



## Introduction

**yourtown** welcomes the extensive work that the Queensland government has undertaken in recent years to seek to close the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders and non-Indigenous Queenslanders. We know that the educational outcomes of every child have long-lasting consequences, with increased school participation and completion rates linked to improved employment, income and other social and economic outcomes over the life course.<sup>1</sup> With statistics continuing to show marked differences in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it is right that governments across Australia continue to focus on and heavily invest in policy and interventions designed to address this gap.<sup>2</sup>

Indigenous students have lower Year 12 retention and Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) attainment rates than their non-Indigenous peers.<sup>3</sup> They are important milestones for the Committee to review and are areas in which **yourtown** has considerable expertise and experience. Over 20 years, we have delivered and continue to provide today a range of programs to help support both disadvantaged Indigenous and non-Indigenous students - who have a multitude of different and complex issues to overcome - to engage with and to complete school. Through our delivery of different programs, we have developed an understanding of what are the main barriers to student retention at Year 12, as well as strategies that help them to stay at school.

Our experience tells us that many of the same approaches to overcoming barriers to school retention and completion work for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people at risk of or disengaged from school, and for non-Indigenous children and young people. This derives from the similar and multidimensional barriers both groups encounter in trying to engage at school, such as domestic violence, bullying, unstable living arrangements which in turn create further problems such as mental health issues, behavioural problems and substance use. We also know that there are some specific barriers that are often more entrenched for Indigenous students, as well as some specific strategies that are effective in providing support to Indigenous students.

In our submission, we apply our experience and respond to the Committee's terms of reference under the following headings, with **yourtown** case studies used to support our assertions throughout the submission:

- *Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to remain at school to complete Year 12*
- *Success factors and effective strategies to support students to remain at school*
- *Barriers of implementing successful strategies to support students to remain at school*

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<sup>1</sup> Findings from our own work, research such as: Australian Industry Group (AIG) & Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) (2007). It's crunch time. Raising youth engagement and attainment: a discussion paper. Sydney: DSF and statistics such as <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features50Mar+2011>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features20Nov+2013>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features50Mar+2011>

## About yourtown

**yourtown** (formally BoysTown) is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown's** Mission is *to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their quality of life.*

**yourtown** provides a range of face to face and virtual services to young people and families seeking support. These services include:

- *Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues*
- *Employment programs and social enterprises, which support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services.*
- *Accommodation responses to families with children who experience homelessness and women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence*
- *Young Parent Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children*
- *Parentline, a telephone counselling service for parents and carers'*
- *Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence*

Programs specifically designed and delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people include:

- *Indigenous School Based Traineeship Programs (SBT) - SBT works with Indigenous senior school students to secure and complete school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, and make a successful transition from school to work.*
- *Indigenous Youth Engagement and Transitions Program (IYET) - IYET works with Indigenous students aged 15-18 years who are identified as at high risk of early school leaving to re-engage in learning and complete their formal education.*
- *Vocational Training and Employment Centre (VTEC) - In partnership with the Federal Government and GenerationOne, VTEC provides tailored pre-employment training, personal mentoring and job placement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

## Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is Australia's only national 24/7, confidential support and counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years. It offers counselling support via telephone, email and a real-time web platform. Kids Helpline is staffed by a professional workforce, with all counsellors holding a tertiary qualification.

Since March 1991, young Australians have been contacting Kids Helpline about a diverse group of issues ranging from everyday topics such as family, friends and school to more serious issues of child abuse, bullying, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, self-injury and suicide.

In 2016, Kids Helpline counsellors responded to over 180,000 contacts from children and young people across the nation, 4% of which were from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

## Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to remain at school to complete Year 12

Since 2000, **yourtown** has been involved in the development and delivery of an extensive range of school engagement and retention, school-to-work transition, work preparation training, mentoring, placement and support programmes for Indigenous people in South East Queensland. We currently provide face-to-face services to over 4,000 disadvantaged young people per year in South East Queensland, of whom 23% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.<sup>4</sup>

We have extensive experience in working with Indigenous Elders, peoples, organisations and communities, government, industry, support services and other stakeholders to support disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve their education and employment outcomes. **yourtown's** experience includes the delivery of the:

- *Indigenous Employment Programme (IEP);*
- *Indigenous Youth Employment Consultant (IYEC) programme;*
- *Indigenous Youth Careers Pathways (IYCP) programme;*
- *Indigenous Mentoring programme;*
- *New Careers for Aboriginal People (NCAP) programme;*
- *Job placement services and industry-specific work preparation training programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and*
- *Paid work preparation training in yourtown Enterprises.*

Today, under the oversight of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Initiatives Manager and in addition to general population services that Indigenous clients can also access, we deliver two school engagement programs specifically tailored to the needs and preferences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, the details of which are set out below.

### Indigenous School Based Traineeship Programs (SBT)

SBT works with Indigenous senior school students in high schools in South East Queensland to secure and complete school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, and to make a successful transition from school to work.

SBT delivers mentoring support for students interested in pursuing a traineeship which is matched to individual needs, interests and aspirations and provides:

- *assistance in securing an apprenticeship or traineeship with a supportive employer;*
- *ongoing support from Indigenous Mentors who can work with the individual, their family, the school and the employer to ensure any potential problems are identified and resolved;*
- *access to culturally appropriate personal development and life skills training and aspiration building workshops;*
- *access to learning support, e.g. literacy/numeracy programs, tutoring, homework clubs;*
- *assistance in engaging in further education or finding employment following completion of Year 12; and*
- *post placement support to ensure retention.*

Since its commencement in 2016, SBT has had 64 participants, 27 of whom have successfully completed the program.

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<sup>4</sup> From June 2016-June 2017, yourtown delivered face-to-face services to 4,167 clients, 964 of whom were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

## Indigenous Youth Engagement and Transitions Program (IYET)

IYET targets Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 15 to 18 years in Logan, Ipswich and Redland and Brisbane South, who are disengaged from mainstream schooling and/or are identified as at high risk of early school leaving or have left school. The aims of the program are to support these young people to re-engage with school and their learning, to improve their education outcomes, to complete their formal education, and to improve transition to vocational, higher education and employment.

Through IYET, qualified Indigenous mentors and specialist support staff work with young people, their families and their schools to provide culturally appropriate support to overcome barriers and re-engage with learning to successfully transition into further education or employment, including school-based apprenticeships and traineeships.

IYET provides a range of support, including:

- *identifying issues that may be contributing to disengagement, including vocational and non-vocational barriers;*
- *undertaking diagnostic testing to identify individual learning barriers and providing support with learning activities, e.g. access to literacy/numeracy programs, individual tutoring, homework clubs;*
- *providing career counselling and assistance in developing a flexible learning and transition plan matched to individual needs, interests and aspirations;*
- *resolving issues affecting education outcomes, including referral to specialist agencies/support services to address personal, health and social issues;*
- *delivering personal development activities and life skills training workshops aimed at improving self-confidence and interpersonal skills; and*
- *building cultural education and connection through learning activities to help build pride in cultural heritage, increasing school and teachers' cultural competency, developing links with local Indigenous communities and organisations and running culturally appropriate events for young people to deliver and take part in.*

Since its commencement in 2015, IYET has had 172 participants, 139 of whom have successfully completed the program.

## Success factors and effective strategies to support students to remain at school

Through our experience of developing and delivering a range of different programs with disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, we have identified a number of different factors within our programs which are effective in supporting Indigenous children and young people to reach their potential. Many of them are effective in supporting groups of disadvantaged children and young people more widely.

### **Early intervention**

As suggested by research, we believe that the timeliness of interventions to support children and young people at risk of disengagement is crucial. The earlier additional support and focus is given to the young person in question, the greater the chance of preventing a life-long disengagement with learning.<sup>5</sup>

IYET and SBT apply this principle by promptly acting on referrals made to our services and through the allocation of an Indigenous mentor to the individual as soon as possible. The early allocation of an

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<sup>5</sup>For example, see <https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/1422/report-education-children-at-risk-of-disengaging-from-school-literature-review.pdf>

Indigenous mentor in our programs facilitates the development of a relationship with someone with whom the student can immediately relate and this supports faster rapport-building, essential to making timely progress with the young person.

It is important to note that we often receive referrals to IYET from the community and schools requesting our support for younger children (aged 12-14 years) than IYET can support, who are at risk of not transitioning to high school successfully. These requests identify the need for earlier intervention and for services such as ours to work with these younger cohorts. Again, research supports the need to support children disengaging from school as young as possible and **yourtown** strongly recommends that the government invests in the provision of support programs tailored to the specific needs of younger children to prevent a school life course of disengagement.

### ***Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models and staff***

Disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (like other disadvantaged groups) can lack adult role models in their lives and do not have stable, mutually-respectful and trusting relationships with adults. However, having Indigenous role models are arguably more important for disadvantaged Indigenous children and young people given the levels of intergenerational disadvantage they experience, the nature of disadvantage that Indigenous communities experience more widely, the widespread racism that confronts these young people, and the importance of relationships and culture to Indigenous peoples.

IYET's and SBT's qualified Indigenous mentors and the intensive, long-term support they provide to young people are pivotal to our programs' success. They are not only important role models for our young people – a source of empowerment in itself – but also further help support their empowerment by being able to provide culturally specific support and learning which our young people can use as an important resource to draw strength and build identity.

Indigenous mentors are also experienced intensive case managers and are able to effectively develop and deliver the program to meet the young person's needs given the relationship of trust which they have developed. This trust is an important lever on which improved relations with young people's schools and teachers can be built. Indeed, Indigenous mentors enable the effective delivery of the other factors proven to help students re-engage and succeed at school (as discussed below) to an Indigenous audience.

#### **Case study**

IYET mentors ran a cultural art engagement activity with Youth Justice at Forest Lake. Our mentors explained what Indigenous symbolism and images in art mean and how to use them. Our young people then each completed a piece of art on what Indigenous culture means to them personally.

### ***Student-centred practice:***

Student-centred practice means treating and responding to the individual needs and preferences of every student that is referred to our programs. This is fundamental to the success of our programs, which we achieve through:

- *Focusing on the young person's individual holistic needs (academic, social, emotional, financial and cultural) and aspirations*
- *Listening to and respecting what young people have to say*
- *Seeing the world from the young person's perspective*

- *Building the understanding of schools, teachers and parents about supporting the individuals needs of the young person comprehensively*

We also are able to provide highly individualised programs for each student through Indigenous mentors, who identify their needs and preferences and devise and arrange support around them. This includes, for example,

- *securing financial support to support the young person's needs in terms of the provision of lunches at school or books and equipment*
- *providing transport to and from school and to other services*
- *referring the young person to a number of different local support services (e.g. mental health services, housing, medical substance use and legal assistance), and supporting them through this process.*

Indigenous mentors can provide one-on-one support where appropriate, or we can deliver a wealth of group support workshops depending on the young person's needs and preferences. Often one-on-one support is useful in cases where the student has low literacy or numeracy as they may feel ashamed about their levels of ability in these areas and not wish to work in groups (hence their disengagement in schools).

The group support workshops are on a range of subjects that include school subject selection, post school destination planning, career planning and employability skills, as well as issues such as health eating, behaviour management and healthy relationships. These workshops are developed by our Indigenous staff and not only use culturally appropriate methods to engage with these young people (e.g. using art and rock painting) but in doing so aim to further develop the young person's sense and understanding of their own cultural identity.

In addition, we know that short-term or standalone interventions do not work so our programs are designed to be able to support young people for as long as they need, and they are also able to leave and re-engage with them at a later time.

#### **Case study**

**yourtown** developed and delivered an IYET program to address issues of truancy, fighting and bullying within a group of young women. During the program, the Indigenous mentor used a school and career planning and goal setting tool and in doing so identified a number of issues that needed to be addressed such as transport issues, lack of school lunch and lack of school resources such as text books and equipment.

#### ***Supporting student empowerment:***

Supporting student empowerment requires the provision of culturally-appropriate and individually tailored assistance in our programs to the young person in question. It also needs us to help the young person's schools, teachers, parents and families, and their wider community and stakeholders to become a part of the support for their empowerment.

To support student empowerment, our programs and workshops are underpinned by the following approaches:

#### **Strengths-based:**

- *Helping the young person to identify their own resources and strengths*

- *Focusing on strengths not weaknesses, and importantly recognising and emphasising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity as a strength*
- *Working in directions that are meaningful to the child*
- *Being aware of social context and social justice issues and demonstrating social justice in methods of engaging*
- *Setting high expectations for the young person*

Developing resources and agency:

- *Clarifying young people's concerns*
- *Facilitating young people's exploration and change*
- *Assisting young people to develop options and strategies for change*
- *Assisting young people to understand the consequences of particular actions*
- *Supporting the young person to develop a sense of control over their life*
- *Working with schools, teachers, parents, families and the wider community to build understanding of their role in supporting young people*

The type of and time spent on work we undertake to support schools, teachers, parents, families and the wider community to build understanding of their role in supporting young people varies. However, a unifying factor is the focus on school and its importance in all our interactions. This is because we know that an important starting point for working with disadvantaged young people at risk of or currently disengaged from school is trying to increase their school engagement. To this end, we need to both work with and in schools, and we need to help raise schools' profile, make positive connections with them and instil a sense of belonging to or ownership of them in Indigenous families and local communities.

Schools' and teachers' openness to working with us is essential if students are to be able to effectively re-engage at school. If their schools and teachers are not willing to respond to the needs of these young students in this way then their chances of educational success are severely limited. Our programs work with schools in the following ways to help create positive connections to school for our clients:

- *We work with our young people in school as this is an opportunity for our students to experience success in this environment, which could be the first time or the first in a long time that they experience success at school.*
- *Through embedding our activities in school, we help to build relationships between disadvantaged Indigenous students and school staff, which is particularly important for this cohort who may mistrust, be intimidated by or not know how or lack the confidence to appropriately engage with teachers who are overwhelmingly non-Indigenous.*
- *We link our individual student goals to educational outcomes (e.g. instead of 'improve anger management', the goal would be 'reduce disciplinary incidents or improve classroom behaviour').*
- *We work to develop a strong belief in and high expectations of Indigenous students in principals and teachers, alongside a good understanding of their needs and issues.*

#### **Case study**

In collaboration with Ipswich State High School, IYET delivered a school reengagement program for a group of male students who were identified as at high risk of disengaging from school. The IYET Indigenous mentor facilitated a series of workshops over the school term to strengthen the engagement and connection these students had with their school, as well as giving clients an understanding of their careers pathways. Several students were experiencing a crisis in the home, which had an impact on their school experience and individual case management support was provided to the students. Additional interventions provided to this group included school lunches, school equipment and uniforms and travel assistance. Graduates of the program were awarded their certificate on parade by their principal. Each graduating student completed a life and five year goal and career plan.



Our programs are firmly focused on our young people and we do not provide family work, mediation, parental support or interventions for the family. Where significant interventions in this area are required, we refer parents and staff to information and support services, such as Parentline, and family mediation services. However, we do need to understand the family context and communicate with parents and carers and to help develop relationships and a sense of belonging/ownership in Indigenous communities and families with local schools, we develop tailored individualised and local activities depending on need.

For example, inviting parents to graduation ceremonies is an important way for us to engage with parents in the school environment and to engender pride in their child, a realisation of their potential and a desire for them to further achieve. We also work to develop connections with the local Indigenous community through holding local events and celebrations.

#### **Case study**

IYET mentors and young people organised a smoking ceremony at one of **yourtown**'s new sites in Ipswich. The young people invited local community groups and Indigenous Elders to experience traditional dancing, art and the ceremony.

### **Barriers of implementing successful strategies to support students to remain at school**

There are many, diverse barriers to successfully supporting disengaged students to remain at school. These include the many complex, deep and/or intergenerational issues that the young person may have to cope with as well as external factors such as the school system or school.

#### **Barriers according to yourtown staff**

Based on their work with disengaged young people, our staff suggested barriers to school engagement, retention and attainment include – often a mixture – of the following issues:

- *Carer responsibilities*
- *Critical life events*
- *Undiagnosed mental health issues*
- *Behavioural problems (e.g. anger management) and socialisation issues*
- *Out-of-home care arrangements*
- *Domestic violence and child abuse*
- *Alcohol and/or drug use*
- *Bullying*
- *Disability or learning difficulties*
- *Low literacy and/or numeracy*
- *Financial distress*
- *Inadequate parental/family support*
- *Low self-esteem*
- *Medical or other health issues*
- *Unstable living arrangements/homelessness*
- *Current/previous juvenile justice orders/detention*
- *Gaming and social media addiction*

In addition to looking at ways to support children and young people to overcome these complex and multidimensional barriers during their school careers, it is important that the Committee considers other

barriers stemming from the school system and schools themselves. For example, while participation in school-based apprenticeships and traineeships has been demonstrated to improve school retention and completion rates for young Indigenous people, and particularly young men, it is important that the government looks at how it can make further improvements to VET and VET in Schools to accommodate the needs and preferences of more students.<sup>6</sup> To this end, we would recommend reviewing:

- *the range and choice of subjects to ensure there is sufficient choice to accommodate the interests of disengaged students*
- *the structure of VET in Schools to encompass broader industry sectors with the opportunity to specialise further down the line*
- *whether current VET options lead to sustainable career pathways*
- *the support and information services provided to students who pursue a vocational pathway*
- *if and how schools privilege students who are heading to university over those who are not, and the impact this has on the esteem, motivation and sense of worth of students who choose VET or who are not inclined to follow a university pathway.*

#### Case study

One young woman was referred to IYET as she was experiencing a number of different family issues that were resulting in her disengagement from school, with her stating that she wished to drop out. She had grown up with family violence, and her mother, her sibling and she had been suffered significant physical harm as a result with her father ultimately being imprisoned. Alongside dealing with the trauma of this, she had insecure accommodation and was living with her older boyfriend despite wanting to be able to live with her sibling. A family member had recently attempted suicide. She was experiencing mental health issues and was self-harming, but unwilling to accept help for this.

#### yourtown recommendations

In the following section, we set out broad recommendations for the Committee to consider in developing a strategy to improve the retention disadvantaged Indigenous students at school until Year 12:

- ***Provide regular and open access to Indigenous mentors at school to support disadvantaged Indigenous children and young people.***
- ***Invest in support services for Indigenous children aged 12-14 years since there is a clear need, and earlier intervention is demonstrated to be most effective at preventing school disengagement***
- ***Invest in support and training for Indigenous students to become teachers, and other key roles with which children and young people must frequently engage, so Indigenous young children both have role models and people with whom they can easily trust, relate and interact with at school etc.***
- ***Review VET programs and VET in Schools to ensure that it accommodates the needs and preferences of more students, and specifically disadvantaged students, and consider how to raise the profile and prestige of VET courses to the same level of academic disciplines.***
- ***Support schools to engage with Indigenous young people, their families and communities so that they feel a sense of belonging and/or ownership of the school.***
- ***Consider how to incorporate culturally appropriate learning to mainstream school programs to make Indigenous students feel welcome but also so that all young Queenslanders have an understanding and appreciation of Indigenous culture and feel connected to it as a part of their Australian heritage.***

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4260.0Main+Features32006-2011>