

# Reconciliation in Action

**Protocols  
for working  
effectively  
with local  
Indigenous  
families and  
communities**



## Rationale

Independent schools educate students and interact with families from diverse cultural and community backgrounds. Working effectively with cultural diversity is enhanced in an informed atmosphere of shared understanding and respect.

This protocols document provides schools with a framework for understanding and working effectively with Indigenous families and communities.

Protocols provide guidance on how to observe and respect cultural customs and to communicate in a manner that is culturally appropriate and relevant.

Observing protocols supports open and effective communication between all cultural groups resulting in an inclusive, open and supportive school environment with positive community and family links.

The protocols are presented in four sections:

- 1 General Protocols
- 2 Protocols for working effectively with local Indigenous communities
- 3 Protocols for working effectively with Indigenous families
- 4 Effective teaching of Indigenous Perspectives

There are no universal protocols or rules which apply to all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities and accepted protocols may vary within communities. No one person can speak on behalf of all communities. These protocols have been developed to provide initial and general guidance for Independent schools. Schools can then develop specific protocols for working effectively with their own local community/ies.

# General Protocols

## Respecting Indigenous Peoples as the Traditional Owners of Their Land

Australia is made up of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and language groups. In 2005, SA Independent Schools are located on the Kurna, Peramangk, Narangga, Nukunu, Ngadjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Banggarla, Buandig and Wirangu lands. (Horton's Map of Aboriginal Australia is a useful resource which shows all language groups in Australia.)

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living in communities that are not on their traditional lands. For this reason, establishing links with both Traditional and Community Elders is important. A Traditional Elder is an original descendant of the area while a Community Elder has lived in and contributed to that community while being a descendant from a different area.

Respect can be conferred to Indigenous Peoples as the traditional owners of their land by including a 'Welcome to Country' or 'Acknowledgement of Country' at the start of significant school events including assemblies, staff meetings and school celebrations.

A Welcome to Country must be conducted by an Indigenous Elder, preferably of the country on which the event is being held (Traditional Elder), or by an Indigenous Elder with permission to represent the people of the country (Community Elder).

An Acknowledgement of Country can be conducted by a non-Indigenous person. This short statement, for example, 'We recognise that today we are meeting on [insert appropriate] land', recognises the ongoing links between the Indigenous people of that country and their land. An Acknowledgement can be developed in consultation with the local Indigenous communities and families.

## Aboriginality

The official and generally accepted criteria used to confirm Aboriginality are: must be of Aboriginal descent; must identify as an Aboriginal person; and, must be accepted as an Aboriginal person by the community in which they live. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people define themselves by their culture and not the colour of their skin, which must never be used as an identifying feature.

## Naming the Deceased

Showing the image of or referring by name to a deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is offensive in many communities. To prevent offensive situations, it is advisable to avoid references to recently deceased Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. If using a text that may contain such images or references, advise the group beforehand, so that any person who wishes to do so may leave the room.

## Flying the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Flags

Flying the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander flags is a mark of great respect and can encourage effective community links. The Australian Government recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags as official flags of Australia. The Australian National Flag flies to the left of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander flags.



# Local Indigenous Communities

## Establishing Links with Local Communities

Recognition that there is cultural diversity within Indigenous communities is of crucial importance. It is important to learn about and make contact with local communities. Organisations like the South Australian Museum and local libraries can provide useful initial information about local communities, but this information is a starting point only, as actual communities will be diverse.

Relationships are the key to working effectively with local Indigenous communities. Begin the establishment of local community links through families associated with the school. Links can also be established by accessing local council/library for contact information, utilising church links, contacting local Indigenous organisations or establishing projects with local artists, performers or story tellers. Do not assume, however, that communities will have all the information that you need; individuals may be new to the area or have few community links.

## Developing an Inclusive School Policy

Development of a school policy (or reconciliation policy) in consultation with local communities and parents can demonstrate a school's commitment to Indigenous students, local families and communities. A policy is most effective when created in collaboration with, and supported by, the community in which the school is located. The policy could be jointly signed or launched.

A school policy can reflect the beliefs and principles of the school while summarising a school's commitment to supporting all students to learn in an inclusive and responsive school environment.

## Creating a Welcoming School Environment

An inclusive and welcoming school environment that reflects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and influence supports and encourages effective community links. Inclusive strategies include placing a copy of the AISSA Reconciliation Statement and/or Indigenous artwork in the Reception area and around the school; developing an Indigenous garden, mural or art project; or, Indigenous resources on display in the library.

Use of the local Indigenous language where appropriate, possibly to label key areas of the school such as library can be inclusive. Dual/Indigenous naming of facilities is an option, e.g. the oval or theatre; schools should approach the local community for advice.

For Indigenous students to feel included and welcome at school, there is no substitute for an Indigenous contact person or Indigenous Education Focus Teacher.

# Indigenous Families

## Establishing Relationships

Relationships with parents are crucial in ensuring that the needs of Indigenous students are met. Involvement of Indigenous families may vary, from families who are comfortable within the school environment to other families who may need support to be included. Supportive strategies to encourage families to become involved in the school and in the education of their children include organising a family coffee morning or BBQ. These events could be held away from the school in a local park or church hall. If necessary, make contact with parents by telephone and encourage parents to have a chat with teachers at drop-off or pick up.

## Expand the Definition of Family

'Family' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is very important and is usually more than just parents. For some Indigenous children, key relatives, such as the Western equivalent of an aunty or uncle, frequently play significant parenting roles. Once identified by the school, their responsibility should be recognised in the dissemination of information and in any consultations that may take place around a particular child's education.

## Establish a Parent/Family Committee

Where there are sufficient numbers, a parent committee is a useful way to develop relationships. The committee can advise on school policy and curriculum where appropriate. Plan for regular, informal meetings that follow an agenda and adhere to agreed start and finish times but provide sufficient time for informal talk before and after the meeting for sharing of views.

## Community 'Business' including 'Sorry Business'

Indigenous communities have a social obligation to attend community 'business', including ceremonial events and Sorry Business. Sorry Business is an important and frequent part of community life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, due to high mortality rates, and may take children away from school for extended periods of time. Strategies to accommodate Sorry Business include prioritising work for students returning from Sorry Business to ensure they are not faced with a daunting backlog of work.

## Absenteeism

If absenteeism is an issue, it needs to be addressed. If transport is an issue, schools can explore public transport solutions. Schools may make an agreement with parents that the school will ring wherever a child is away – discussing this strategy with parents first will help avoid conflict if a parent feels harassed by the calls. Explaining to parents how days away from school can accumulate into a total of weeks, months and even years of missed education can be an effective strategy.



# Effective teaching of Indigenous perspectives

## Respecting Communities as Custodians of their Knowledge and Culture

Indigenous communities should be consulted in the development of culturally inclusive teaching programs and activities that cover Indigenous content. Ideally, this consultation should extend beyond checking with local communities that content is appropriate. Where possible, it should involve collaborative development of curriculum content and planning of activities.

Utilise existing communities and family links to support this process, but be sensitive that not all people who identify as 'Aboriginal' will have extensive cultural knowledge.

## Inviting Members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities into the School

Inviting members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities into schools provides students/teachers with an important insight into Indigenous cultures. Prior to the session, ensure the speaker is well briefed about context and audience and has some key questions to address. Students also need to be prepared for the content of the session, especially if it will cover sensitive issues, for example the Stolen Generation. When the visitor arrives at the school, ask about correct name e.g. Aunty Jean or Mrs Thomas. Ensure a comfortable venue is provided and that students address their guest appropriately and, if applicable, formally.



## Involving Indigenous Students

It is important that teachers are sensitive to the fact that Indigenous students do not necessarily have cultural knowledge to share. Many students have limited cultural knowledge and are learning along with the class. However, if the student wishes to contribute, embrace the opportunity. Asking an Indigenous student a cultural question that they are unable to answer puts them in a position of 'shame' – 'shame' is humiliating for any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person cannot be expected to speak on behalf of all Indigenous peoples.

Greater understanding comes from a willingness to open channels of communication and to encourage connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and families within and beyond the school boundaries.

It is Reconciliation in Action.



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