

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMITTEE

# KIDS + SCHOOL

MISSING SCHOOL MATTERS AND EVERY DAY COUNTS!

HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT  
ISLANDER FAMILIES WITH SCHOOL ATTENDANCE



COUNCIL OF  
**CATHOLIC  
SCHOOL  
PARENTS**  
NSW/ACT

LEADERSHIP | ADVOCACY | SUPPORT

ATTENDANCE • PARTICIPATION • BELONGING





School absences can be reduced when schools and their communities partner to build a strong culture of student and family engagement and seek to identify and respond to the factors affecting school attendance.

Schools can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families around school attendance by providing a school culture that respects and honours families' knowledge, experiences and care for their children as well as their capacity to make a positive contribution to their children's education.

**ATTENDANCE  
IS EVERYONE'S  
RESPONSIBILITY!**

## DEVELOPING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

**Make all students and families feel welcome:** Ensure students and families see themselves reflected and respected in your school environment, and that their cultures are visible and celebrated in your school. Do you fly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and/or have an Acknowledgement of Country in your front office?

**Make school a culturally safe place for all students:** Reflect on and scrutinise your school and classroom practices and behaviours to look for more subtle forms of racism, unfair treatment and/or exclusion.

Communicate effectively to develop positive school community cultures and relationships: Use a variety of methods to communicate important information to parents, in ways that are meaningful and helpful for them.

**Train staff in cultural competency:** Ensure all staff, including volunteers, have professional learning in cultural understanding and awareness.



**Offer engaging learning:** School should be motivating and stimulating for all students. How well are Aboriginal perspectives taught across the curriculum? How well do you acknowledge Aboriginal ways of knowing the world, including Aboriginal spirituality?

**Start the day with a breakfast program:** Breakfast programs can provide an organised start to the day for students and also engages parents who stay on for a tea/coffee. Some schools have morning reading sessions where older students mentor younger ones.

**Show empathy:** Be sensitive when dealing with difficult situations such as when students don't have the right uniform or equipment or lunch, for example. Having a sensitive yet positive and proactive process that all staff can follow is critical.

**Make it as easy as possible for parents/carers to contact the school:** One or two regular key contact people is the best option, so that the family (and student) can build a rapport and relationship with that staff member. It may not always be the

classroom teacher or year coordinator or even the AEW. Different families may have a different contact person. But every family should have someone they can know and trust and can contact without prejudice.

**Show concern about student absences:** Ensure the school shows concern about student absences; if no one shows any genuine concern about an absent student it may be assumed by that student and/or family that it doesn't matter that they missed school. School attendance isn't just a compliance issue, it is also about care and concern for others. A student who believes they are important and cared for will be more likely to want to attend school. Ensure parents are called on the day by the principal, business manager, AEW or classroom teacher to check on the wellbeing of absent students.

**Acknowledge and celebrate students' attendance:** For those students who are often absent, celebrate when they come to school, even if they are late; make students feel that you appreciate and need them at school and miss them when they are not there.



## ENGAGING FAMILIES AND BUILDING CAPACITY

**Share research evidence with parents:** There is now a strong body of evidence to show the critical importance of regular school attendance. Share with parents and carers current research that links attendance with student achievement levels. Include short messages in the newsletter, on the website and other places such as Facebook about the importance of school attendance. Make it positive.

### **Unlock the language and structure of schooling:**

The language we use can either alienate families or it can build bridges between home and school. In order to engage families there needs to be a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the desired outcome and the process to achieve it. If students think that both the school and their families are 'on the same page' when it comes to their learning and school attendance, they will be more likely to attend school. will be more likely to attend school.

- ▶ Provide information in the 'language of parents'.
- ▶ Make links between home and school learning. Honour families' contributions.
- ▶ Provide families with the tools to help them support learning at home, especially if a student is going to be absent from school for a period of time.
- ▶ Make in: school learning visible for families: portfolios, vodcasts, gallery walks
- ▶ Provide information to parents on the sequential nature of lessons and learning and how their child's learning can be severely disrupted if they miss crucial learning points.
- ▶ Provide parents with quick tips and strategies to help them get their children to school and ready to learn.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for parents to get together to share their own challenges and strategies. This provides important peer support and encouragement.

**Avoid the stress of surprises:** If families know what is going on and what is expected in advance they can be better informed and better prepared which will assist them in supporting their children to be more organised and prepared. Set out the school calendar as early as possible and share it with parents.

**Support families:** Work closely with families and support agencies when families are suffering hardships or are in crisis. Parents can often feel stressed, overwhelmed, guilty, ashamed and/ or angry about the situation. Try not to compound those feelings, but rather try to be empathetic and supportive. Put yourself in the place of the parent or child.

**Take a strengths-based approach:** Don't assume if a child is chronically absent that it is a signal that parents do not care about the child's education or attendance. Generally, parents care deeply.

- ▶ Ask families what they already do that works.
- ▶ Work in partnership with the family to address the absenteeism building on their strengths and knowledge of the child.
- ▶ Know your community and the resources and assets that exist within it: tap into, and use, those resources.

**Ongoing engagement:** Remember that parent engagement is an ongoing process and a relationship, not a one: time event. Creating ongoing opportunities for dialogue with parents invites them to partner in crafting solutions.

- ▶ Integrate discussions about attendance into all school parent meetings and parent education programs.
- ▶ Include it in the newsletter and on social media and in all other communications
- ▶ Ensure that it is part of each personalised learning plan (PLP) meeting.
- ▶ Remember that 'engagement' requires two: way conversations

### **Make it easy for parents to comply with school policies:**

Ensure policies and guidelines are 'parent friendly' and easily accessible.

- ▶ Engage families in a conversation about the school's policies and procedures.
- ▶ Provide templates for absentee notes to help parents, especially those who may have literacy needs.
- ▶ Have a regular contact person for each family who can help them navigate school policies and procedures.

### CONTACT US:

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