

Submission to the Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

This submission has been prepared by Richard Stewart (General Manager, AFL Cape York House Cairns from September 2012 to September 2015) and Rachel Elphick (current Education Manager, AFL Cape York House).

The submission has a focus on the following key terms of reference:

- engagement and achievement of students in remote areas
- impacts on and support for families and communities whose children experience different models of education services
- best practice models both domestically and internationally.

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The Cape York and Torres Strait Context

There is very limited provision for quality comprehensive secondary education for Indigenous children who reside in the communities of Cape York and the Torres Strait. The majority of secondary school aged children have to leave their communities, families and friends to attend secondary school in Cairns and a range of other regional centres and in Brisbane. The transition to secondary school away from home is a fact of life for children at the end of Year 6, most of whom are 11 or 12 years old when this transition must be made.

While secondary facilities exist in Weipa (which has a residential facility attached to Western Cape College), Thursday Island (which also has a residential facility) Bamaga and Cooktown, the range of subjects on offer, especially in senior secondary, is very limited. In some communities such as Coen and Pormpuraaw, there is no provision for secondary education.

The transition to boarding is a complex process and it is an area in which very little research has been conducted. What is clear is that while there are some excellent supports for children and families, such as the Queensland Department of Education and Training Transition Support Service which services Cape communities and Palm Island (there is no comparable service for Torres Strait communities), many students fail to transition successfully and they return to their communities where they disengage from formal education. The consequences of this disengagement are profound: a default to a life on welfare and a very strong chance of involvement in the juvenile justice/criminal justice system.

An Alternative Model of Residential Care: AFL Cape York House Cairns

AFL Cape York House is a 48 bed residential facility in Cairns which provides residential care to secondary school aged boys in Years 7 to 12 from remote Indigenous communities in Cape York, the Torres Strait and Gulf regions. The House offers a small-scale and innovative approach to boarding based on individual case management. Students are supported in the development of career and life pathways while attending partner schools in Cairns. The House

commenced operations in 2013 and has now been operating for close to 3 years.

Students come from the remote communities of Hope Vale, Coen, Lockhart River, Kowanyama, Coen, Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Bamaga/Injinoo, Mornington Island, Badu Island, Maubiag Island, Moa Island, Yam Island, Coconut Island.

In its first 3 years of operation, AFL Cape York House has come to be regarded as successful in terms of rates of student retention from semester to semester, levels of Year 12 completion and transition to tertiary study and the opportunities it has presented to previously disengaged students to successfully reengage with their secondary education. Indeed, AFL Cape York House has provided support and guidance to a range of education providers, both government and non-government. These include the National Rugby League who wish to replicate the model in Townsville, the Melbourne Transition School, the AFL in the Northern Territory and representatives from the Northern Territory Department of Education who are engaged in the implementation of the Wilson Review which has recommended the winding back of remote secondary education and the development of residential facilities in centres such as Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek.

Keys to early Successes

1. A Stand-Alone Facility

Students at AFL Cape York House attend one of six partner schools in Cairns. The schools are both government and non-government. Schools are selected to meet the individual needs of boys who reside at the House and in a number of instances, boys have changed schools in order to enhance the quality of their participation in secondary school. This flexibility is critical.

The fact that the boys regard AFL Cape York House as 'home' is of vital importance. They get to leave school each day and go 'home.' For many boys this is an important factor in lessening the feeling of institutionalization that so often accompanies the transition from remote Indigenous community to traditional boarding schools. A number of the boys who have been at the House since it opened have kept the same bedroom. Again, this encourages a sense of stability

and ownership, so essential in developing a strong sense of well-being.

2. Small Size

The transition from remote Indigenous community to boarding in regional centres and capital cities is a complex process. For many students it occurs before they turn 12. Children in transition require considerable support if they are to succeed. They need to be in an environment where they can be well known and where they can build strong relationships with their peers and with the adults responsible for their care and well-being. This is not always possible in large, highly structured boarding schools. A small scale facility such as AFL Cape York House allows the young men to build relationships in a stable and secure setting. Small scale facilities are far more likely to build and then nurture a sense of belonging which is essential in facilitating the transition to life away from home and mitigating the strong feelings of homesickness and isolation which so often make successful participation in secondary school so difficult.

3. Relationships with Family and Community

AFL Cape York House has always worked to build and maintain strong linkages with families and communities. Family members feel comfortable in visiting the facility when in Cairns and key staff at the House ensure that there is regular and constructive communication between the House and families.

A Parent Advisory Group meets regularly and provides an effective forum in which parents provide feedback to management on the operation of AFL Cape York House.

4. The Education Manager Role

AFL Cape York House has a strong relationship with the Queensland Department of Education and Training which allows for the engagement of a full-time qualified teacher to manage the relationships between the House and partner schools and ensure that students are appropriately supported in their studies. Without this position operating successfully, AFL Cape York House would have no credibility in the education sector.

Since AFL Cape York House opened, the person in this role has done an extraordinary job. Student pathways have broadened, scholarships have been sourced at James Cook University and Sydney University, Year 12 completions with recognized accreditation have

been at 100% and mature and constructive relationships have developed with partner schools which give the boys the best possible chance of success at school. A key element here has been in affirming the fact that the students are not speakers of Standard Australian English and therefore require specialized and intensive support if they are to successfully participate in a quality secondary education. It is an area in which the majority of teachers in urban settings have very little experience.

5. A Place For Sport

AFL Cape York House is NOT a sporting academy. Sporting ability is not a criteria for selection or inclusion, however all boys who reside at the House must be involved in the AFL program which includes participation in the local competition as part of the AFL Cape York House Eagles teams.

There is a priority given to physical fitness and well-being. This is consistent with the most recent research which highlights physical activity and well-being as a key factor in avoiding a range of chronic physical and emotional conditions. The boys at AFL Cape York House are physically fit, their diet is low in fats and sugars and in playing in teams together, strong bonds are formed among boys from a range of remote communities.

It is also important to stress that students at the House are actively encouraged to participate in a range of sporting endeavors in addition to AFL. The boys represent their schools and the region in a range of sports and for many, sport is their 'chance to shine.' One student will travel to the United States in mid-November as a key member of a national Indigenous Rugby Union side. He has also been offered a place at Sydney University in 2016, having participated in their Indigenous programs over the last 18 months through partnerships developed by the House Education Manager.

6. Advocacy

The General Manager and Education Manager at AFL Cape York House have seen their role as advocates for boys at the House as central to the effective discharge of their professional obligations. Children in transition require support that meets their pastoral well-being and education needs. Many teachers in partner schools have very little experience in working with Indigenous children from remote communities and find their behavior and requirement for

learning support to be quite daunting. Without strong advocates, the boys from the House would struggle to successfully engage in their secondary education. Staff at the House have worked to provide appropriate professional development and support to teachers in order that they work to deliver the best possible outcomes for the boys.

Summary

The transition to boarding school for Indigenous students from remote communities is a complex and multi-dimensional process. Students must navigate their way through changes in school size, language and culture while at the same time adjusting to the changes wrought by adolescence and the pressures of homesickness. There is scope for alternative models of residential care outside of the traditional default to boarding schools. Despite the paucity of research in the field, we do know that traditional models of boarding fail an unacceptably high number of students from remote Indigenous communities. There must be a closer examination of alternatives which attempt to address unacceptably high levels of disengagement from secondary education.