

# What Works to support Indigenous boarding students

## PREBOARDING: COMMUNITY VISITS

### Overview

The move to boarding school is a significant period of adjustment for Indigenous students. Indigenous students go through three key transitions: Stage 1 – Preboarding, Stage 2 – Boarding and Stage 3 – Post-Boarding. Each of these stages can significantly impact students' boarding experiences and their willingness to remain in school.

### Preboarding

Preboarding transitions are the first introduction many students and their families will have to boarding. There are eight elements that schools should consider when coordinating their preboarding transition program. There is a good guidance paper dedicated to each of these factors.

- ❖ Element 1: community visits
- ❖ Element 2: visits to boarding school
- ❖ Element 3: student application support
- ❖ Element 4: positive first impressions
- ❖ Element 5: regular contact with families
- ❖ Element 6: student resources
- ❖ Element 7: student selection
- ❖ Element 8: parent/guardian readiness

### Element 1: Community Visits

This good guidance paper discusses Element 1: Community Visits. Visits to prospective students' communities are a vital aspect of the preboarding transition process. A regular presence in community helps build healthy and trustful relationships between the host school, families and the local school.

### The Purpose of Preboarding Community Visits

Visiting students in community serves many purposes, including relationship building and introducing host school staff members to life in community.

#### Relationship building:

Relationship building is an important reason to visit communities. Having a presence in these communities helps to build a sense of recognition and familiarity. The more interactions communities have with representatives of a host school, the more families will know about the boarding school and the process involved. These visits also help build trust within the community; they demonstrate an honest interest in the students, their families, and their cultures.

### Staff introductions:

Introducing families to host school staff is a crucial element of the preboarding visit to community. Families need to meet the key people who will be responsible for their children during the school term. These introductions will help give families a greater sense of confidence in their decision to send their children to boarding school.

### Context:

A visit to community gives host schools an idea of the context from which the student comes. Through community visits, host schools can see students at home; consequently, gaining a better understanding of their needs, interests and experiences.

## Who Should Visit Community

Key staff from the host school should visit the community. These staff members include:

- ❖ Principal
- ❖ Indigenous Student Coordinator and other specific support staff
- ❖ Boarding house representatives
- ❖ Teaching staff

The Indigenous Student Coordinator should be Indigenous themselves. Alternatively, schools should designate the role to someone who demonstrates an in-depth knowledge of Indigenous culture and significant experience working with Indigenous communities.

## Timing of Community Visits

Every school approaches community visits slightly differently. Early and consistent visits to community are central to building relationships and demonstrating an honest interest in the students. Ideally, schools will have a presence in community each year, or even multiple times a year. Host schools should visit families the year before the student commences boarding.

Community visits should coincide with application and enrolment periods. Schools having a presence in community during application time gives families the maximum opportunity to engage with the host school and to receive as much assistance as necessary. Where schools cannot, or choose not, to be present at application time, transition support units can step in to provide assistance.

## Community Protocols

Host schools need to make themselves aware of, and comply with, community protocols before visiting. Community protocols, like the need for entry permits, will vary significantly. Schools need to make a conscious effort to adhere with these practices. Schools should have a primary point of contact in the community to help navigate these protocols.

## Accommodation During Community Visits

Host schools need to be conscious of where their staff will stay during community visits.

For best practice in choosing accommodation, host schools should consult with the community about the most appropriate housing situation – the answer may vary between visits and different communities.

Where available, staff should stay in accommodation owned by the community. Sometimes, this might mean paying a higher rate.

Accommodation options might look like:

- ❖ Caravan parks.
- ❖ Hostels, motels or hotels.
- ❖ Teacher housing.
- ❖ Facilities at the local school.
- ❖ Homestays: with local teachers or principals.

### Staying in Community

Visiting staff should stay in community. Staying in community gives visiting staff a chance to observe and participate in community activities in the morning and evening. Staying in community is vital for building relationships and trust.

Host schools who choose to stay outside of community will miss out on an opportunity to gain insight and contextual understanding of the children's backgrounds.

### Dry communities:

Host schools need to inform themselves about dry communities and respect the implications.

Dry communities are areas where alcohol is prohibited or restricted. These restrictions are put in place in many Indigenous communities to promote health and well-being among those living there.

Staff should not bring alcohol into a dry community for any reason.

Staff should also avoid staying outside of community so that they can access alcohol. This will limit the success of the visit by taking away opportunities to connect with the community in the morning and evening. If necessary, staff can always leave the community for a meal with an alcoholic drink.

## What to do in Community

To get the most out of their visit to community, host schools should focus on working with the families and local schools to make the transition to boarding as easy as possible.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of activities or tasks that host schools should complete while visiting community.

- Meet the families.
- Meet elders.
- Meet NGOs, transition support units and other agencies working in community.
- Bring all interested parties together to talk.
- Visit students' current school.
- Talk to current teachers.
- Talk to the principal.
- Talk to other members of the community.
- Help with student applications for boarding school, scholarships, ABSTUDY.
- Discuss expectations of boarding.
- Answer questions that students and families have about the school, the city and any other concerns they may have.
- Share important information.
- Observe the students' sociability.
- Discuss any trauma backgrounds, behavioural issues, special needs.
- Ask questions and be open to learning more about the community and their culture.
- Participate in community activities where possible/appropriate.
- Take the time to visit the families of existing students.
- Discuss the boarding process – where to from here.

## Things to be Aware of When Organising Community Visits:

### Costs

The costs associated with travel to regional communities are a significant challenge. Flights and accommodation in community are expensive and due to limited options, often book out quickly. Schools need to plan how they will fund trips to community and allocate resources accordingly.

Some cost-conscious variations to community visits might include:

- ❖ Sending less staff but more often.
- ❖ Sending more staff but less often.

- ❖ Not sending staff but using skype to conduct interviews and meetings – local schools to help ensure internet access.

Schools might be able to incorporate community trips into other responsibilities. For example, staff can visit community as escorts when children return for school breaks. ABSTUDY covers the costs of escorts for youth returning to community, significantly reducing the costs of travel while enabling schools to have a presence.

#### Academic calendars:

Academic calendars may also prove a challenge to community visits. The availability of staff for community visits should be a priority. Planning visits early will help avoid timetable conflicts and ensure that there is sufficient time to book accommodation and flights.

### Summary

Community visits are an integral part of preboarding transitions, and host schools should make them a priority. By visiting communities early and consistently, schools will build relationships and learn more about students, their families and their communities. Schools need to think about where they will stay when in community and how they will fund their visit. Community visits are an important way to connect with continuing and prospective students and help make the transition to boarding less intimidating.

## Further Information

A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory, Bruce Wilson, July 2013.  
[https://education.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/229016/A-Share-in-the-Future-The-Review-of-Indigenous-Education-in-the-Northern-Territory.pdf](https://education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/229016/A-Share-in-the-Future-The-Review-of-Indigenous-Education-in-the-Northern-Territory.pdf)

AIEF Compendium of Best Practice for Achieving Successful Outcomes with Indigenous Students in Australian Boarding Schools – 2016.

AISNSW Pilot Project: Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students. Final Evaluation report – March 2019.  
[https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20\[Open%20Access\]/Improving%20Outcomes%20for%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Students.pdf](https://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20[Open%20Access]/Improving%20Outcomes%20for%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Students.pdf)

Focus Group: Better Support for Boarding Students Meeting Notes.

Interschool Partnerships: Remote Indigenous Boarding Students Experiencing Western Education Whilst Keeping Culturally Safe, Andrew Lloyd & Tristan Duggie Pwerl.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10371656.2020.1809138?journalCode=rrso20>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This good guidance paper is part of the What Works to support Indigenous boarding students project. These good guidance resources aim to improve knowledge and practices that will increase student retention and contribute to improved educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student boarders.

The What Works pre-boarding series fact sheets were reviewed by a focus group including the QLD Transition Support Service, NT Transition Support Unit, experienced boarding managers and Indigenous staff in boarding.