What Works to support Indigenous boarding Students

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PREBOARDING: REGULAR CONTACT WITH FAMILIES

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 stage 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: 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 5: Regular Contact with Families

This good guidance paper discusses Element 5: Regular Contact with Families. Initiating regular contact with families early in the transition period is a necessary step. Through regular contact with families, schools can create an inviting environment that will help students feel welcome and safe.

Schools' contact with families is equally crucial during the preboarding transition stage and while the children are away at boarding because it sets a positive precedent for communication.

The Need for Regular Contact with Families, Preboarding

Trust

Having regular contact with families during the preboarding period builds trust with the host school. Schools that regularly communicate with families demonstrate a genuine interest in the students' experiences. Parents and guardians need to know that the school will be contactable throughout their children's boarding experience; families need to trust that the school will keep them updated with their children's challenges and achievements. In initiating contact early, families can see how schools might behave when students are in their care. By developing a pattern of communication during preboarding transitions, schools can help to build this trust.

Confidence

Families often have concerns about commencing a boarding programme. Regular contact between families and the host school before boarding begins can help alleviate some of this uncertainty. In addressing these concerns through regular, early communication, schools can build families' confidence in the programmes.

Confidence in the programme contributes to greater comfort overall and will facilitate a smoother transition to boarding because the families will be more sure of and committed to their enrolment decision.

Relationships

Beginning regular contact with families from the preboarding stage facilitates relationship building. Communication with families is an important step in ensuring families continue to feel involved in their children's lives and that the partnership between parents and guardians and host schools is equal. Schools need to emphasise the value of two-way communication early in the experience.

While schools should make significant efforts to establish contact with families, they also need to encourage and empower families to reach out. Encouraging this two-way communication from the beginning means that families will feel more comfortable contacting the school whenever they need or want to throughout their boarding journey.

Direct Contact Person

Schools should ensure that families know of a direct contact person or persons, giving them names and appropriate contact details. In doing so, families have the ability to contact the people who can best help them. Families need to communicate with staff who have the answers to their questions or who will go out of their way to find them.

Ideally, the contact person for families should be a staff member in a dedicated Indigenous student support role. Working in this role will mean that the contact person is familiar with the impact of transitions, boarding and the concerns that families often have. This familiarity puts the staff member in the best possible position to answer the families' questions.

Host schools should establish a team of people with whom families can talk about a variety concerns. Having a team of people means that the task does not fall on one coordinator; this increases the school's accessibility and accounts for circumstances where a coordinator may be unavailable. Both men and women should be included in this team so that parents have greater choice about who they feel comfortable contacting. These people might include:

- Indigenous student support staff.
- School principal.
- House parents.
- School nurses.

The direct contact person should participate in host school visits to community. In doing so, families have the chance to meet the person with whom they will be communicating and can begin to develop a relationship. This early introduction means that families know the person on the other side of the phone, helping families to feel more comfortable approaching the contact person with their questions.

How to Initiate Contact

Schools

Schools should take the lead in initiating contact with families. Schools need to commence contact with families early. Schools can approach families in different ways. For example, schools might call to ask whether families have questions or invite them to upcoming school events.

Communication with families should also extend to contact with:

- The students themselves.
- Community leaders – Elders and youth leaders.
- Local school staff.

The internet in community is typically unreliable. Consequently, phone calls are the best option for communicating with families.

Families

Families are also able to initiate preboarding contact with the school. Schools need to make sure that families feel empowered to reach out to the school, bringing their own questions and concerns. A central aspect of a positive boarding experience is keeping communication open between families and host schools; schools should be available for families before their children start boarding to establish a pattern of open communication.

Families, knowing that they can contact the school, and have someone waiting on the other end to answer their calls, sets an important precedent for when their children are away at boarding school.

Reasons to Initiate Contact

Reasons that schools or families may initiate contact vary significantly. Each family's experience is different, meaning that each family has different needs. Open communication should not end once the student is enrolled, but rather should follow through their entire boarding experience.

Some reasons for communication between schools and families include:

- Asking questions about applications and enrolment.
- Expressing their uncertainty and concerns.
- Knowing that the host school is available.
- Following up on orientation activities and visits – for example, 'it was nice to meet you…did you have any concerns?'
- Inviting families to campus for a camp or special event in which they might like to participate.

Things to Consider about Regular Contact

Guilt and other intense feelings

When communicating with families during the preboarding stage, it is vital that schools recognise the emotional stress that families experience. Many families experience guilt and anxiety about sending their children to boarding school, where they will have little opportunity to care for them. Accordingly, schools need to approach their communications with families with patience and empathy.

The boarding experience is different for everyone; some families might need significantly more reassurance than others which might mean going over the same topics several times. In appreciating the mix of emotions that families feel leading up to boarding, staff members are better prepared to help families make the transition. A patient approach to family communication is central to building a sense of trust and reliability between schools and families and helping relieve some of the anxieties.

Summary

Regular contact between families and schools is an important aspect of the preboarding transition phase. Schools can build trustful relationships with families and encourage confidence in the boarding process when they communicate frequently.

Ideally, families should feel empowered to initiate contact with the school; two-way communication will be necessary while their children are away at boarding school.

During the preboarding stage, families should be aware of staff members whom they can contact directly about their concerns. When communicating with families, schools must take a patient and empathetic approach to ensure each family has a positive experience before the term begins.

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.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.

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.