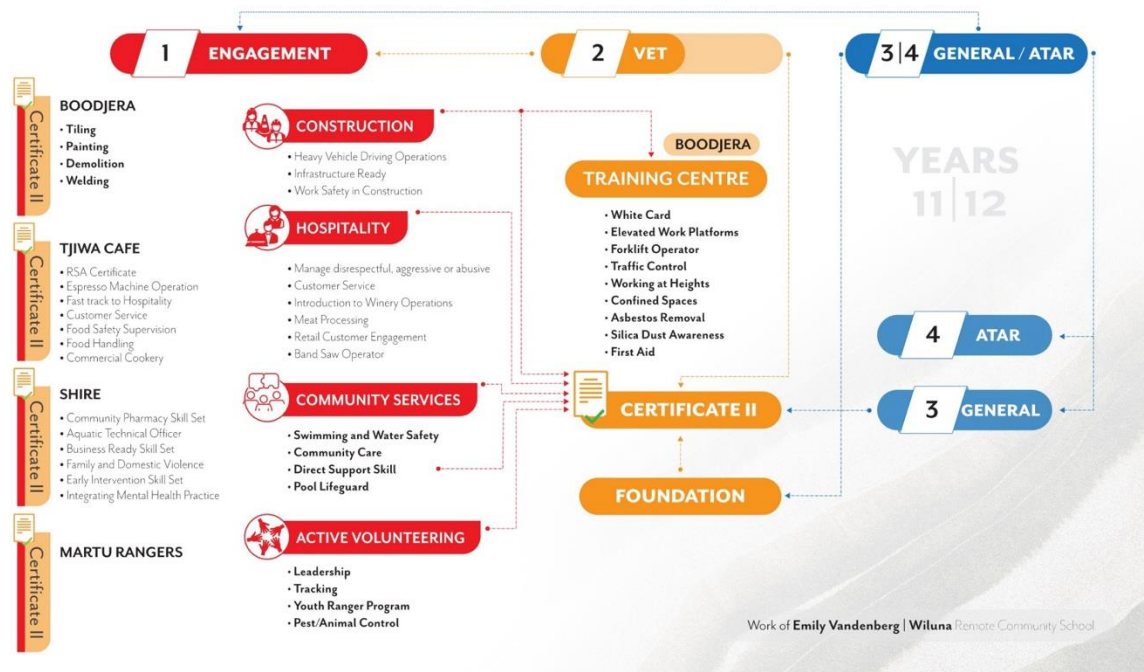
Program	School/s	Program Goals
Dismantle	Leonora	Dismantling youth disadvantage by using bikes to build knowledge, skills, teamwork, mechanical knowledge and confidence
Shooting Stars	Leonora, Laverton	Empowering Aboriginal girls
Two-Way Science	Wiluna	Culturally responsive learning programs
Drone Course	Leonora	Engagement and employment skills
Men's and Women's Camps	Menzies	Culturally responsive learning programs
Basketball	Leonora	Community and self-care

Moving Forward

Deeper ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities is essential, to ensure that the reforms made are well designed and effectively implemented (Davie, 2024). The factors that promote attendance, engagement and retention in educational settings are complex and contextual. Meaningful, engaging and culturally sensitive learning experiences are key factors in motivating students to remain committed to their education, so that they are prepared for life beyond secondary school. Community engagement has commenced as part of what has already been implemented, and the Regional Teaching Team will continue to consult and operationalise by using the SIDE 3 Pillars model and building ongoing collaborations with communities.

Some schools are early adopters of the SIDE 3 Pillars model and have mapped culturally responsive engagement within their schools to qualifications. Figure 2 shows one such map created by Wiluna Remote Community School.

Figure 2. Engagement at Wiluna Remote Community School



Source: Emily Vandenberg, Principal Wiluna Remote Community School

Wiluna Remote Community school has embedded four engagement strategies into its teaching and learning program:

1. The Tjiwa Café is a café set up within the school, where students learn about hospitality and business management. The café provides a rich learning environment, and the skills learnt can be linked to curriculum.
2. Boodjera is a program in construction where students engage in work experience, learning skills that can be mapped to the curriculum.
3. Shire is a community services program, where students learn skills that can be mapped to the curriculum.
4. The Martu Ranger program enables students to learn On-Country with a local ranger group, learning skills about caring for country and environmental science.

The skills of all four strategies are all linked to the curriculum, so that students can be credited with their knowledge.

Conclusion

The work of the Regional Teaching Team is not always straightforward or easy. For example, the team had a bumpy start with a new SIDE Goldfields regional coordinator, a new team and many new SIDE supervisors. However, to try to get things on track, the Team made school visits a priority, teaching students and breaking down barriers with both students and SIDE supervisors. The team is aware that teachers and school leaders in a new context often struggle to embrace new ideas when they are struggling to grasp and make sense of their new environment (Frahm & Cianca, 2021).

The team also recognises that it will take time to build relationships and trust with local communities, in order to deliver appropriate educational outcomes. Whilst there is support in principle from Government agencies, a disconnect still exists between policy and practice in the context of Aboriginal education in schools. The Regional Teaching Team aims to work with Aboriginal communities to provide them with opportunities to communicate their goals and

desires for the education of their children. Traditional measures, that are based on attendance, completion of written tasks and grades, perpetuate failure and do not inspire success or engagement. Engaging communities and involving them in the co-design of relevant programs is important for building student motivation, attendance and improvement.

In relation to the future, the Regional Teaching Team will grow in 2025 and continue to be flexible, with the aim of meeting the needs of students, regardless of their location, background or culture.

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