

## **Submission to the Royal Commission into the Child Protection and Youth Detention Systems of the Northern Territory.**

### **(h) concerning identification of early intervention options and pathways for children at risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour.**

#### **Case Study: Kormilda College**

Kormilda College is an Independent Transition to Year 12 school, situated in Berrimah, mid way between the Darwin CBD and the satellite city of Palmerston. It's educational history goes back fifty years and the one common element has always been the education of Aboriginal students from remote communities of Northern Australia.

Results indicate that Kormilda College provides an outstanding educational product, meeting the needs of students from across the academic and socio-economic spectrum. However, financial stability in terms of ongoing recurrent funding for the remote boarding aspect of the budget continues to elude management.

This submission will demonstrate a model for young Aboriginal people that works. It is a model based on:

- students leaving their communities to go to boarding school for their secondary education in their early teens, or prior;
- the school taking its *in loco parentis* role very seriously. This is particularly important for children who come from dysfunctional families;
- the school taking a holistic approach to their care from the day of their arrival;
- the school providing individualised Intensive English (IE) programs for the majority of the students for most of the years that they are at school;
- immersion in a process of acculturation over 5-6 years in an environment where their traditional culture is respected but in addition they are gradually exposed to the aspirations of other teenagers, thus working through with mentors just what their own aspirations are and can be.

#### **College Site Overview**

History is fascinating – site was a military hospital during the war; 1946-1966 was a Qantas stop over for passengers and crew whilst plane refuelled – they built the 25m concrete pool still currently in use; in 1967 the site commenced as a Government-owned Aboriginal hostel for secondary aged students from remote communities; in 1988 it began as an Independent school (handed to two Churches by NTG) with Aboriginal students only, gradually had urban families enroll from Darwin and surrounding stations so mixture of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal boarders for many years.

The College occupies 20ha, bordered by Berrimah and College Rds. Map attached.

The site has 15 houses/units for staff accommodation, usually reserved for essential emergency/boarding staff and the janitor. This ensures staff are available for students 24/7 if need be.

Boarding capacity 230 (three boarding houses). Largest in Australia. There are three large boarding houses at one end of the campus across an oval: Dewarra (the newest, 84 beds), Galangwa (85 beds), Gumimba (50-60 beds).

(Other boarding schools in the NT include Marrara (100 Aboriginal boarders), St John's College (150 boarders but half are West Papuans), Yirrara College in Alice Springs (150+, all Aboriginal enrolments), Tiwi College 40-50 Aboriginal boarders who go home on weekends, plus several other small boarding hostels in Jabiru, Katherine, Daly region and now Nhulunbuy.)

Students come to Kormilda College from 40 communities across all of NT; we now have children of previous students attending;

The Student Services building, centre of campus, contains a full health clinic, staffed by one nurse. In the past there have been a psychologist and counsellor as well, the preferred model but unaffordable at present. A health clinic is critical in order to manage the health and trauma backgrounds of the Indigenous students, especially on their arrival back to school each term.

- Cases of rheumatic heart disease (which requires an injection every 28 days (exactly) for ten years), diabetes, major dental problems, broken bones, foetal alcohol syndrome characteristics, anger management issues, etc. are very common.

As a result of this, the College has always had to provide for their needs on arrival, and subsequent ongoing medical assistance including vaccinations, so we have an established medical clinic, a fulltime nurse (we used to have two but financially this was too difficult) and a local General Practitioner who visits one day a week for our Aboriginal students (Medicare covered service); the overall cost to keep this essential service is over \$200K, none of which is funded by either government. I have personally gone to Canberra to speak with politicians in order to try and get some funding but was told that the health funds for these students is given to communities to run their health clinics on community and so I should use public services such as Danilla Dilba in Darwin for the health needs of these students. When I was referred to Danila Dilba, I was told that they could offer 1.5 hours per week as they were also financially stretched in terms of meeting the health needs of Aboriginal clients in the Darwin area.

A recent visit by Minister Scullion to the College highlighted that Educational funds were being used for health care for 180 remote Aboriginal students and he agreed that something had to be done. The Health Department made contact but the solution still revolves around students going off site for treatment. This causes long breaks in a child's education, sometimes on a daily basis, when they can ill afford this, plus the school has to send someone to accompany them as we are *in loco parentis*'. This puts too much pressure on staffing when finances are tight.

The College has excellent facilities, the original campus being added to over the years as student numbers climbed to over 1000 in the mid 2000's. With the QANTAS-built pool offering swimming

lessons to students in our new Primary School, as well as offering recreation for our boarders on the weekends, a Dance and Drama Studio, a Music Technology/Recording studio, a new Food Technology centre, a state of the art Early Learning Centre, two large VET sheds incorporating Automotive and Metal Fabrication and Woodwork classes, an Auditorium and the yet to be fully completed Dumabudla Cultural Centre.

### **Educational Snapshot**

- There are currently 640 students, one third of these are Aboriginal;
- 180-200 Aboriginal students board at the College from 40 different communities.
- Kormilda College is one of the few boarding schools in Australia with >100 Aboriginal boarding students from remote communities across the Top End.
- Always had high expectations for education of all students, but in particular remote Aboriginal students – introduced the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma at senior level schooling in 1993 and then gained accreditation for the Middle Years Programme (MYP) in 2010 with the College currently being a candidature school for the Primary Years Programme (PYP).
  - Remains the only IB Diploma school in the NT. Already have international trainee teachers and students from Indonesia, funded by the Indonesian Government, supported by the Indonesian Consulate staff in Darwin. Potential to increase revenue by developing international contacts further. Current Indigenous education programs include participation in international projects such as community service trips to Malaysia and Indonesia through Indigenous Youth Leadership Program (Smith family) funding.
- Three constant issues relevant to educational outcomes for Aboriginal students:
  - Students arrive at Year 7/8 year level with very **low literacy, often at Year 3 or below**; with 5-6 years at Kormilda College, these students graduate at Year 12 in the NT Certificate in Education and Training (data to follow).
  - Students all have a **disadvantaged background**, usually with minimal time in school, in many cases with minimal parental influence; health concerns are a major component of care and support in the early days of attending Kormilda College;
  - **Inadequate level of funding** for the required level of support that these low socio-economic background students require for their educational experience to have a meaningful outcome and future for them as an individual in the Australian education system.

**We DO have strategies in place** to cover:

- **Low literacy:** Accelerated Literacy program (and others such as Toe by Toe, VET certificates in Access to Employment/Vocational Pathways) is most appropriate for literacy development with secondary aged students; regular assessment of their reading levels; paired reading program after hours in boarding; homework or tutorial support at night after dinner; use of data by classroom teacher to ensure students are progressing; as a result we graduate between 17-22 Aboriginal students each year at Year 12 in the Northern Territory Certificate in Education and Training (SACE), some with an ATAR.

- **Disadvantaged background:** students enroll in the college from remote communities, arriving with a huge range of mental health, medical and dental issues. If a student is well, they can learn. If not, then it is a battle for them to concentrate and learn. We have to provide for their immediate health needs on arrival at school, often each semester as they return. Otherwise they do not attend class, they cannot concentrate, and they consequently feel angry and upset. We have to attend to their immediate needs prior to even considering the opportunities for learning to occur.

**We do NOT have strategies in place to compensate for inadequate levels of funding for these high needs students.** Upon arrival, Aboriginal students from remote communities require personal and individual attention concerning their mental and physical health, their hearing ability, their dental care needs and their level of vaccinations. Many arrive with only the clothes in which they are standing. By the commencement of the following term, when they arrive they have a school backpack, clearly identified as theirs, school uniforms, phone text messaging links with staff who will check on them during the break and let them know when to catch the plane or bus back to the college. Often children lose weight during the long holiday breaks like Christmas and July as they are not fed three meals a day, morning and afternoon tea and supper like at college. Staff receive phone calls from anxious students asking when they can come back.

Attendance is very good for our Aboriginal students. Over the past three years the statistics demonstrates that attendance of Aboriginal students is regularly in the mid to high 80% with some terms producing over 90% **attendance rate**. Examples of their journals describe how in the early years they return each term because their older sibling tells them to come back to school or they want to be with their friends from other communities. But by the middle of Year 10 their writing indicates that they can see the purpose of their education, the reason why their parents chose for them to leave community and go to boarding school.

**But Kormilda College is on the brink of closing.** Media reports have detailed the journey across several years whereby the Board, consisting of two Church member representatives, have tried a variety of strategies to increase revenue because the funds provided by the Commonwealth Government is totally inadequate, and has been since 2008. Two reports in recent years, the 2013 Project Vale report by Deloitte, commissioned by the Federal Government and a more recent NT Govt. Review of Aboriginal boarding (yet to be released) adequately demonstrated that all schools with boarding students from remote communities (>50) were losing money as the funds provided were totally inadequate. Fortunately for most of them they are System Schools (like Catholic or Lutheran) and so the *system* provides cover for the funding shortfall. This is not the case with Kormilda College. It is a stand alone Independent college.

By comparison, funding from the Federal Govt. for remote boarding per capita is \$17-20,000 below what it costs the NT Govt. to operate a hostel for remote boarders. Evidence can be found on the NT Budget that the *per capita* cost of operating a 40 bed remote Aboriginal hostel at Katherine or a 60 bed hostel in the grounds of Nhulunbuy High School is between \$30,000 and \$36,000. Kormilda College, on the other hand, similarly to other schools with >50 Aboriginal boarders, is funded somewhere between \$15-17,000 per head. Underfunding grows over the years and Kormilda College Board can no longer meet its obligations to its creditors. The College cannot keep going with such a discrepancy between the Abstudy/Federal Govt level of funding and the required level of funding

needed to ensure that remotely based Aboriginal students are educated to a level that enables them to fulfill their educational and vocational aspirations like any other teenager.

### **Data showing consistent results**

Our 2015 Year 12 students:

96% of our Year 12 students passed their Year 12 studies; Top IB ATAR was 95.85, Top NTCET ATAR was 96.9.

In addition to this, our Aboriginal students met the high expectations of their teachers **with 17 students from remote communities graduating from Year 12**. Our Top NTCET ATAR from an Indigenous student from a remote area community was 53.35.

**This is an incredible achievement.** These students come into the college with a poor level of English literacy, not school-ready in many cases and with low academic aspirations.

Kormilda College has long been regarded as a 'lighthouse' school, with proven results and international recognition of the accomplishments of our Aboriginal students. The graph below illustrates the performance of our Year 12 Aboriginal student results over eight years, 2008-2015.

This aligns to our key performance indicators of growing our students' learning outcomes and confirms that we are not only meeting our targets, but also adding value to our students' learning experiences.

#### **Aboriginal (remote only) Year 12 completions at Kormilda College 2008-2015**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Yr 12 Aboriginal student completions</b>
2015	17
2014	21
2013	27
2012	20
2011	17
2010	16
2009	20
2008	27

#### **NAPLAN results**

Indigenous students show improvement at Kormilda College in their NAPLAN results from their attendance in Year 7 to when they sit NAPLAN in their Year 9 of an average 15.04% using their comparison to National Mean results from all schools and an average of 23.82% using their comparison with the NT mean results of all schools.

Staff at Kormilda College continually track student improvement and assess learning needs from the data for progressive intervention. A closer case study was made of Aboriginal cohort of students who began Year 7 in 2013. These students were tracked across various data sets. One of these was NAPLAN. The following were the results showing improvement across their two years from Year 7 to Year 9.

	Value below national mean Year 7 (Year 9)	% improvement	Value below NT mean Year 7 (Year 9)	% improvement
Reading	-270 (-216)	20	-206 (-155)	24.7
Writing	-393 (-352)	10.4	-290 (-244)	15.8
Spelling	-212 (-173)	18.3	-126 (-96)	23.8
Grammar & Punc	-272 (-2320)	14.7	-184 (-156)	15.2
Numeracy	-177 (-156)	11.8	-116 (-70)	39.6

Whilst there is still a long way to go for these students, the issue is that they are improving in the boarding/Day school environment where they can be assured of minimal interruption to their studies.

### **VET access is essential**

Vocational options are a necessary part of senior secondary studies for many of our Aboriginal students. It provides the hands-on experience that Aboriginal teenage students enjoy plus it often provides that positive reinforcement of their value to society because it is not always based on a high English literacy level. In some of the pathways it is a realistic future employment possibility for our students. As an example, the students relate well to the Conservation and Land Management certificates as often their relatives are employed as Land/Marine Rangers on community.

The data below shows VET achievements of our Aboriginal students 2012-2015.

Year	Full Qualification	Partial (including skill sets)
2015	7 + 7 BIITE (Access) students	38
2014	21	32
2013	12	31
2012	24	44

### **Issues with VET in Schools in the NT:**

There are inherent issues in the delivery model of VET in schools as it is easily adapted for the unique cultural and educational factors of Aboriginal students from remote communities.

VET is mainly offered as a 1 day per week model to fit in with cluster funding from Dept of Education. Over the last year the days VET was offered was spread across the week, so different courses were offered on different days instead of students all being out on one or two days per week. This made balancing an academic timetable (or Intensive English) difficult as students could be absent from a class on any day of the week. We kept the days our students were able to be out of class mainly to the Tuesday and Wednesday as this provided less disruption to the running of a teaching program. As a result, we were limiting the range of courses available to them.

Another issue with having VET one day a week is that if students are away from school for several weeks due to funeral or cultural leave they were unable to catch up on missed work or information. The rest of the VET class had moved on and the trainer did not have time to go back for one student. This resulted in a large number of partial completions.

VET in schools funding is paid on completion of units, not partial as in previous years. This means that the providers of the training, the Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), are pushing students to complete as many units as possible and differentiated delivery is quite often non existent. The RTOs require students to do a literacy and numeracy assessment (LLN) before the qualification starts to try to pick the most capable students rather than using it to know how much training or content delivery needs to happen. This has been very disappointing especially with an RTO who is part of an Indigenous focused organisation. To enable our low LLN students to keep up with the more mainstream students in the VET programs we are asked to send a Teacher Assistant (TA) to assist them in class. Due to staffing numbers and the high level of need here at school we are not able to do this.

Because the students are living in urban Darwin region they are not given the same consideration or variety of courses that the students in remote areas are able to undertake. Examples of this are Music and Art qualifications, basic level construction or perhaps just small skill sets that will enable students to gain employment.

### **What works:**

Block delivery where we can support the students to complete. The block method seems to work well, we are able to arrange the sessions to coincide with the weeks that traditionally have a full level of student attendance. This is evidenced in our baking program as it used to be in the Rural College visits and Rural Operations. We find that courses run on site at Kormilda and using the same lunch and recess breaks work better than off-site courses. Teachers and support groups like Clontarf Academy and Strong Girls are able to pop in to show their interest in the students.

Courses that the students find relevant are more successful. Unfortunately this does not always line up with the Government priority list of skills to be funded. Skills sets are more achievable for the students and probably more suited to the type of work they will gain in community (including CDEP or RJCP employment). An employment skill set that included a driver introduction course (this would give the student the background knowledge to complete the Drivesafe course and test), first aid and White Card would be highly valuable for the remote students.

A return to being able to access the Rural College in Katherine to teach the students skills for Station work would be another great option for employment success for our students.

Certificate Levels 1-2 courses, delivered using a project model rather than a classroom model, works well. Students are eager to learn about the land and get a lot out of projects like the CSIRO Fire Project. They are able to reflect on this learning and see a real life application for it in their own community. The introduction of only Certificate III level VET actually counting towards an ATAR in Year 12 NTCET has resulted in limiting the pathways of some students.

### **Kormilda's role in its international context**

Kormilda College is a research hub for several universities including Charles Darwin University (Menzies), Southern Cross University and Edith Cowan University. Several research projects are ongoing, investigating teacher effectiveness, Indigenous student learning and cultural competency in the classroom.

Building on my PhD studies concerning Indigenous student retention, I have investigated institutions in Australia and overseas that specialise in cultural and educational remediation of this type and have been assured that the Kormilda model is second to none.

Of particular note was a visit to the East Side Young Leaders Academy in London, where children from disadvantaged and dysfunctional backgrounds are given a new conception of what normal life can be. This parallels Kormilda's role in giving children from remote areas a broader world view of what their lives might be. The difference between what these two institutions are doing was pointed out by the Principal of the East Side Young Leaders Academy when he commented, "You folk are heroes, we wouldn't attempt to make a difference to children who came to us over the age of eight years!"

Kormilda College is regularly celebrated through conference papers and book chapters as a beacon of educational success and cultural reconciliation in the world of Indigenous education.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the fact that we can demonstrate quality educational outcomes for Aboriginal students from the Kormilda College model suggests that the elements of early intervention should include:

- boarding from a young adolescent age;
- children from different communities being given strategies to prevent inter-community conflict; we do this by calling the boarding environs the Kormilda Community; Larrakia elders welcome students to country and insist that community feuds are not brought onto their land;
- giving the students a new *normal*, a new view of what their life can be, with the utmost respect for their cultural beliefs and practices, which they are invited to showcase as part of the Arts and Music programs as well as Religious and Values Education (RAVE) classes;

- on-site health care with a health practitioner working closely with the NT Dept of Health and Health Clinics on community so that ongoing health problems can be monitored both during term and during school holidays, and students leave school fully vaccinated, fully aware of their health needs going into adulthood;
- encouragement of social intercourse between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal students; this breaks down the tendency to apartheid that accompanies all-Aboriginal boarding facilities; this is important for broadening their world view;
- a 'significant other' in their lives as they make the transition from community life to the broader Australian society; this person/s will change over time but needs to fulfil the gap in the student's life at the time; for instance, both Clontarf Academy and the Strong Girls program at Kormilda offer support and mentoring based on a common interest initially but moves into a more mature relationship over time based on mutual respect and development of individual aspirations;
- a continuity of support post Year 12; Kormilda offers this through Clontarf Academy and what we call Year 13, which is a support year for students who previously boarded at Kormilda; they return and have their own accommodation within boarding and are role models for the younger students but they have to be either employed or studying or a combination of both on a fulltime basis;
- integration: when I first applied for the Deputy Principal position in 2007, part of the process was an interview with senior students one of the chief concerns expressed by the student panel was the need to integrate the boarding students with the Day school students and break down the perceived apartheid. I have worked on this assiduously the whole time I have been at the college and believe that the integration of the boarders in Day school activities is a key element in building their aspirations and confidence in bridging two worlds.
- use of an intervention strategy such as Real Justice/Restorative Justice such that the same process is used by all staff across the college to manage situations where students need to reflect on their actions; it develops a reflective frame of mind over time in students who are otherwise conditioned to respond emotionally;
- high expectations: in Day school the sooner they get into mainstream education the better; for many years there was a culture in schools of providing busy work for students who were never expected to succeed or excel because of their Aboriginality; no such culture is tolerated in Kormilda.

**I would like to invite the Commissioners to visit Kormilda College in the near future and speak with Aboriginal students about their boarding and Day school experiences.**

**Thank you.**

**Dr Helen Spiers**

**Principal, Kormilda College**