

## Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

Submission to an inquiry into educational outcomes for  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

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To: The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

Aims: Committee Chair, and Federal Member for Durack, Ms Melissa Price, propose:

***...to identify the best opportunities and pathways we can give to Indigenous students to assist them to succeed in school, regardless of whether they live in a remote community or in a regional or urban centre.***

This submission specifically relates to the following points of the inquiry outlined by the committee

- access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling
- the provision of boarding school education and its outcomes
- access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for Indigenous students in different parts of Australia
- engagement and achievement of students in remote areas

This submission demonstrates how a partnership between two schools can provide an opportunity and pathway for Indigenous students to value school and experience success through relationship building and shared experiences.

## Background

My name is Vivienne Wearne. I am the Head of the Penbank Campus of Woodleigh School. I am 59 years of age, married to Larry with 2 daughters aged 29 and 24. This year we welcomed a 17-year-old Aboriginal boy from East Arnhem land, N.T. into our family. He lives with us during the school terms and attends the secondary campus of Woodleigh School. I began my teaching career in the independent sector due to the glut of teachers in the government sector at the time. For the most part, I have been at the school that I lead today, Penbank School; now a junior campus of Woodleigh School situated on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria. Penbank and Woodleigh merged at the beginning of 2015 due to the majority of Penbank students moving onto Woodleigh in Year 7 and the alignment of values and beliefs that underpin both schools.

As a school leader I have been shaped and developed by the opportunities that Penbank and now Woodleigh offer. Both Penbank and Woodleigh commenced in the mid 70's. They were, and still are, family oriented schools that value collaboration within an innovative teaching and learning environment. Offering an enriched, progressive education, students have learnt and developed through an experiential and inquiry-based framework. Many of the programs involve the students in learning how to take responsibility through experience in social justice initiatives. Learning by authentically being engaged with others is at the heart of a Woodleigh education that is committed to students growing into capable, honest and thoughtful citizens.

Exactly 7 years ago, I wrote to the Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd and Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard because of my personal concern with the education of children in a NT remote school that I visited. I received a standard letter of reply outlining the government's initiatives. I have recently looked at this letter. The issues and observations that I put to the prime minister then, largely remain.

What I saw at a glance 2009: (In brackets I comment on how I see it today)

- A two year old new school that did not reflect in any way the community, other than the Aboriginal flag flying. (The school is now 10 years old).
- An institution, barred gateway/entrance breezeway. (More bars have been added to fully secure the school. It looks somewhat like a prison).
- Good classrooms with everything that you would want that were uninspiring and uncared for – a lack of pride. (One teacher who has been at the school for several years now is running an effective classroom).
- Very little recognition of children's natural strengths, talents and learning styles. (Visiting artists work at the school from time to time – the school is now very limited to these programs due to the mandatory DI Direct Instruction that takes up much of the day).
- Class work that was predominantly learning by rote and using themes and content quite irrelevant to the children's experience. (Rote learning has

increased in recent times with DI being implemented and routinely assessed by American DI specialists).

- The inappropriateness of NAPLAN. (The NAPLAN is a white form of assessment – so much of the content disregards the environment and world of the children that attend this school).
- A reward and punishment system using food as a reward or withdrawal of it, as a punishment. (Haven't seen this in recent times).
- Children being served food by teachers out of dirty serving platters that had not been washed from days before. (The children are served relatively good food. The conditions for eating are still the same).
- A principal apologising for the state of the school because cleaners come and go. (Still the same).
- Beautiful children who did not have sticky eyes or runny noses. (Children are prone to ear and nose infections).
- Children who were eager to please. (This is mostly the case, although there is often school refusal due to disengagement and 'yelling' teachers).
- Children who were so over-punished, missing out on food and experiences; basic physical needs that enable us to function as human beings. (I see a lot of unkindness directed towards children by teachers who would not be employed in schools in Victoria).
- Hungry children
- Mostly capable, happy and affectionate children (some have significant learning disabilities)
- Children who were intelligent with a quick wit and an interest in the world beyond their community
- Children who could listen
- Children who were too tired to stay awake for the complete school day because they are often roaming the community by night or unable to sleep due to household noise etc
- An issue with roaming dogs

My initial reason for visiting the school was to visit a Penbank teacher on leave who had a desire to work in a remote school. For many years, Penbank has been committed to learning about and engaging with Aboriginal people, which inspired this teacher to work in the NT. This was the beginning of the partnership that has been developed between the schools, Penbank and Wugularr. Both schools and members of the Beswick community have been committed to improving educational opportunities for Aboriginal children while providing experiences for Penbank and Wugularr students to learn about each other's worlds.

When the Wugularr and Penbank students came together for the first time in 2009, they decided we should be called Wugubank. It very quickly became the name of the partnership.

My desire to participate in this submission is that I believe the Wugubank Partnership provides a powerful and achievable model that specifically relates to the points of the inquiry.

The next part of this submission is about the Wugubank Partnership. It is a unique concept because it involves primary school children. It developed as an idea and now provides amazing experiences and opportunities for Aboriginal children.

### **The Wugubank Partnership**

Wugubank is the title given to a developing partnership involving 2 schools Penbank, a co-educational, independent primary school situated on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria and Wugularr School at Beswick, an hours' drive east of Katherine, Northern Territory.

The Wugubank Partnership developed when a teacher from Penbank took leave to work in the Northern Territory – Wugularr School was his post. During his 18 month period of leave, a number of Penbank teachers including the school principal visited Wugularr School. When at Wugularr, they worked in a voluntary capacity supporting the school in areas of need such as Art and Library. The Penbank teachers were generally at Wugularr for a week at a time. Two or three Penbank teachers would travel to Wugularr working at the school once a term during this period.

Strong and supportive relationships developed between teachers and students from Wugularr and Penbank. Wugularr students enjoyed visits from the Penbank teachers. The natural next step was to introduce the students of each school to one another. This was first achieved with 16 Wugularr students visiting Penbank School in August 2010.

### **Rationale**

Governments and many organisations have formulated policies and implemented strategies to improve the opportunities for Aboriginal people. Some organisations such as the AFL have made a significant difference. A number of schools have formed partnerships to support some needy Aboriginal schools.

The purpose of the Wugubank partnership also supports the improvement of opportunities for Aboriginal people. The significant difference is that it is through children, beginning at a primary school level. It is well documented that Early Childhood and the Primary Years of schooling play a major role in influencing and educating children for a successful life ahead. With a positive primary school experience, parents and children are more likely to value a secondary education and so forth.

*'Education is the great engine to personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of a mine, that the child of a farm worker can become the president of a great nation.'* Nelson Mandela

The purpose of the Wugubank partnership is to provide an educative experience through relationship building and school visits. It is based on the premise that young children naturally interact with each other and are not unduly affected by the barriers of culture or language. Children are generally free from prejudice and purely love to play and learn. In a school setting and through structured and appropriate educational exchanges the Wugubank Partnership enables the children from each school to understand and influence each other about their world. The Wugubank Partnership aims to develop long term relationships over time, thus establishing trust, personal respect and connections, with the view of broadening horizons for all.

The Wugubank Partnership promotes the importance of education and reinforces that school is a normal thing to do for all children and young people. This is enabled through the quality of experiences at a joint level when Penbank and Wugularr School interacts with each other. The Wugubank Partnership promotes lifelong learning through personal involvement, genuine respect and consideration of others.

### **Implementation**

- Teachers from Penbank visit Wugularr School each year. Regular contact is required to maintain a relationship with Wugularr School, which has a high staff turnover. The Penbank teachers provide continuity, support and mentoring (as required) to the Wugularr School Community. Small groups of Penbank students may accompany teachers on these visits if appropriate. Wugularr teachers are likewise encouraged to visit Penbank
- Visits can involve voluntary work or opportunities for Wugubank planning
- Visits and Wugubank planning is facilitated through the Regional Director and school leaders
- Students maintain a relationship with the Wugularr students throughout the year via Skype, Facebook, email and written correspondence
- Annually, a group of students from each school visits the other. This enables the students to be with each other twice in the year
- Students are 8 to 12 years of age and then continue to participate in the Wugubank Partnership from then onwards. The continuation of a student's involvement is integral to the Wugubank Partnership building long-term relationships with the aim for Wugularr students to be motivated to remain at school during the secondary school years
- Woodleigh School, of which Penbank is now a junior campus, has agreed to participate in the partnership, providing a secondary school experience for secondary school age Wugularr students.
- The selection of the students is the joint responsibility of Wugularr and Penbank educators and leaders. The selected students will consist of students who have participated in previous years and new students. The selection of students should

be connected to improvement but not connected to discipline unless an individual or the group's safety is at risk. It should be considered a privilege for those who are deemed to benefit from the experience

- When each school group visits the other, ALL students and teachers of the host school are involved. This general involvement at a school level promotes the partnership between the 2 schools throughout the broader school communities
- The Penbank Head of Campus, in consultation with the Wugularr Principal assumes the responsibility to co-ordinate the program of any school visit. I.e. the organisation of the joint camp to Katherine Gorge and Kakadu held in September 2011, was completely organised by Penbank
- Any Wugubank experience must promote the importance of education through respect and inclusivity
- Funding for any work experience to Wugularr or Wugubank planning is supported by Woodleigh School
- Parents and students, Between the Bays (Penbank Music Festival) and other organisations, support funding for the Wugubank Partnership. A high priority is to achieve government funding
- The safety of all students and staff is fully considered prior to and during any visit
- Selection of teachers/adults involved in any school visit is similar to the selection of students. I.e. staff consist of a teacher and adult who has participated in a Wugubank experience and another adult or two, new to the experience. Medical expertise is a priority.
- The types of experiences must be age appropriate and aligned with the students' interests such as: participation in general school work, hands on projects, particularly the Arts, recreational activities involving sport and the outdoors such as AFL football, cultural celebrations (Walking with Spirits) joint camps and ongoing communication
- During any visit, an appropriate welcome and farewell is in place to acknowledge the importance of the friendship through the Wugubank Partnership
- Documentation of the visits that tell the story of the partnership

### **The points of the inquiry relating to educational opportunities and outcomes for school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students**

#### **1. Access to, participation in and outcomes of pre-schooling**

The school that I refer to has an adequately resourced pre-school with potential to further improve the environment for children to learn and play. Due to the teacher or previous teachers not being qualified in Early Childhood education, there is a lack of understanding about the importance of play to learning at this stage of development. Appropriate planning and implementation of quality play-based activities is not appreciated. Teachers in the school believe that children merely destroy the areas

and make a mess. There is not a lacking of resources. There is a lacking of knowledge and expertise both at the teacher and leadership level. Early childhood settings require teachers with an Early Childhood Degree.

## 2. Engagement and achievement of students in remote areas

This is very challenging due to what I believe is an inappropriate and inadequate form of education. Leadership and teachers are generally itinerant with outdated skills and competencies to support students to be engaged in learning. I have observed teachers brought out of retirement due to the lack of teachers applying to work in remote schools. Continuity is an issue. There is little recognition of the learning styles and cultural experience of students. Informing pedagogical practice by knowing the child and developing a curriculum from what they know and are interested in promotes engagement in the learning environment.

The above two points directly connect to teacher quality. According to John Hattie, highly regarded Professor of Education and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia,

***'It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation.'***

Council for Educational Research (ACER) ACEReSearch 2003 - Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us?

***Teachers Make a Difference.*** John Hattie

***'I therefore suggest that we should focus on the greatest source of variance that can make the difference – the teacher. We need to ensure that this greatest influence is optimised to have powerful and sensationally positive effects on the learner. Teachers can and usually do have positive effects, but they must have exceptional effects. We need to direct attention at higher quality teaching, and higher expectations that students can meet appropriate challenges - and these occur once the classroom door is closed and not by reorganising which or how many students are behind those doors, by promoting different topics for these teachers to teach, or by bringing in more sticks to ensure they are following policy.'***

If teacher quality is the most significant factor in achieving student success, what needs to change to enable the very best of teachers to understand these contexts and teach in these challenging environments?

### ***Perhaps.....***

#### **Attention needs to be given to teachers' living conditions**

- Teachers need to feel safe and comfortable. Teachers in these communities are often scared of the dogs and too frightened to venture out of their houses.
- Housing is ordinary, bungalow accommodation and very basically furnished. Cleanliness is up to the individual, however, once in their houses, that's where they stay, so it can be a solitary existence and quickly becomes very lonely. If you want to attract families to work in these schools, safety is imperative.
- Optional accommodation elsewhere, as a reprieve from the demands of the school and community environment. Weekend residences in regional towns purchased by the Government or stays on a number of weekends in hotels/resorts could be another option. These could be places where teachers have the opportunity to de-brief and share ideas.
- I appreciate resourcing the above suggestions may be a challenge

### ***Most definitely.....***

#### **Teachers need to know how and what to teach.**

- Intensive training where teachers complete a practicum in a remote school should be a priority before gaining a position. Teachers and leaders in remote schools need to be the very best and paid accordingly. They need to be culturally respectful and innovative in curriculum design.
- Teachers need to value the school setting, as an authentic place of learning for Aboriginal children. In all schools the learning environment is the third teacher that reflects the educational values, community and culture. As an example, the creation of learning circles/corroboree grounds, and specific shelters for boys and men and women and girls could be constructed as a school project. (Potential places where elders can work with kids – perhaps alongside teachers who are learners too).
- Establishing partnerships with high performing schools can improve pedagogical practice. According to the Principal of the NT school, when our teachers visit, the level of enthusiasm of the staff lifts significantly. Our teachers model personalised and differentiated approaches where children can be creative and artistic. They are respectful of the children and treat them with kindness. Their work is valued and displayed. When our teachers visit, they clean the school and re-design class spaces. This is always done in collaboration with the NT school staff. Little time is provided for planning, so help and ideas are always appreciated.
- DI (Direct Instruction) disengages students. It is the most basic of instruction, and if we taught our children using that approach, they would be reluctant to come to school. We know that children learn from experience and doing. Learning, to be embedded intellectually, must have a context. If there is no relevance to what's being taught, children will disengage. This is ALL children.



- There needs to be a strengths and interest-based focus, yet there are very few specialist teachers available and little acknowledgement of learning styles. In the playgrounds, children are acrobatic, great footballers and extremely knowledgeable concerning their surrounds. Literacy and Numeracy should be taught through these curriculum areas that give recognition to what's culturally important to Aboriginal people.
- The two-way learning model should be emphasised. At present there is almost a complete lacking of understanding of the importance of teaching and experiencing through culture. Involvement of elders in the provision of cultural programs should be a priority. The school ideally should be a learning hub for the whole community, where culture and mainstream education merge.
- English is their second language for the most part (in this community). They should be taught English through their own language. We must show respect for how these children think and feel.
- Teachers need to acknowledge that all children progress differently and differentiate programs accordingly. The learning environment needs to be an inspiring place that will entice children and families to want to attend.
- Teaching needs to be aspirational to enable children to have the skills to participate successfully when they move beyond their world. Too often, a deficit model of teaching and learning is the main focus for learning.
- As we all know, strong and supportive relationships are key.
- Teachers must be prepared to engage with the community through day to day school activities and programs, community events and celebrations.

#### **Leaders need to be able to lead.**

- The leader of any school needs the time and space to develop ideas and implement the vision in the best interests of the students and school community.
- The leader is the enabler of this vision. Specifically, in the school I refer to, there are many challenges and constraints. It is a huge job, and even though the enrolment may seem small (90 plus student) the demands are extraordinary.
- Therefore, schools such as remote schools require extraordinary leadership and need to be remunerated appropriately, supported by a team of highly able teachers, administrative staff and including adequate housing.

In 2014, Dr Chris Sarra and David Spillman from the Stronger Smarter Institute produced a Position Paper on High-Expectations Relationships.

As stated in the paper:

***'The Stronger Smarter philosophy rejects the negative 'deficit' thinking for both teachers and students, and promotes the idea that the same high quality teaching strategies used for all students are relevant for Indigenous students as well. By focusing on the strengths of students and teachers, Stronger Smarter encourages a strong sense of cultural identity, belonging, and being valued for all students with the belief that this will improve student learning.'***

### 3. The provision of boarding school education and its outcomes

Throughout the years we have been involved in this school, we have observed that increasingly students leave the community to attend boarding school from Year 7. This can be a successful option, as it is an expectation by some families that their children attend boarding school for secondary school, as they did. For a number of students, boarding school is not successful. For these students, uninformed decisions can be made concerning the suitability of the school. Decisions can be rushed and preparation for moving away from home is not necessarily appropriately planned. Once at the boarding schools, there is often fighting and conflict between students who are often from a mix of communities or family groups. This conflict can become aggressive and usually occurs in the boarding house where supervision is less than in a classroom environment. There are also other circumstances that disrupt a child from being at boarding school such as family issues. Returning to boarding school following a long break at home can also be difficult.

In some boarding schools, success is high for students. Students living with a family rather than in a boarding house is proving to be a successful option. The **Melbourne Indigenous Transition School** provides a transition year at Year 7. Small groups of students live together in the schoolhouse. In addition to comprehensive teaching of Literacy and Numeracy, students are introduced to the urban environment through involvement in sporting teams, field trips and finally, the school they will be attending the following year. In its early stages, the feedback from a former student from our partnership school is that it has been a most successful year. This particular student is being prepared to transition into Melbourne Grammar School.

#### *Perhaps.....*

- Schools partnering up with each other by actively working together builds a relationship of trust. As with the Wugubank Partnership, teachers, students and families get to know each other from an early age. Visits to each other's schools and communities through primary school enables children to develop confidence. Strong relationships are formed. If a child chooses to go to school at Woodleigh, friendships and knowledge about the school is well embedded.
- When partnering schools work together, teachers too can develop their own professional partnerships. Ideas and issues can be shared, as can the learning between students at a similar stage of learning. ICT has brought the world together and is an ideal means for keeping schools connected on a regular basis.
- Regularly connecting with families on a face to face level is also vital. Parents have faith when they know how their child is going and when phone contact with their child is regular.

### 4. Access to, participation in, and benefits of different school models for Indigenous students in different parts of Australia

The Wugubank Partnership has enabled children from the NT to participate in a different school experience. Although there are differences, there are also many aspects that are the same. There is familiarity when students participate in school together. In addition to the school program, the unique setting at Penbank exposes children to a variety of experiences to include bush, beach, rural, sporting and urban experiences. For the Penbank students, their experience in the NT is in stark contrast to their lives on the Mornington Peninsula. The most overwhelming aspect of this partnership is the sharing of each other's worlds. The learning is phenomenal – The Penbank mob in the NT valuing the interactions of their Aboriginal friends and the learning that takes place by being with the children and Elders. When the NT mob are at Penbank, it is the same. The NT children gain so much from staying with families and living in an urban/coastal environment. This relationship has developed over time. There is a high level of trust due to the consistency of the people involved; the relationship deepening to the extent that community members are now requesting that students attend the senior campus of the school.

### **In summary**

My interest in making a contribution to this submission is that Woodleigh School is committed to developing ideas such as the Wugubank Partnership. It is an example of a positive and achievable model for creating quality and relevant learning experiences and opportunities for Aboriginal children.

Collaboration through partnerships can be a highly successful way to strengthen schools and communities to enhance learning for all. The strength of this partnership is the connections, trust and continuity that has developed over time. This Partnership is not about school visits but is about improving education for all through relationship building. With commitment, these partnerships can be most successful, as is the example of the Wugubank Partnership.

Woodleigh School is not a large school. To date we have been able to sustain the partnership financially, however, this will become increasingly difficult. As the partnership develops, enabling Wugularr students at a secondary level to complete their education at Woodleigh, more time and therefore money will be required to enable the partnership to continue to develop and flourish. To date, parents and school initiatives largely fund the partnership. We are doing our best to seek funding through other means, however, this is proving to be difficult and extremely time consuming.

For other schools to partner with schools to enhance and enrich the education for Aboriginal children, government funding needs to be available. My personal experience in having a Year 9 student live with our family and attend Woodleigh School is that it is extremely complex. Paperwork alone, and dealing with agencies such as Centrelink are incredibly difficult. In addition, maintaining contact with families, engaging with the school in a loco parentis role and ensuring that students

have connections with other Aboriginal friends are incredibly important responsibilities. In saying that, it is most rewarding to see the growth and many successes that this particular student has achieved in the three terms that he has been at Woodleigh.

This submission comments upon and presents a model that supports opportunities and pathways for Indigenous students to succeed in school, regardless of whether they live in a remote community or in a regional or urban centre.

As noted in the implementation section of the Wugubank Statement of Purpose, all Wugubank experiences are documented. As part of this submission you will receive the latest publication of the Wugubank Partnership.

I do look forward to participating in this vitally important discussion.

Yours sincerely,

Vivienne Wearne  
Head of Penbank – Deputy Principal, Woodleigh School