

# What Works to support Indigenous boarding Students



## STAGE 1 – PREBOARDING: Student Application Support

### 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.

#### Stage 1 – Preboarding

Stage 1 – 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: boarding school visits
- ❖ 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 3: Student Application Support

This good guidance paper discusses Element 3: Student Application Support. There are significant administrative tasks involved in the process of applying to boarding school. The applications and necessary forms act as an additional barrier to education for Indigenous students. Accordingly, schools should be present to support students and their families during the application process, making boarding a more accessible experience.

### The Need for Student Application Support

Application forms and the broader application and enrolment processes are notoriously difficult. By offering application support, schools can ensure the accessibility of their boarding programs, continue to build relationships with community and improve confidence in the boarding process.

## Accessibility

Student application support makes the option of boarding school more accessible. With the right support, barriers such as language and limited technology will have a lesser influence on a student's ability to access an education outside of community. An inaccessible application and enrollment process significantly limits opportunities to receive a secondary education. By increasing the accessibility of the application and enrolment process, schools can provide an education to students who may otherwise miss out.

## Relationship building

Application support is an important part of the preboarding transition because it demonstrates an interest in building relationships with families and communities. Schools that offer application support indicate to families that they are wanted members of the host school network.

## Improve confidence and belief in the process

Host schools can improve confidence in the boarding process through application support. Being present to provide support when needed demonstrates an honest interest in the students and their families. If the host schools appear disinterested and unengaged during the application processes, families have little reason to believe that they would behave differently once their child is in boarding. For boarding school to be a positive experience, students and their families need to trust and believe in the host.

## Informed Choice

Through application support, families can make more informed choices about their children. Schools should promote family empowerment, working with communities to ensure that families have the information they need to make these difficult decisions. Transparency is a central aspect of helping families make informed choices. While the reality of the power relationship between host schools and communities limits the available options, an empowerment-based approach to support means that families can play a more active role in the transition to boarding.

## Types of Applications

There are several types of applications that students will need to complete if they want to attend boarding school. Families may need help to complete one or, more likely, all of these applications. Support is needed in the following areas:

- ❖ Applications to the school.
- ❖ Enrolment after acceptance.
- ❖ Applications to residential colleges.
- ❖ ABSTUDY.
- ❖ Private scholarships.
- ❖ Other local funding options – many local organisations offer or are open to financially supporting students. Schools should consider funding options from the Aboriginal Lands Trust and community groups, like Rotary Club or Lions Club.

## Who Can Help

Host school staff, including the Indigenous Education Program Coordinator and Principal, should be available to offer families application support.

Host schools can collaborate with other groups in and around community to ensure that families can access the level of help they need. These groups might include:

- ❖ Transition support units.
- ❖ Community leaders.
- ❖ Elders.
- ❖ Local schools.
- ❖ NGOs.
- ❖ Scholarship providers.

## Who to Help

Everyone applying for boarding school should have access to application support. This includes:

- ❖ Families who have no prior experience with boarding school.
- ❖ Families with limited experience with boarding school; this might include beginning but not completing previous applications.
- ❖ Families who have gone through the application process with other children, even if recently.

Ongoing support is important because application processes change. Further, each interaction with boarding is unique and can be equally as intimidating.

## When to Make Support Available

Application support from host schools should begin during visits to community when staff have a physical presence. The support should continue after staff leave community. Host schools should be contactable through phone, email and videoconferencing platforms (like Skype or Zoom) for students, families or local school staff who may have questions about any of the processes.

## How to offer support

Schools can offer application support to families in different ways. While the level of assistance that students need will vary between families and communities, structured support is necessary across the board. Some things that schools can do include:

- ❖ Providing internet access.
- ❖ Going through paperwork/forms with the family – breaking it down into the simplest terms.
- ❖ Ensuring families have access to the specific applications and application support that are needed for their child.

- ❖ Making sure applications are submitted properly.
- ❖ Explaining the steps involved – are there pre-enrollment interviews, meetings, tests, host school visits?
- ❖ Discussing academic, social and financial expectations.
- ❖ Providing access to hard copies of forms needed for the host school and scholarship applications – negating the need for internet.
- ❖ Waive or refund application fees of students who are not allocated a place.
- ❖ If an application is unsuccessful, let the family know ASAP and provide feedback – this will help them if they choose to apply the following year or to other schools.
- ❖ Liaise with NGOs and transition support units.

### **Transparency**

Host schools need to be open and transparent throughout the application process. Schools should inform families of the application steps and what they will need to do to satisfy the criteria as early as possible. Transparency should extend to the costs and commitment involved. Knowing what the application process involves will help reduce applicants' stress and uncertainty. Further, families should know what their options are so that they can select their most suitable option and be aware of the likelihood of success for their children's applications.

### **Things to be Aware of When Offering Application Support**

Application support and power imbalances

Host schools need to be conscious of power dynamics when offering application support. Allowing families to ask for help and come to the school themselves is an important way of determining whether the student and family are committed to the application process, and the boarding experience. However, this expectation ignores the power imbalance that exists between host schools and families. Schools need to actively offer support to families and be conscious of the power they hold. Hosts need to find a balance between giving the families the tools and resources they need to complete the forms and not making families feel pressured into going through with the application.

Barriers to application completion

Families face many barriers to completing applications for their children. Schools should be aware of possible obstacles including:

- ❖ Lack of birth certificates.
- ❖ Lack of comprehension of language used on forms.
- ❖ English as a second language.
- ❖ Minimal access to internet/strong internet connections.
- ❖ Costs.

## Costs

Significant fees accompany student applications. Schools need to make families aware of the cost commitments involved in boarding, and that they begin from the very start of the application process. Schools should keep application fees as low as possible and consider waiving or refunding payments made by unsuccessful candidates.

## Scholarships

Schools need to be aware of key dates for scholarships. Scholarship applications often close early, meaning that students and families who were not aware of these dates often miss out on a chance to apply. Hosts should work with Elders and staff at the local school to identify students who may be eligible for scholarships early; often the year before they would be looking to apply. In doing so, schools give families who may be able to access scholarships greater choice when making boarding decisions.

## Summary

An important aspect of preboarding transitions is application support. Staff from host schools need to not only be available to help, but also to be proactive in assisting students and their families complete and submit their applications. Each family requires different levels of support for a variety of applications, including for scholarships and ABSTUDY. The application process should reflect an opportunity to further empower families and communities. Application support is an important step towards enabling remote Indigenous students to access a secondary education.

## Further Information

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

AINSW Pilot Project: Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students. Final Evaluation report – March 2019.

[https://www.ainsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20\[Open%20Access\]/Improving%20Outcomes%20for%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Students.pdf](https://www.ainsw.edu.au/Resources/WAL%204%20[Open%20Access]/Improving%20Outcomes%20for%20Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Students.pdf)

Enrolling Remote Indigenous Students in Boarding Schools and Residential Facilities. Nicole Booth and Mareta Alexander, Transition Support Services: Queensland Education Department, March 2020.

Focus Group: Better Support for Boarding Students Meeting Notes.

## 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.