

Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese

Closing the Gap Report 2025



Catholic Schools
Parramatta Diocese



Preface

Education plays a critical role in shaping the future of individuals, families, and communities. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culturally responsive education is essential to fostering a sense of belonging, strengthening identity, and ensuring access to meaningful opportunities beyond school. Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese (CSPD) now has 1,217 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in our schools across Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains, an increase of approximately 7.5% from last year. This growth reflects the increasing confidence of families in our schools and the impact of our commitment to culturally responsive and inclusive education.

This Closing the Gap report is a key part of our strategy and a reflection of our broader commitment to Reconciliation. Preparing our own report annually is one of the additional commitments we have made on our Reconciliation journey. It examines the initiatives and strategies implemented across our schools and organisation to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, focusing on enrolments, participation in courses, educational outcomes, and pathways to further education and employment.

Beyond education, this report explores how our efforts contribute to improving socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, aligning with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It covers multiple socio-economic areas, including early childhood development and education, health and wellbeing, employment, economic participation, justice, family and community connections, and the preservation of culture, language, and Country. However, it does not specifically address infrastructure and housing matters, even though our Jarara Team occasionally provides support in this area. While we are actively involved in social justice as a Catholic organisation, our primary focus remains on delivering initiatives and programs aligned with our mandate and role as a school-age education provider.

This report reflects our commitment to a strengths-based approach that recognises the capabilities, resilience, and knowledge of First Nations students, families, and communities while building upon their achievements and aspirations. Through culturally inclusive teaching, targeted wellbeing support, and strong home-school partnerships, we equip students with the academic, social, and emotional foundations needed for success. It also highlights our role in addressing disparities in economic participation, equity, inclusion, and overall wellbeing through education and early years development initiatives, reinforcing the vital contribution of schools to the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Ultimately, this report is both a reflection on our progress and a guide for future action. By continuing to refine our approaches and strengthen partnerships with First Nations communities, community-controlled organisations, and other key stakeholders, we aim to drive lasting, positive change. Our commitment remains firm: to ensure that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student in our schools receives the support, respect, and opportunities they deserve to realise their full potential.



Jack de Groot
Chief Executive Officer
Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese





Acknowledgement of Country

Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese acknowledges the Dharug and the Gundungurra people who are the Traditional Custodians of the Land in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains, people who have loved and cared for this Land for thousands of years.

We pay our respects to Dharug and Gundungurra Elders, both past and present, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this report, we use various terms when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Specifically, we use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' and 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people' (where "and/or" acknowledges individuals who belong to both groups) interchangeably with 'Indigenous'. However, we recognise that this approach is not without contention.

These terms do not fully reflect the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. Many individuals prefer to be identified by their specific group or clan names, while others prefer 'First Nations'. Additionally,

some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people dislike the term 'Indigenous', as it is often used as a broad government classification that may not fully capture their identities.

Wherever possible, we have explicitly used 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' or 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people'. However, for brevity, we have at times used 'Indigenous' or 'First Nations'. We acknowledge that language is deeply personal and evolving, and we sincerely apologise for any offence this may cause. Our intention is always to be respectful and inclusive.







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Introduction

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (the National Agreement) includes 19 socio-economic targets across 17 key outcome areas, each significantly impacting the wellbeing and broader life outcomes of Australia's First Peoples (Closing the Gap, n.d.). As an organisation deeply committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, students, and families, we align our analytical framework and discussions on our schools' and broader organisation's efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with the approach outlined in the *Commonwealth Closing the Gap 2024 Annual Report and 2025 Implementation Plan*.

Building on the framework used in the *2023 Annual Report and 2024 Implementation Plan*, this approach groups the socio-economic outcomes and targets into seven interrelated areas, "reflect[ing] the need to develop actions holistically to advance the aspirations of First Nations people" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024, p. 11). The importance of this approach cannot be overstated in the collective effort to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, particularly because these outcomes and targets are not only interconnected but also mutually reinforcing.

While all Australian governments share responsibility for working with their peak partners to implement actions, programs, and initiatives that contribute to achieving the Closing the Gap goals (Commonwealth of Australia, 2025), all organisations – including non-governmental education providers such as ours – also play a crucial role. In this first

edition of *Catholic Schools Parramatta Diocese (CSPD) Closing the Gap Report*, we focus on recognising, acknowledging, and celebrating the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, rather than adopting the often-counterproductive emphasis on deficits and deficiencies.

This strengths-based approach enables us to work effectively with First Nations students and families by utilising a wide range of support mechanisms available across our schools and organisation. This report provides a detailed description of the different initiatives we have implemented to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, helping them achieve the best outcomes across the socio-economic areas outlined in the National Agreement, especially those within our responsibility as a system of 80 Catholic schools in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains in New South Wales.

The report is not exhaustive and does not cover all the Closing the Gap socio-economic outcome areas. However, it provides valuable insights into our commitment and efforts in areas that are more closely aligned with our responsibility as a school-age education provider, as we strive to make a meaningful impact in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities. In particular, the report does not address 'Housing and Infrastructure – Socio-economic Outcomes 9 and 17.' This is not to imply that we are not actively involved in broader advocacy efforts and providing housing-related support to families as part of our overall advocacy focus.



Health and Wellbeing

Socio-economic Outcomes 1, 2 and 14

Our organisation's commitment to the Closing the Gap objectives is reflected in a holistic approach to student and family wellbeing. The Jarara Team, located within the Aengus Kavanagh Centre in Mount Druitt, plays a critical role in ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel engaged, culturally safe, and supported in our schools, positioning them for success in life.

Through various school-based initiatives, we are actively contributing to achieving parity in wellbeing outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by 2031. In partnership with the Jarara Team, a notable example is St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, where a dedicated Family Liaison Officer (FLO), Aunty Roz Webb – an Aboriginal Elder embedded within CSPD's Student Support Directorate – has transformed support for First Nations children and their families. The following sections outline some of these initiatives.

Initiatives and Actions

Holistic Wellbeing Support by the Family Liaison Officer (FLO)

The FLO plays an integral role within the school's Multi-Tiered System of Support, addressing key areas such as learning, behaviour, attendance, and parental engagement. As a core member of the Student Support Directorate, she participates in weekly meetings, reviewing student behaviour, attendance, and wellbeing data to provide targeted support. Aunty Roz assists in meeting the diverse needs of First Nations students while ensuring a safe, culturally responsive environment. Additionally, she facilitates access to the Student Wellbeing Hub – a Tier 2 support space where students can regulate their emotions before starting the day – helping them to be emotionally prepared for academic challenges.

Morning Wellbeing Check-Ins

Each day, students begin in a designated supportive space, allowing them to settle emotionally and mentally prepare for the day ahead. This practice fosters a calm, focused mindset, leading to improved classroom engagement. Throughout the day, Aunty Roz is available to provide support and guidance, helping students stay calm and feel culturally safe – an essential aspect of the social, mental, and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Advocacy in Behavioural and Learning Meetings

The FLO serves as a crucial advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in meetings about student behaviour and academic needs. Many students come from homes affected by complex trauma, and over one-third have personalised learning plans. Aunty Roz ensures that these families are actively involved in discussions regarding their children's education, helping them navigate the school system and ensuring tailored support is provided. This advocacy is particularly important for students identified as vulnerable across multiple domains in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

Ongoing Family Engagement and Holistic Support

As part of the Jarara Team's wellbeing services, regular transition calls and follow-up initiatives ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are informed and supported throughout their children's education. Aunty Roz follows up with families regarding uniforms, fee support, and equipment, assuring them that our schools care about them. As a teacher from one of the schools where the FLO and the Jarara Team offer support reported [name withheld for confidentiality], this strong and consistent family engagement has been vital in overcoming the significant learning and wellbeing challenges many students face, highlighting the importance of home-school connections.

Impact and Outcomes

Improved Student Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

The FLO's culturally safe, holistic support has helped reduce school-related anxiety and improve the management of behavioural challenges. As one St Joseph's Primary Kingswood student shared: *"I like Aunty Roz coming to our school because she supports me. She has been with me in the principal's office when I've misbehaved. Knowing she'd be there helped me stay calm and not get upset. Aunty Roz guides me to make good choices for myself and others at school."* This culturally responsive support creates a nurturing environment and equips students with the resilience and confidence needed for long-term success.

Enhanced Student-Teacher Relationships and School Engagement

Morning wellbeing check-ins offer a structured, predictable opportunity for students to express their emotional needs, enabling teachers to respond promptly and effectively. This regular, caring support fosters trust and strengthens relationships between students and staff, leading to increased classroom engagement. As a result, students are more likely to attend school regularly and engage in their learning, knowing that their emotional wellbeing is a priority and well supported.

Strengthened Family Connections and Community Engagement

The FLO's involvement in regular meetings with families to discuss academic and behavioural needs helps build stronger relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and the school. As the Diversity Leader of Learning at St Joseph's Primary Kingswood remarked, *"Aunty Roz... has been an invaluable support for our Indigenous students, providing them with a strong cultural connection and guidance throughout their school journey. Her presence has not only supported their wellbeing but has also enriched our entire school community."* In this way, the FLO fosters a culturally safe and trusting environment, empowering First Nations families to actively participate in their children's education, thereby strengthening home-school connections and promoting ongoing collaboration.

Holistic Support Leading to Flourishing Learners

By addressing immediate practical needs and promoting emotional wellbeing through a comprehensive, culturally safe and responsive support system, our initiatives create a stable environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can thrive academically and socially. This approach fosters mental health, emotional resilience, and positive relationships among students, families, and educators. For example, in a previously mentioned school a student facing significant learning challenges was able to complete a specialised certificate program, thanks to the holistic academic and wellbeing support provided.

In summary, our holistic wellbeing and advocacy initiatives ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families receive essential support they need at every stage of their journey. By embedding an Aboriginal Elder as a Family Liaison Officer (FLO), conducting regular wellbeing check-ins, and maintaining proactive family engagement, we create an environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners can excel. While the FLO now works across several schools, expanding this model further is crucial. This approach not only addresses immediate educational, emotional, and wellbeing needs but also contributes to the long-term preservation and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage, supporting the broader Closing the Gap objectives.



Education and Early Years Development

Socio-economic Outcomes 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7

Education is a powerful tool for driving long-term socio-economic benefits, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people. A culturally responsive and inclusive approach strengthens identity, engagement, and learning outcomes. Our schools embed Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, support students through key transitions, and create pathways to further education and employment. By fostering strong connections with families and communities, these initiatives contribute to Closing the Gap in education and improving broader socio-economic outcomes for First Nations peoples.

Building on this foundation, we recognise that achieving equitable education outcomes requires ongoing collaboration, culturally safe learning environments, and targeted support. By aligning our efforts with the Closing the Gap targets for socio-economic outcomes 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, we remain committed to addressing barriers, expanding opportunities, and ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students thrive academically and socially throughout our schools.

Initiatives and Actions

Early Learning and Curriculum Integration

The FLO at St Joseph's Primary Kingswood plays a vital role in early childhood engagement, regularly attending the Junior Joeys playgroup to connect with families and preschoolers before they begin their primary school journey. This significantly eases transitions for the children. In addition, Aunty Roz supports Kindergarten students in developing social-emotional skills through play-based learning, building a strong foundation for school success.

Teachers, in collaboration with the Jarara Team, embed Indigenous perspectives across various subjects to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is meaningfully represented in learning. For example, Year 2 students engage in hands-on cultural activities such as Aboriginal art and basket weaving during their Shared Reading unit, reinforcing the value of Indigenous knowledge in their educational journey. This aligns with the new NSW syllabuses, which place a greater emphasis on Indigenous perspectives.

Strengthening School-Community Engagement

A collaborative, culturally safe approach ensures Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel included and empowered. The FLO, based at St Joseph's Primary Kingswood and supporting multiple schools, strengthens parent engagement through regular phone check-ins and informal morning teas. Collectively, these efforts build trust, strengthen vital connections with families, and enhance school-community relationships, improving enrolment and attendance among First Nations students.

Therapeutic Case Management Model

Our Attendance Support Team uses a holistic, culturally responsive therapeutic case management model to provide individualised, wraparound support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This approach builds trust through time, persistence, and nuanced engagement, particularly in addressing intergenerational barriers. Currently, 15% of students and families accessing this service are from Aboriginal backgrounds, highlighting the model's effectiveness in meeting community needs.

Up and Go Bus Service

A key component of our attendance strategy, the Up and Go Bus Service directly addresses transport challenges – one of the most common barriers to consistent school attendance. Working closely with the Jarara Team, this initiative provides a reliable and culturally safe transport solution, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students arrive at school on time and ready to learn. By strengthening family-school partnerships, this service reinforces students' sense of belonging while improving attendance rates.

Sky Country Dreaming and Yuludarlaa Jaraan Programs

The 10 week-long Sky Country Dreaming program at St Canice's Primary Katoomba, for example, integrates STEM with literacy and numeracy to improve NAPLAN performance. Local Elders and the Jarara Team contribute to curriculum design, using the Three Sisters totem as a key cultural reference in learning. The Yuludarlaa Jaraan program, implemented in 2024 at schools such as St Francis of Assisi Primary Glendenning and St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, spans five weeks and incorporates English, Human Society and its Environment (HSIE), Science, and Visual Arts through Dreaming stories and cultural art activities.

Transition Support and Leadership Development Programs

The Jarara Team works closely with schools to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' transition to secondary education. Year 5 parents are contacted during the term to confirm the completion of high school enrolment forms, while Year 6 parents are similarly contacted to secure a place for Year 7, ensuring that families receive assistance with uniforms, school fees, and essential resources.

We continuously support senior students and connect them to leadership development opportunities through our collaborations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations such as Baabayn Aboriginal Corporation and Kimberwalli, enabling them to grow as future leaders. This initiative promotes Indigenous leadership and empowerment, including through involvement in public speaking at important events such as NAIDOC Week and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) meetings.

Another notable impactful program in which our students actively participate is the Murama Youth Ambassador Program. This is a resilience-based program that culminates with an 'on-country' leadership camp in the urban setting of Sydney. It brings together Indigenous youth to celebrate their cultural journey, to connect them with Elders and each other and empower them to lead their schools and communities towards deeper cultural understanding and appreciation. In 2025, there are students from 12 of our high schools participating in this program.

Tailored Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Students are supported in pursuing various vocational pathways through tailored VET programs at all of our secondary schools, including the award-winning CathWest Innovation College School-Based Apprenticeship and Traineeship (SBAT) program, along with intensive training in essential areas such as resume writing and workplace safety. Several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have earned Certificate II and III qualifications in different courses alongside their Higher School Certificate (HSC). This achievement further enhances their post-school opportunities, with supported work placements in leading partner organisations.

In 2023, 49 First Nations students enrolled in Stage 6 NESA HSC VET, representing approximately 2.92% of total enrolments. Of these, four enrolled in Certificate III in Business, seven in Certificate II in Hospitality, 14 in Certificate II in Construction Pathways, and four in Certificate II in Active Volunteering. In 2024, 31 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled, making up approximately 1.70% of total enrolments. Among them, eight enrolled in Certificate III in Business, six in Certificate II in Hospitality, seven in Certificate II in Construction Pathways, and one in Certificate II in Active Volunteering. While these enrolments were modest, the students were among the most successful in their courses.

Higher Education Pathways Programs

Various partnerships with universities, including Pathway to Dreaming (Western Sydney University), Jumbunna (University of Technology Sydney), and Walanga Muru (Macquarie University), provide mentorship, academic support, and leadership training inspired by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture

and values. We also collaborate with the Young Indigenous Women's STEM Academy (YIWSA), Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA), and the National Indigenous Culinary Institute (NICI) to prepare students for careers in nursing, education, and the culinary arts through industry workshops and career mentoring.

Indigenous Immersion and Professional Development

Teachers from the Faith in Action Team (FIAT) participated in an Indigenous Immersion program in Alice Springs and Arrernte Country – Uluru (9–18 July 2024). Through experiences such as bush medicine workshops, art gallery tours, and visits to significant sites such as Simpsons Gap and Uluru, they deepened their understanding of Aboriginal culture and history. Likewise, during 2024 staff professional development, teachers at St Finbar's Primary Glenbrook took part in a cultural immersion day facilitated by Muru Mittigar at Western Sydney Airport.

The Jarara Team runs cultural competency training for staff across the organisation, including "Crossing Cultures Hidden Histories," a one-day Aboriginal Cultural Competency Course. Alongside online courses and workshops, these initiatives equip educators with the skills to ensure cultural safety in schools, follow Indigenous protocols during community engagement, and gain the knowledge and confidence needed to effectively integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into their teaching, where appropriate.

The Leading Teacher from Jarara Team facilitates a teacher network that meets each term. Through this network, staff are offered the opportunity to hear from educational leaders such as Dr Tamilka Worrell, Senior Lecturer at the Centre of Critical Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, Dr John Hunter, Associate Professor at UNSW, and Aunty Brenda Matthews, Author of *The Last Daughter*.

Impact and Outcomes

Growth in Indigenous Enrolments

The enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in our schools has steadily increased over the years. At the primary school level, there were 546 self-identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2024, representing 2.34% of total enrolments. This marks a consistent rise from 1.78% (400 students) in 2020, 1.87% (420 students) in 2021, 1.9% (440 students) in 2022, and 2.12% (492 students) in 2023.

Similarly, in our secondary schools, 611 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were enrolled in 2024, making up 2.75% of the total student population. This is an increase from 2.13% (433 students) in 2020, 2.13% (443 students) in 2021, 2.26% (483 students) in 2022, and 2.49% (541 students) in 2023.

Overall, the total number of First Nations students attending our schools grew from 1,033 (2.3%) out of 44,966 students in 2023 to 1,157 (2.54%) out of 45,556 students in 2024. Notably, with 1,217 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students now enrolled (2.73% of total CSPD enrolments), this represents an approximately 7.5% increase from last year.

Steady Growth in Indigenous HSC (Year 12) Participation

In 2016, there were 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait HSC (Year 12) students from 10 enrolled students in our schools, contributing just 0.35% of total HSC participation (2,869). By 2021, the numbers had increased to 39 students from 43 enrolled, making up 1.42% of total HSC participation (2,754). This growth continued in 2022, with 45 HSC students from 47 enrolled (1.61% of total participation of 2,789), in 2023 with 62 HSC students from 61* enrolled (2.18% of total participation of 2,841), and in 2024 with 65 HSC students from 66 enrolled (2.22% of total participation of 2,925).

*The "enrolled" figure is taken from census data and the "HSC students" figure is from HSC data provided by NESAs. It is possible that:

- students enrolled after census; or
- students were not identified as Indigenous in the census but were identified in the HSC data.

While the Indigenous share of total HSC (Year 12) participation remains small compared to non-Indigenous students, the data shows a steady and significant rise in both enrolments and HSC engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students over time. This consistent growth in enrolments and HSC participation suggests a promising trend, and there is hope that this positive momentum will continue as we support our First Nations students with the various strategies in place to foster their educational participation and success.

Increasing Parity in HSC Academic Achievement

The HSC (Year 12) results since 2016 reveal significant trends in student performance across Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. Historically, non-Indigenous students have consistently achieved a higher proportion of top-band awards (Bands 5, 6, E3, E4), maintaining results above 30%, except in 2022. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have shown steady improvement, with their proportion of top-band awards rising from 7.69% in 2016 to nearly 30% by 2024. This substantial growth suggests that targeted educational support, enhanced access to resources, an improved curriculum, the commitment of our teachers, and our robust support system have all contributed to better outcomes.

Beyond high-band performance, the overall HSC results for our schools, at or above the State mean, have also shifted over time. While Indigenous students initially outperformed their peers, with over 64% achieving marks above the State mean in 2016, their results declined over time. Nevertheless, except for 2018 and 2023, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieving HSC marks at or above the State mean has consistently been higher than that of non-Indigenous students, reaching 57.80% in 2024, compared to 55.72% for non-Indigenous students. This trend suggests increasing parity in academic achievement for our students, with our support system playing a crucial role in fostering greater success.

Impressive Indigenous Course Enrolments

First Nations students have consistently been well represented in a diverse range of courses across our schools, often at similar or higher rates than non-Indigenous students. Significant participation in Agriculture, Business Services, Community & Family Studies, Dance, Drama, Entertainment Industry, Food Technology, Hospitality, Human Services, Industrial Technology, Information Technology, and PDHPE suggests a broad engagement with both vocational and creative fields. The steady enrolment in these courses reflects a strong interest in hands-on, community-focused, and culturally relevant career pathways, reinforcing the value placed on practical skills, service industries, and artistic expression.

At the same time, representation in academically intensive courses is more varied. While there is solid participation in Ancient History, English Extension 2, and History Extension, enrolments in Economics, English Advanced, English Extension 1, Mathematics, Science courses, and Studies of Religion remain relatively low. This may reflect differing educational experiences or a preference for courses linked to immediate career opportunities and community engagement. Expanding culturally responsive and targeted support, as seen in several schools, can help broaden pathways into higher education and STEM fields, ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to all post-school opportunities.

Culturally Safe and Welcoming Learning Environment

These steady increases in Indigenous enrolments, HSC participation, and interest in a variety of courses reflect the growing confidence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in our schools. They demonstrate our commitment to fostering a culturally safe, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment that supports the needs of First Nations students and equips them for the workforce.

As highlighted throughout this report, a key component of this commitment is the work of our Jarara Team, which plays an essential role in sharing and celebrating Indigenous cultures throughout our organisation. The Jarara Team provides dedicated pastoral care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, ensuring they feel supported and valued within our school communities, while helping teachers build culturally supportive classrooms and integrating First Nations perspectives into learning.



Indigenous Student Achievement and Growth in NAPLAN

From 2019 to 2022, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students showed resilience and progress in NAPLAN numeracy, though their mean scores remained below State and CSPD averages across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. While results from 2023 and 2024 are not directly comparable due to assessment changes, similar trends continue. This highlights opportunities to further strengthen Indigenous students' mathematical skills. A great example is the Sky Country Dreaming program at St Canice's Primary Katoomba, where the Jarara Team is working with classroom teachers to embed Indigenous knowledge systems into numeracy and literacy instruction to boost engagement and achievement.

In Literacy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students performed relatively well in Writing from 2019 to 2022, often meeting or exceeding the State average, except in 2022. While their scores remained below the CSPD average, this provides a solid foundation to build on. In 2023 and 2024, Years 5 and 9 continued to perform close to the State average, while Years 3 and 7 presented opportunities for targeted support. In Reading, First Nations students' scores remained below both State and CSPD averages across all years, reinforcing the need to keep fostering reading growth and engagement.

These trends highlight the strengths and potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students while also pointing to areas for further support. While this report does not assess individual student progress, it is important to acknowledge that many First Nations students are excelling in both numeracy and literacy. The data reinforces the value of culturally responsive teaching, strengths-based learning, and targeted interventions that build on Indigenous students' knowledge and skills to improve NAPLAN outcomes.

Resilient and Ready to Learn

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families continue to demonstrate resilience and commitment to education. While the COVID-19 pandemic caused fluctuations in school attendance over the past few years, Indigenous students maintained an attendance rate above 87% in both 2023 and 2024, compared to 85.1% in 2022. Non-Indigenous students recorded slightly higher rates of 91.4% and 91.7% in 2023 and 2024, respectively, but both groups have followed similar trends.

It is worth noting that an impressive 51.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attended school regularly (i.e. with attendance rates above 90%) in 2024, for example, demonstrating a strong commitment to consistent engagement with learning. Within this group, a significant number achieved perfect attendance (100%), meaning they never missed a day of school throughout the year.

Programs such as the Up and Go Bus Service and the Therapeutic Case Management Model continue to address barriers to school attendance, with 15% of students in case management services from Aboriginal communities. Despite progress, there is still room to reach the required 90% or higher regular attendance rate for First Nations students. Expanding successful initiatives will drive further improvements, ensuring they remain engaged and achieve better educational outcomes.

Enhanced Cultural Integration in Education

Our educators and school support staff have deepened their understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledge systems, leading to a more culturally responsive curriculum. Many teachers now confidently integrate Indigenous knowledge into lessons, as appropriate, ensuring meaningful cultural representation that enhances learning experiences. Programs such as Sky Country Dreaming and Yuludarlaa Jaraan embed First Nations perspectives across subjects, fostering a sense of belonging for students, which is critical to educational engagement and academic achievement.

Giving feedback on the Sky Country Dreaming initiative, the principal of St Canice's Primary Katoomba said:

Dear Julie and Ted, I have not thanked you properly for your input into our Sky Country Dreaming work. We are so lucky to have the opportunity to work with such wise and supportive leaders. Thank you so much for the resources you have provided to us. What you saw last Thurs was only possible because you worked hand in glove with us throughout. It was the best form of collaboration. You gave us the resources, the support and the freedom to shape the work for our context. I have loved this project and my dearest wish is that we are enabling change in our students' lives, so that they value and take pride in their Australian

culture in the same way as I am so proud of my Irish culture. I think it is quite amazing to see what is possible when the support is given. As you saw, thanks to bringing many experts to the table, we were able to highlight Indigenous culture through dancing, singing, art, English, Science and more. Thank you, Julie and Ted. I have had many school experiences over time and this has been the most fulfilling.

Improved Student Engagement and Wellbeing

By strengthening cultural safety and personalising support, schools have fostered an inclusive learning environment where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel welcomed. Our culturally sensitive, interdisciplinary approach, which is driven by the Jarara Team and the FLO, together with our Inclusive Learning Team, has built trust with students and families, leading to greater confidence and participation in school life. Personalised plans, learning support, and culturally embedded activities ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain increasingly engaged in their educational journey.

Culturally responsive personalised plans to support our First Nations students have had significant impact on them as the feedback from the principal of St Clare's Catholic High School Hassall Grove demonstrates:

Dear Julie,

Thanks for all your efforts on behalf of our students. This project is a broad one but at the same time very focused on the needs of our Indigenous students. It has the potential to have an impact on all of our students by growing their understanding of the environment as well as cultural practices. We are very excited. At the same time we would like to thank you and the team for the opportunities being afforded particularly to Deacon and Malakai. The work that they will be involved in with Elders will be very powerful. The extent of the improvement in their confidence was evident in their delivery of our Acknowledgement of Country at our recent Assembly. Much of this is as a result of the support and encouragement they receive from Jarara. Please pass on our thanks to the team. We appreciate their support very much. We know that there is so much to be done and sometimes we neglect to acknowledge the impact of your work.

Stronger Family-School Partnerships

Collaboration between schools, families, and Aboriginal community organisations has strengthened family engagement in education. Regular communication, informal morning teas, and dedicated liaison support have increased trust in our schools and fostered greater parental involvement. While commenting on the role of the FLO, one parent noted: *“Knowing our kids have an extra pair of eyes to watch over them and an extra pair of arms to hug them if they need, especially while we aren’t there, is comforting.”* These high levels of trust and strengthened connections have contributed to improved student wellbeing, attendance, and retention.

Further illustrating the impact our Jarara Team are making on the lives of families, a parent gave this feedback:

Dear John Spradbrow and team,

I hope this letter finds you well. I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude for the incredible support you’ve given me during a time when I needed it most. Your generosity and kindness have made a profound difference in my life, and I truly don’t have the words to fully convey how much it means to me. Your assistance came at a time when I was facing significant challenges, and it provided me with the stability I needed to regain my footing. Beyond the practical help, your unwavering belief in me and your emotional encouragement gave me strength and hope. You’ve been more than a source of support – you’ve been a reminder that compassion and generosity can truly change lives. Thanks to you, I’ve been able to focus on my wellbeing and take positive steps forward which greatly benefits my children. Please know that your kindness will never be forgotten. I hope to one day pay forward the gift you’ve given me and make a difference in someone else’s life, just as you have in mine. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for being there for me and my family.

With deepest gratitude and warm regards,

(Name withheld)

Greater Access to Essential Services and Support

Advocacy and case management have helped Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families access critical services, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and other support programs. By addressing social and financial barriers, schools have improved student wellbeing and educational experiences. Additionally, early intervention strategies have ensured that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receive targeted learning support to thrive academically. By proactively identifying and addressing emerging emotional, behavioural, or academic challenges, these strategies allow for timely assistance through personalised support plans.

Strengthened Cultural Identity and Student Confidence

Our schools’ collaborations with the Jarara Team and local Elders have provided Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with opportunities to celebrate their culture and strengthen their identity. Cultural programs, Dreamings, and hands-on activities such as basket weaving and storytelling have reinforced cultural pride and a sense of belonging. In turn, this builds confidence and resilience, laying a strong foundation for academic success.

Through the Jarara Team, Cultural Officers, Murama Youth Mentors, and Leading Teachers run significant programs in both primary and secondary schools. The Birraygal Cultural Program is a cultural immersion program where primary school students learn about their identity through activities linked to the Eight Pillars of Culture. This program focuses on culture, respect, kinship, responsibility, LORE, discernment, spirituality, and sustainability. It is currently running at Holy Family Primary Luddenham, Holy Family Primary Emerton, Trinity Catholic Primary Kemps Creek and St Joseph’s Primary Kingswood and will soon begin at St Francis of Assisi Primary Glendenning, St Margaret Mary’s Primary Merrylands, and St John Vianney Primary Doonside.

While commending the efforts and impact of the team, one of our principals sent this message regarding one of our trainee Cultural Officers:

'I wanted to provide you with some feedback regarding B [name withheld]. We have seen real development in his connections and maturity throughout this year. He makes a huge effort to connect with students and is fitting in beautifully with our community. Several staff have commented recently that he is showing initiative, getting involved and is really engaging with the students. He created an amazing artwork for our Yr 6 farewell and I had tears in my eyes as he told us the story and symbolism of the art. He attended the Year 6 farewell last night and several parents made a point of telling me that he has had a positive influence on their children'

The Strong Sista Group is a positive cultural mentoring program running at Nagle College Blacktown, Caroline Chisholm College Glenmore Park, and Catherine McAuley Westmead. The Jarara Female Cultural Officers facilitate this positive cultural program through weaving, totems, art, and kinship activities. The steering philosophy behind the program is that 'You can't be what you can't see'. Having positive female role models to guide, support, and accompany them, the younger women discuss their aspirations and goals.

Vocational Readiness and Career Pathways

Through our VET programs, several First Nations students have developed sought-after technical, soft, and employability skills and completed Certificate II and III qualifications while undertaking their HSC. In particular, by participating in the SBAT program, they gain industry experience in fields such as business, hospitality, construction, and community services, among others.

For instance, St John Paul II Catholic College Schofields Aboriginal student Tataya Curry-Jones completed a Certificate III in Business through study at school and employment as a School-Based Trainee at Kimberwalli, gaining valuable experience in Aboriginal community program development. She was also named the NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student of the Year for the Western Sydney and Blue Mountains Region at the 2024 NSW Training Awards. This award recognises the achievement of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student who displays a strong understanding and knowledge of the vocational education and training system and demonstrates the relevance of lifelong learning for themselves and their community.

Similarly, while completing her Certificate III in Business, St Agnes Catholic High School Rooty Hill Aboriginal student Jewel Osborne underwent traineeship at the National Australia Bank (NAB), gaining practical skills, industry knowledge, and firsthand experience in the financial services sector within a culturally safe and inclusive environment. Notably, she also won the prestigious Aurora Award (2024) presented exclusively at the Western Sydney and Blue Mountains Regional NSW Training Awards for outstanding vocational training, inspiring her peers to pursue academic excellence and lifelong learning.

Expanded Higher Education Pathways

Our educational partnerships with universities, including Pathway to Dreaming, Jumbunna, and Walanga Muru, provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with culturally safe and appropriate support and mentorship throughout their high school journey. Collaboration with YIWSA and IAHA, among others, has created pathways in STEM, health, and education. These initiatives equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to transition successfully into higher education and professional careers.

Building Leadership Skills

By integrating Indigenous perspectives into learning and extracurricular activities, students are encouraged to develop leadership skills and take pride in their cultural identity. Opportunities such as public speaking at NAIDOC Week, participation in AECG meetings, the Murama Youth Ambassador Program, and engagement in leadership activities within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations have empowered First Nations students to become active contributors to their communities. These experiences have also strengthened their confidence, resilience, and commitment to becoming future leaders and role models.

Long-Term Change in Teaching Practices

Professional development programs – including Indigenous Immersion experiences – have fostered long-term shifts in educational practice. Teachers who participated in the Faith in Action Team (FIAT) Indigenous Immersion Program in Alice Springs and Arrernte Country developed a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and gained confidence in embedding Indigenous perspectives into their teaching. In addition, engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other educational leaders from universities enhances our teachers' professional development. These experiences have contributed to a more culturally responsive education, ensuring First Nations students receive a learning experience that respects and reflects their cultural heritage.

In summary, by addressing attendance barriers, strengthening family engagement, and expanding education pathways, our programs contribute to the socio-economic advancement of First Nations students. Exposure to diverse higher education and career opportunities, combined with cultural mentorship and academic support, bridges the gap between school and employment pathways. Improvements in HSC participation and academic achievement further demonstrate the effectiveness of these initiatives, showing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can indeed succeed in their studies.

By embedding Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, including numeracy and literacy instruction where appropriate, providing personalised support, and creating pathways to further education and employment, our schools foster an environment where students thrive academically and culturally. These initiatives strengthen cultural pride and expand long-term opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Through strong school-community partnerships and holistic support, we are making progress towards Closing the Gap goals and ensuring First Nations students have the resources to succeed in school and beyond.



Employment and Economic Development

Socio-economic Outcome 8

Our organisation is committed to enhancing the economic participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by creating clear, sustainable pathways from education to employment. Through a strengths-based approach, we provide tailored support at each critical stage – from classroom learning to the workforce – including collaboration with families to ensure they are actively involved in their children’s future.

Below, we detail a range of initiatives, their impact, and outcomes, all of which contribute to achieving the Closing the Gap target of increasing the employment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–64 to 62% by 2031. Our efforts are built on school-community collaboration, ensuring that progress is both sustainable and scalable across our schools. This collaborative approach enables continuous refinement of strategies to meet the evolving needs of our students, their families, and the labour market.

Initiatives and Actions

Workplace Learning and Supported Placements

Our Post School Options Team connects students with workplace learning experiences and supported work placements, including those who may be at risk of disengagement or requiring additional support as they transition into employment. We ensure students can access Disability and Employment Support services and School Leaver Employment Supports (SLES) programs, facilitating early intervention and support as they develop the skills and confidence necessary for workforce entry.

Personalised Transition Planning Process

Our team works closely with students and their families to develop targeted, student-centred transition plans. This process, which involves collaborative decision-making, aligns pathways with each student’s aspirations – whether further education, leadership roles, cultural connection, or direct employment. By prioritising student voice, we provide comprehensive support at every stage of their educational journey, empowering them to recognise their strengths and confidently pursue their dreams.

School-Based Apprenticeships and Traineeships (SBAT) Opportunities

Students across our schools have the opportunity to participate in SBAT programs, which prepare them for roles in diverse contexts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations such as Kimberwalli, where Tataya Curry-Jones completed her traineeship, and NAB, where Jewel Osborne gained invaluable hands-on skills and experience, making her the first Aboriginal trainee at the Penrith Branch. These initiatives ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are equipped for employment opportunities that align with their career aspirations in culturally inclusive environments.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Senior Students Forum

The forum brings senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students together with providers from universities, TAFE institutions, and workplaces. At the inaugural forum, hosted by St Columba's Catholic College Springwood on 15 May 2024, students in Years 10, 11 and 12 celebrated their cultures and heard from a keynote speaker, Taleisha Councillor, a member of the Jarara Team.

The forum included a careers expo featuring exhibitors from various sectors, including TAFE Digital, the Australian Taxation Office, the Australian Defence Force, and all major universities across Sydney. This expo broadened students' awareness of diverse career and training opportunities, allowing them to make informed decisions about their future pathways.

Industry Engagement and Structured Vocational Training

Partnership programs such as CareerTrackers, Yarpa, and AES Careers Hub at St Agnes Catholic High School Rooty Hill directly connect students with industry professionals in leading companies and organisations for mentoring and employment opportunities. Additionally, the First Nations Programs at Western Sydney International Airport offer structured training and industry-recognised certifications for students in fields such as tunnelling and retail, ensuring a smooth transition into the workforce.

The Jarara Team has also developed strong partnerships with organisations and industry leaders to provide opportunities for our students in Years 10, 11 and 12. These partnerships include Aboriginal Employment Strategy, Multiplex/Connectivity Centre Penrith, Sydney Water, Sydney Olympic Park, and The Indigenous Culinary Institute – all giving students better job and economic prospects.

Partnerships and Volunteer Engagement

While recruiting an adequate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to work across our schools remains challenging, schools such as St Finbar's Primary Glenbrook are exploring partnerships with local Department of Education schools to access additional resources and cultural mentorship. Feedback from 'Yarnup,' a gathering at St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, also highlighted the need for more male Aboriginal educators to further enhance cultural representation and mentorship in schools. As a result, the opportunity to engage volunteers in certain roles is an area our schools are actively exploring to meet the support needs of our growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families in a culturally safe, respectful, and appropriate manner.

Impact and Outcomes

Vocational Training and Individual Success

Participation in the SBAT programs has helped First Nations students better understand the value of vocational education and lifelong learning. For example, Tataya Curry-Jones gained deeper cultural understanding and a passion for sharing Indigenous knowledge, aspiring to pursue a career in Aboriginal community program development following her traineeship with Kimberwalli. Likewise, benefiting from her traineeship at NAB, Jewel Osborne stated that she developed skills in communication, time management, working under pressure, and professionalism – all of which are essential for career success.

The impact and benefits of our tailored and inclusive SBAT programs to our students and their families are further illustrated by this message from a grandmother regarding her granddaughter's apprenticeship: *"Only just got home from signing A's new apprenticeship [name withheld]. You can't imagine how grateful we are. The company is fully aware of her disability and additional needs. I'm so appreciative for all that you do to support our family."*

Improved Career Pathways

Our focus on workplace learning, supported placements, and SLES programs equips students with practical skills and industry connections. These efforts address the immediate economic needs of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students while creating a robust framework for successful transitions into work and long-term career success. Connecting students with industry mentors and real-world experiences forms a strong foundation for future opportunities.

For example, the programs at St Agnes Catholic High School Rooty Hill have helped students secure consulting jobs with companies such as GHD, working on sustainable and culturally sensitive infrastructure projects. Just as notably, a 2024 graduate has also been employed at Paramount, demonstrating the effectiveness of these initiatives in bridging education and industry.

Enhanced Employment and Economic Opportunities

Our targeted interventions ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with additional needs receive tailored disability and employment support services, effectively preparing them for post-school life. By providing personalised support, we help these students overcome challenges, build resilience, and develop critical skills necessary for workforce integration.

This focused approach not only enhances students' ability to navigate the workforce with confidence but also opens up greater economic opportunities, empowering them to access meaningful employment and achieve long-term financial independence. Through these efforts, we contribute to improving employment outcomes and fostering economic empowerment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families.

Strengthened Industry Connections and Informed Career Decision-Making

Direct engagement with industry professionals at the careers expo during the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Senior Students Forum in 2024 exposed students to a variety of career options, bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world job market demands. By engaging with over 20 education and employment providers across diverse sectors, students gained valuable information to make well-informed decisions about further education and career choices, setting them on the path to successful careers. Importantly, our partnerships with various organisations and industry leaders significantly expand post-school employment opportunities for First Nations students.



Long-Term Cultural Preservation and Economic Advancement

Our initiatives not only support economic participation but also contribute to the preservation and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. By integrating cultural perspectives throughout their education, students are empowered to preserve their heritage while developing the skills required for economic advancement, thus becoming advocates for cultural continuity and economic empowerment.

In summary, our comprehensive approach to employment and economic development provides a strong framework that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through their transition from education to employment. By combining vocational training, workplace learning, and strategic industry engagement, we prepare them to secure meaningful employment, enhance work readiness, and drive economic advancement.

This commitment is essential to Closing the Gap, ensuring students are well-prepared for the workforce while their cultural heritage is celebrated. Our integrated support systems also foster continuous professional development, enabling students to navigate evolving job markets and contribute to sustainable economic growth within their communities.



Justice for All

Socio-economic Outcomes 10 and 11

Our school support system ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receive the robust guidance and care necessary to remain engaged, navigate behavioural challenges, and avoid becoming involved in criminal activity. Through early intervention, restorative approaches, and strong family advocacy, we collaborate with families and communities to foster an environment where every student feels safe, supported, and empowered to make positive choices. In doing so, we contribute towards reducing the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (aged 10–17 years) in detention by at least 30% and, indirectly, the rate of adults in incarceration by 2031.

Initiatives and Actions

Support for Students at Risk of Disengagement

At the heart of our approach is targeted support for students at risk of disengagement. At St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, for example, the Family Liaison Officer (FLO) plays a pivotal role in offering emotional support to students facing behavioural or discipline issues. This support is enhanced by tailored programs that provide individualised assistance for students and their families.

The Jarara Team attends meetings with the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) to ensure that each student's unique needs are addressed. This proactive approach aims to prevent minor issues from escalating, keeping students engaged with the school community and reducing the risk of them becoming involved in crime.

Restorative Justice Approach

The FLO adopts a restorative justice approach in collaboration with school leadership and families, helping students understand the consequences of their actions while supporting emotional regulation. This approach focuses on accountability and personal growth rather than punitive measures. By emphasising restoration, the initiative mitigates immediate behavioural issues and fosters long-term behavioural improvement, thus reducing the likelihood of their involvement in crime.

Advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families

Recognising that family involvement is crucial for success, the FLO actively supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents during behavioural and learning meetings. By ensuring families are heard and included in decision-making, this advocacy strengthens home-school connections, creating a supportive network that reinforces positive outcomes. This collaborative approach reduces disengagement risk and prevents future involvement with the criminal activity.

Active Participation in the Murama Programs

The Murama Junior Ranger and Murama Youth Ambassador programs aim to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth through cultural and environmental stewardship while strengthening their resilience. These school-based leadership, cultural, and environmental initiatives address the impacts of intergenerational trauma through cultural intervention, allowing participants to lead their own healing processes, thus contributing directly to Closing the Gap outcomes for Indigenous youth, their families, and communities.

Impact and Outcomes

Reduced Behavioural Incidents and School Suspensions

Early intervention and consistent support have led to a notable decrease in behavioural incidents and school suspensions, preventing minor issues from escalating into involvement with crime. As one teacher noted, the FLO has played a key role in building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students facing behavioural challenges, helping them navigate these issues in a supportive and culturally safe manner. This reflects the effectiveness of combining emotional support with restorative practices.

Enhanced Safety and Support

By providing targeted, proactive support, our programs foster a safer and more nurturing school environment. Students are better equipped to manage behavioural challenges, reducing the risk of disengagement and helping them stay on a positive educational path. Initiatives such as the Murama Programs build resilience and address mental health challenges, particularly those resulting from the effects of intergenerational trauma, further supporting overall student wellbeing. With our dedicated FLO, an Aboriginal Elder, available to guide them, students feel protected and are better positioned to avoid risky behaviour that could lead to criminal activities.

Sustaining Positive Behavioural Change

Regular, targeted support and active family advocacy foster strong, enduring relationships between families and schools. These relationships ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families remain actively involved in their children's education, which is vital for sustaining positive behavioural change and preventing potential involvement in crime. Such partnerships, championed especially by the FLO and the Jarara Team, create a collaborative community where parents and educators work together to support each student's success, enabling them to remain focused and keeping them away from getting involved in behaviours that could put them on the wrong side of the law.

In sum, by integrating emotional support, restorative justice practices, family advocacy, and support through the Murama Programs, our school support system plays a crucial role in reducing behavioural issues and creating a safe, supportive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This strategy not only prevents behaviours that could lead to involvement in crime but also reinforces home-school connections, boosts student engagement, and fosters overall wellbeing. These efforts are a major component of our broader commitment to Justice for All under the Closing the Gap framework.



Families and Kin

Socio-economic Outcomes 12 and 13

Our schools recognise that strong family connections are at the heart of positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Through culturally respectful initiatives and staff competence training, we actively promote the sharing of cultural knowledge and reinforce home-school partnerships to support the wellbeing of students and families, including those at risk of domestic violence. This approach is vital to eradicating family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, and to reducing the overrepresentation of children (aged 0–17 years) in out-of-home care (OOHC) by 45% by 2031.

Initiatives and Actions

Targeted Support by the Student Support Team

Our Student Support Team works closely with the Jarara Team to deliver professional learning on cross-cultural competence and conduct cultural consults for staff. This enhances our ability to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families respectfully and effectively. Additionally, the team provides individualised support and referrals to services for students facing challenges at school and home, including those who may be affected by domestic and family violence. This proactive, tailored support helps safeguard vulnerable students and reduce the risk of OOHC placements.

Proactive Engagement and Future Collaboration

With improved cultural competence, our Student Support Team takes proactive steps to support at-risk children. The team is actively exploring further collaboration with the Jarara Team to develop culturally safe, sensitive, and timely interventions. These initiatives are

essential for offering additional support to families and students affected by domestic violence, empowering students to draw on their strengths and resilience, and preventing OOHC placements.

Impact and Outcomes

Strengthened Home-School Connections

The ongoing, targeted support from our Student Support Team, supported by the expertise of the Jarara Team, has led to stronger, enduring home-school relationships. These connections ensure that families remain actively involved in their children's education, addressing concerns early and preventing escalation into more serious challenges such as OOHC placements.

Improved Support for Vulnerable Students

Through tailored interventions, including cross-cultural training, cultural consults, and proactive referrals, our teams are equipped to effectively support students from challenging backgrounds, including those affected by domestic and family violence. This support helps ensure vulnerable students remain within safe, culturally affirming home and educational environments, which are necessary to their ability to thrive and reach their full potential.

In summary, by offering targeted individual and family support, along with ongoing professional development in cross-cultural engagement, we foster strong, trusting relationships between families and schools. These efforts not only strengthen home-school connections but also provide crucial support for vulnerable students, ensuring their safety and helping them remain within their families and communities. This holistic approach is central to our broader commitment to Closing the Gap and plays a key role in securing better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.



Connection to Country, Culture and Languages

Socio-economic Outcomes 15 and 16

Aligned with the Closing the Gap targets – which envision that by 2030 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will maintain their distinctive cultural, spiritual, physical, and economic relationship with their land and waters, and by 2031 their cultures and languages will be strong, supported, and flourishing – our organisation is steadfast in its commitment to honour and celebrate the heritage, spirituality, cultures, and deep connection to Country of Australia's First peoples.

We ensure that these values are woven into the fabric of our school communities through a comprehensive range of initiatives and activities. These programs provide immersive cultural experiences, support language revitalisation, promote authentic cultural engagement, and integrate Indigenous spirituality into everyday learning and liturgical celebrations, thereby fostering pride, resilience, leadership, and spiritual connections among First Nations students.

Initiatives and Actions

Indigenous Immersion and Experiential Learning

Organised by the Mission Team, the Faith in Action Team (FIAT) Leaders' Indigenous Immersion to Alice Springs and Arrernte Country – Uluru was held from 9–18 July 2024. It offered direct, hands-on experiences that enabled participants to connect with the vital relationship between Indigenous cultures and Country. Visits to sacred sites, such as Uluru and Simpsons Gap, provided firsthand exposure to the spiritual and cultural significance of these lands for First Nations peoples. Complementary activities, including bush medicine and bush tucker presentations, art gallery tours, and traditional ceremonies, underscored the intrinsic links between culture, language, and the land, ensuring that the sustaining power of Country was fully appreciated.

Cultural Immersion Days and Curriculum-Enriched Programs

Annual Cultural Immersion Days (Mini Murama) in schools, such as St Agnes Catholic High School Rooty Hill, begin with a smoking ceremony and include a variety of cultural activities. An eight-year partnership between the Jarara Team and Xavier College Llandilo featured a workshop with 240 Year 7 students on 11 February 2025. Annual immersion events at St John Paul II Catholic College Schofields and Nirimba have successfully embedded Indigenous culture into the school community. In addition, programs such as Sky Country Dreaming and Yuludarlaa Jaraan integrate dreaming stories, art activities, and Indigenous perspectives into academic subjects – including Religious Education – thereby reinforcing the connection between culture, history, and Country.

Cultural and Spiritual Integration in School Life

We recognise and respect the profound heritage, spirituality, and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many of our schools have established dedicated yarning spaces, cultural groups, and inclusive Aboriginal cultural programs. An understanding of Aboriginal spirituality is

actively incorporated into school prayers, liturgies, and classroom practices. At St Matthew's Primary Windsor, St Finbar's Primary Glenbrook, and St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, cultural competency projects such as dedicated yarning circles – where a Jarara Team member, students, and family members share stories and cultural guidance – offer safe spaces for open dialogue, enhance cultural knowledge, and reinforce strong family-school connections.

Cultural Education Through Celebrations and Events

Our schools celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture through various initiatives. At St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, for example, whole-school celebrations during NAIDOC Week, Harmony Day, and Reconciliation Week feature Indigenous-led projects, including an Indigenous Garden and a collaboratively created mural. Schools also host unique community events, such as the Koori Cookup, bringing families, students, and educators together in shared cultural experiences.

At St Matthew's Primary Windsor, innovative initiatives include the rebranding of school houses, with one house named 'Yarramundi' to showcase cultural storytelling through artwork. Additionally, an annual cultural day, hosted by the Nyumbar Aboriginal Cultural Group, deepens students' appreciation of Indigenous heritage while fostering a strong sense of community and belonging.

Embedding Culture in Daily School Life

Embedding Indigenous culture into daily school life ensures continuous engagement beyond special events. At St Joseph's Primary Kingswood, for instance, weekly cultural sessions led by the Family Liaison Officer involve damper making, weaving, art, and song. At St Matthew's Primary Windsor, cultural recognition is reinforced through a morning Acknowledgement of Country broadcast, an Aboriginal tribes and languages map display, and the weekly singing of the national anthem in both Dharug and English. Traditional Indigenous games introduced during NAIDOC Week further connect students with cultural traditions and heritage.

Murama Indigenous Youth Leadership Program

Our Jarara Team continues to proudly co-design and deliver the Murama Youth Leadership Program with the Murama Cultural Council – an

Indigenous youth leadership program delivered at Sydney Olympic Park since 2016. With First Nations students from our schools actively taking part in the events, the Murama model involves a residential summit for emerging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and offers unique opportunities for young people to exercise cultural leadership at events throughout the Park's vibrant calendar.

Backed by mentors, elders, community leaders, and family, Murama enables young people to experience deep cultural connections with a strong focus on healing and resilience. The program includes workshops, cultural exchanges, and leadership training that empower Indigenous youth to become agents of change in their communities.

Integration of Cultural Opportunities in Transition Planning

For the Post School Options Team, ongoing collaboration with the Jarara Team ensures that cultural learning opportunities are an integral part of transition planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. By involving students in discussions about their cultural identity during these critical transitions, we empower them to make decisions that align with their personal, educational, and cultural goals, thereby reinforcing their connection to heritage as they navigate new experiences.

Student Ambassadors and Cultural Leadership

We actively nurture cultural leadership by encouraging students to serve as ambassadors. For example, Aboriginal student Tataya Curry-Jones serves as a youth ambassador for CSPD, working with the Jarara Team to promote Aboriginal culture in schools, while Jewel Osborne organised and hosted the first NAIDOC event during her SBAT experience at the National Australia Bank (NAB). Roles like these enable students to integrate cultural awareness into their daily lives and work and advocate for the authentic representation of First Nations perspectives in both educational and professional settings.

Cultural Heritage and Engagement with Aboriginal Elders and Organisations

At the Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students Forum in 2024, the event began with a smoking ceremony to honour cultural traditions, followed by engaging activities such

as dancing, weaving, and painting. These sessions provided students with opportunities to interact directly with Aboriginal Elders, facilitating intergenerational cultural exchange that deepened their understanding of cultural practices and histories.

Facilitated by the Jarara Team, collaborations with community organisations ensure that our cultural offerings are guided by authentic community expertise while fostering meaningful and respectful relationships. These partnerships include Baabayn Aboriginal Corporation, Kildare Medical Centre, Muru Mittigar (Aboriginal Cultural and Education Centre), Bangarra Dance Theatre, The Healing Foundation, and Dalmarri Indigenous Organisation.

Partnership with Kinchela Boys' Home Aboriginal Corporation

CSPD has partnered with Kinchela Boys' Home Aboriginal Corporation since 2021. The Uncles, who are survivors of Kinchela Boy's Home, share their stories as survivors of the Stolen Generations. This knowledge is essential to understand intergenerational trauma and the barriers to Reconciliation. Through this partnership, we aim to preserve and amplify the voices of survivors, fostering a deeper understanding of the long-lasting impact of these experiences on their communities and future generations.

Cultural and Language Revitalisation

As part of our cultural and language revitalisation efforts, St Finbar's Primary Glenbrook's Aboriginal Cultural Immersion Program rotates each term, incorporating Dharug language revival through Bayala resources, the Dharug Delang language course, and participation in 'On Country' Language Days. The school's Bush Tucker Garden, developed in partnership with Muru Mittigar Nursery, educates students on native plants and their cultural significance while supplying warrigal greens to Kalico Catering, a Dharug-owned business, promoting sustainability and reciprocity.

Ongoing cultural engagement includes celebrations such as the Coming of the Light festival, Sorry Day, and Reconciliation Week, along with weaving workshops and a 7-week Creative Arts program featuring Dharug language, story dance, and song. Community yarning sessions and the active involvement of First Nations parents ensure cultural protocols

are respected. Their input also helps refine and strengthen these initiatives over time.

Impact and Outcomes

Enhanced Appreciation of Connection to Country

Immersive experiences, such as visits to sacred sites and participation in traditional ceremonies, enable participants to gain a deep understanding of the spiritual and cultural bonds that tie Indigenous peoples to their traditional lands. Through interactive sessions with Elders on Country, they learn that "We don't own the land, the land owns us." (Knight, 1996, as cited in Reconciliation NSW, n.d.) This enriched appreciation informs everyday teaching, learning, and interactions, ensuring that the significance of Country is continuously celebrated and preserved within the school community.

Strengthened Cultural Awareness and Preservation

The extensive range of cultural activities throughout our schools – from weekly traditions and whole-school celebrations to dedicated language revitalisation programs – reinforces the importance of Indigenous languages, stories, and cultural practices. This robust cultural engagement supports the long-term preservation and revitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, ensuring that these traditions remain vibrant for future generations.

Fostering Student Leadership and Authentic Representation

Initiatives that empower students to lead with a greater appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples include a student-led Acknowledgement of Country, the rebranding of school houses with Indigenous design, and naming a house 'Yarramundi' at St Matthew's Primary Windsor. Ambassador roles, along with participation in Murama, bolster cultural pride and ensure authentic representation of First Nations voices. These leadership opportunities, in particular, encourage students to become cultural advocates and actively shape their communities.

Building Community Connections and Inclusivity

By engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through regular consultations, community yarning sessions, and co-led cultural events, our programs build strong, authentic relationships that embed Indigenous knowledge into daily school life. This consistent engagement fosters an inclusive environment where cultural heritage is valued and shared across the entire school community.

Cultural Preservation and Curriculum Integration

Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives throughout both extracurricular and curricular programs ensures the long-term preservation of Indigenous languages, stories, and cultural practices. This integration enriches the educational experience, promotes intergenerational knowledge-sharing, and supports cultural continuity.

Enhanced Intergenerational Connections and Cultural Engagement

Direct interactions with Aboriginal Elders during events such as the Senior Students Forum and continued engagement with various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations facilitate the transfer of cultural knowledge between generations, reinforcing family and community bonds. These intergenerational exchanges deepen cultural understanding and foster a strong sense of belonging and pride among participants.

In 2022, Aboriginal students from seven of our schools undertook a truth-telling project to capture Elder Voice for NAIDOC week of that year. Led by the Jarara Team, students focused on the NAIDOC theme 'For Our Elders.' The students were integral to interviewing, filming, editing, and post-production of this transformational documentary.

Progress in Reconciliation and Healing

The partnership with Kinchela Boys' Home Aboriginal Corporation has provided a platform for the voices of survivors to be heard, contributing to a greater understanding of the ongoing effects of the Stolen Generations. Through sharing their stories, the initiative has helped raise awareness of the trauma that continues to affect communities today. Sustaining the dialogue and fostering ongoing

support for healing are essential to overcoming the barriers that still exist, and ensuring that Reconciliation moves beyond awareness to real, lasting transformation in both communities and policy.

Transformative Experiences for Educators

The Indigenous Immersion program has provided educators with transformative, direct experiences of Aboriginal culture and spirituality. As one participant noted, *"This journey has been a transformative and deeply enriching experience for me. The opportunity to connect with Indigenous people, learn about their culture, and witness their resilience and courage firsthand has left a mark on my heart and mind."* Such experiences empower our teachers to integrate Indigenous cultural values into their teaching, creating a respectful, inclusive, and culturally competent learning environment.

Strengthening Indigenous Youth Leadership (Murama)

Participation in the Murama Indigenous Youth Leadership Program offers emerging leaders transformative experiences focused on healing, resilience, and leadership training. Through workshops, cultural exchanges, and residential summits, young First Nations leaders are empowered to drive positive change within their communities, strengthening both cultural advocacy and economic participation.

In summary, our approach to Connection to Country, Culture, and Languages ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage is dynamically integrated into every aspect of school life. By offering rich immersive experiences, culturally integrated curricula, language revitalisation initiatives, diverse cultural events, and community-led programs, we strengthen cultural identity, foster authentic representation, and build enduring connections among students, families, and educators.

This holistic strategy enriches the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people throughout our schools. It plays a crucial role in preserving and celebrating their culture and heritage while contributing to the broader Closing the Gap goals in other key areas that are essential to accelerating improvements in life outcomes for First Nations peoples.





Final Reflections and Future Outlook

Our initiatives reflect a strengths-based approach that empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, recognising and building upon their cultural identity, knowledge, resilience, and aspirations. By embedding culturally responsive practices across our education and early years development offerings, we create an environment where students feel safe, valued, and supported to thrive. Strong home-school partnerships and proactive engagement ensure that families play an active role in their children's education, strengthening their connection to Country, culture, and community. Our targeted enrolment and attendance support helps students transition smoothly through key educational stages, minimising disruptions and reinforcing a stable learning journey.

The impact of these initiatives is evident in increased enrolment, improved attendance, enhanced student wellbeing, and strengthened pathways into further education and employment. The Family Liaison Officer (FLO) model, alongside structured wellbeing support, proactive transition planning, and vocational training opportunities, ensures that students are equipped to reach their full potential. With the specialised role of our Jarara Team helping us to deepen our understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, and histories, we focus on students' strengths and aspirations rather than deficits. This holistic approach supports First Nations students' academic, social, mental, and emotional wellbeing, fostering confidence, self-determination, and long-term success.

These initiatives and actions directly contribute to the Closing the Gap objectives by addressing disparities in educational attainment, economic participation, and social wellbeing. The combination of culturally responsive teaching, wraparound student support, and strong community engagement ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receive the guidance they need not only to succeed academically but also to develop the resilience and skills required for further education, employment, and broader life opportunities. These efforts also support their growth within families and communities while ensuring they are kept safe from the criminal justice system.

Looking ahead, scaling the FLO model, expanding transition support, and strengthening vocational pathways will be key priorities. Deepening partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations, universities, and employers while increasing access to targeted wellbeing services will further enhance student outcomes. By refining our programs and fostering strong community collaborations, we can ensure sustained progress towards parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

With regard to 'Housing and Infrastructure – Socio-economic Outcomes 9 and 17,' a key outcome area for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families, and communities, digital inclusion is an issue we recognise still requires more attention within our organisation. However, knowing that access to digital technology is integral to broader infrastructure development, the Jarara Team and schools continue to support some families with this need, ensuring that socio-economically disadvantaged and First Nations students have access to the necessary resources. Our commitment to Closing the Gap remains unwavering as we provide meaningful support that empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to succeed on their own terms and achieve the best outcomes across all socio-economic areas of the National Agreement.

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