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Raising the Bar Closing the Gap *maana*

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Summary

Raising the Bar *maana* is an extension of the Tasmanian Government's commitment to the Raising the Bar (RTB) reform. *Maana* means 'moving forward'. RTB *maana* effectively engages students through personalised learning plans with inclusive learning practices and environments that affirm students' cultural identities through more intentional school leadership, provision of cultural understanding training and an inclusive curriculum.

A key aspect of this program is the employment of Aboriginal Educational Workers (AEWs) trained to support the schools in successful partnerships with their local Aboriginal communities, ensuring close community and parental engagement to maximise student attendance.

This program involved five schools not previously involved with the RTB program. All the schools have high Aboriginal student enrolment and need. *Maana* aims include accelerating literacy and numeracy achievement of participating Aboriginal students and establishing effective, meaningful and ongoing partnerships with local Aboriginal communities. More broadly, it is intended that this practice will be extended across other schools in Tasmania.

The project focused on supporting Aboriginal students by providing resources for the schools to develop a whole-school approach to literacy and/or numeracy. This involved an emphasis on high expectations of Aboriginal students, a valuing of their cultures, application of appropriate pedagogies and curriculums, inclusive practices and successful community engagement.

The original RTB project that informed this initiative was designed as a whole-school, evidence-based approach to the improvement of students' literacy levels. Key elements included sharing best practice across networks of schools across the state, and helping teachers use student outcome data to monitor and evaluate the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.

Target student group

The program took place in five regional and rural schools with high Aboriginal enrolment. This resulted in the involvement of approximately 2361 primary and secondary students from years 1 to 8. The project involved five principals and approximately 150 teachers and staff from the five schools. The project was funded by the federal government to implement actions identified in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (NATSIEAP).



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Method

RTB *maana* involved a range of strategies made possible through the provision of staff, including a part-time AEW, an additional full-time literacy and/or numeracy teacher, 0.5 of an assistant principal and additional support for specialist professional learning on cultural understandings, inclusive teaching practice and curriculum development. The project plan included a data collection plan, listing the baseline and trend data to be collected and analysed as part of the evaluation of the project.

With this support, each school addressed the professional learning of teacher and support staff related to literacy and cultural understandings. The school was supported in achieving more intentional school leadership and whole-school improvement. In addition, there was a focus on the collection of quality data to inform teaching and planning. The aspect of pedagogy was addressed to support teachers in the implementation of an inclusive curriculum through increased student–teacher interaction.

Professional development for staff has been a key focus at the school. Staff meetings were held for the professional development of staff each term. All staff and teacher assistants have been involved in professional learning with the Senior Curriculum Officer at Aboriginal Education Services. Teacher mentoring was undertaken to introduce Aboriginal components of the Australian Curriculum to improve the capacity of staff. (Principal)

While all the structures and processes were important, a critical aspect of the program was the employment of an AEW in each school to improve home–school liaising, to directly support students, and to improve community and parental engagement in personalised learning and participation in school planning and activity.

Participating *maana* schools cooperated with other local schools to develop and promote successful practice in leadership, pedagogy, cultural competency, inclusive curriculum and community engagement.

The Department of Education Tasmania (2013) states:

Identity is the basis upon which Aboriginal students grow, develop and relate to those about them, including their teachers.

Nurturing the Aboriginal identity of students was a common theme across the five schools throughout the project. Some students were unaware that they were Aboriginal and only a few had any connections with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community.



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For sustainability, the first step for the schools was to build the Aboriginal identity and capacity of the children, and their connectedness to their school and the wider local Aboriginal community. With this basis, it was felt that Aboriginal children would be more likely to gain from literacy and numeracy initiatives. All schools committed to promoting a whole-school approach, working in partnership with parents and the wider school community to develop strategies to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into all aspects of school practice and process. The schools focused on curriculum, pedagogy, school organisation, the environment and community partnerships.

Dodges Ferry Primary School is committed to the goal that every student has the opportunity to learn and achieve his or her potential. The school is committed to working with its community, and supporting teachers working together designing personalised learning opportunities for all students. (Principal)

Results

Baseline and trend data were collected using qualitative data (related to aspects of teacher quality) and quantitative data (related to student school attendance and attendance for NAPLAN, plus literacy and numeracy achievements from NAPLAN and PAT testing).

Through the data, participating schools demonstrated improvements in:

- aspects of teacher quality
- Aboriginal student attendance
- Aboriginal student performance – NAPLAN
- Aboriginal student performance – other sources.

Student attendance improved for Aboriginal students in *maana* project schools, but did not change for all students. Details of this and other data can be found in *Final progress report Raising the Bar Closing the Gap maana*. To obtain a copy of the report, contact the Tasmanian Department of Education (see below for contact details).

All schools have reported closer connections with their local Aboriginal communities and increased awareness and understanding of Tasmanian Aboriginal culture, history and perspectives. Schools reported that teachers have increased:

- understanding and knowledge of the way in which Aboriginal students learn
- capacity to teach Aboriginal perspectives
- ability to relate to local Aboriginal parents and community members
- capacity to develop personal learning programs with Aboriginal students and their parents.



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Teachers report improved relationships with their Aboriginal students, and the Aboriginal students report pride in their Aboriginal identities being recognised and respected. Students also report greater self-esteem and confidence in their abilities, which in turn is beginning to show in academic results. Teachers report they are more confident in their professional judgements of students' progress after taking part in professional learning. Early evidence gathered through teacher and parent interviews also showed that students are more engaged in reading and writing activities.

The Department of Education Tasmania (2012) reported that five key findings from the data indicated positive outcomes of the *maana* program in schools:

1. Good news stories were gathered in each school in accordance with the qualitative data collection plan. These detailed positive collaboration of staff, and positive feedback from students related to confidence, identity and aspects of engagement.
2. Student attendance improved for Aboriginal students in *maana* project schools, but did not change for all students.
3. Improvements in persuasive writing from 2011 to 2012 were evident for students in years 3, 5 and 7.
4. Some improvements in reading were evident from NAPLAN and PAT tests. In particular, the mean percentile change indicated small positive change, in most cases, providing some indication of student improvement above normal improvement over the same period.
5. Improved practices by schools in the collection and interpretation of student data from a range of sources, including monitoring attendance, PAT testing and other school-specific collections for spelling.

An exciting finding of the study was the positive impact – specifically for Aboriginal students – in improving attendance, and progress in closing the attendance gap with non-Aboriginal students.

As each school continues its journey, all are optimistic that continued improvement in Aboriginal students' literacy and numeracy outcomes will occur.

Lessons learned

Raising the Bar Closing the Gap *maana* implemented actions identified in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan. The positive results will inform successful practice in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal students throughout Tasmania.



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Maana schools have focused professional learning programs on increasing teacher capacity and improving quality teaching and pedagogy. This will contribute to improved teaching and learning outcomes beyond the life of the RTB *maana* funding.

Schools with high community partnership and parent participation are already showing good signs of sustainability. Continuing to build the capacity of the community and the relationship between the community and the school will ensure sustainability of improved student outcomes for Tasmanian Aboriginal students.

Central to success was appropriately demonstrating that Aboriginal students were valued and cared for. Steps now recognised as contributing factors to success include having an Aboriginal presence at the front desk; cultural days – such as NAIDOC week – promoted to the whole community; quality professional learning in cultural understandings; ensuring the school library and school resources contained relevant and up-to-date materials; and flying the Aboriginal flag.

In 2013, Aboriginal Education Services is working closely with the *maana* schools to further develop curriculum resources and units of work to share with other schools. These will be available online. Cultural understanding modules are also being further developed for statewide distribution.

The *maana* project has enabled the school to lift the profile of Aborigines in our school. Through the program, these children decided they wanted everyone to know they were Aboriginal, and are proud to be so. (Principal)

Next steps

Implementing *maana*, schools will continue to be guided by the strategic direction of the Tasmanian Education Department, the priorities of literacy, numeracy, attendance, and each school's improvement plan.

Schools will maintain a commitment to a systemic school-wide school improvement process, although teaching and learning approaches are varied depending on localised factors.

While there is some commonality in the approach taken across the five *maana* schools, contextual factors have guided and will continue to guide implementation. *Maana* extends Tasmania's established commitment to the Raising the Bar reform. Each participating school has addressed the nominated reform areas as follows:

- professional learning
- pedagogy
- student engagement and performance.



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Participating *maana* schools are sharing their processes with other local schools – especially focus schools – to develop and promote successful practice in leadership, pedagogy, cultural competency, inclusive curriculum and community engagement. Continuing to build the relationship between the community and the school will ensure sustainability of improved student outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Whole-school ownership of school improvement plans and student performance is more evident in *maana* schools since school data is being used more effectively and has become part of team planning. Increased capacity to effectively use data at the classroom, school and system level is a sustainable feature across all schools. This will be further supported in 2013 and beyond when data literacy professional learning is delivered through the Professional Learning Institute.

Aboriginal Education Services are working closely with the *maana* schools to further develop curriculum resources and units of work to share with other schools. These will be made available online. Cultural Understanding modules are also being further developed for statewide distribution.

Research base

The University of Tasmania undertook an evaluation of the Raising the Bar pilot program in Tasmania over 2009–2010. Findings from this evaluation have informed the *maana* schools, especially around building the capacity of leaders and teachers. The University of Tasmania evaluation determined that the additional literacy funding and resourcing did enhance the students' level of literacy in the participating schools. From the report, the Department of Education Tasmania can identify a range of indicators to further support effective literacy teaching and learning, and increase student achievement.

In Tasmanian schools, the spread of educational achievement for Aboriginal students ranges across the spectrum. In the early years, learning for Aboriginal students keeps pace with the general cohort, but then it starts to differentiate in both directions at about year 3.

Building learning cultures in Tasmanian schools and the system was fundamental in the design of the project. Tasmania has used (and is using) current best practice from Victoria, ACT and the UK to develop the improvement and accountability process for schools. The project was designed in response to identified needs, using sound research in the field, as outlined below.



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Research underpinning issue 1: Different classes, different outcomes

Results were showing that the premise that all teachers are equal is incorrect. Hill (1997) showed that class effects are much larger than school effects when the proportion of variance in value-added measures of student achievement at the class and school levels are analysed. Hattie (2003) demonstrated that, aside from what students themselves bring to schools, teachers and teaching account for the greatest level of variance of any other factor operating in a school (approximately 30 per cent). The work of Zbar (2008) informed this aspect of the design.

Research underpinning issue 2: The question is 'how?'

The reality is that teachers want to do a good job and always seek to do a better job, but don't necessarily know how. Guskey (2002) concluded that changes in attitudes and beliefs generally follow – rather than precede – changes in behaviour.

Hattie (2003) found that a typical effect size of classroom interventions over time is of the order of 0.4 (0.2 = small; 0.5 = moderate; 0.8 = large). The findings from this research underpinned some aspects of the design of the project. It was concluded that there was a need to provide teachers with content-rich materials and associated pedagogical advice, linked to clear assessment criteria and tasks aligned to the relevant jurisdictional standards.

The designers of the project concluded the following:


- Some schools are more effective than others at meeting their students' learning needs and generating quality student outcomes.
- A data-collection regime is essential for effective improvement in schools. There needs to be agreement for some common and nationally agreed data sets to be developed (in the same manner as teaching standards).
- Data needs to be used by system leaders to classify schools, so that schools can be supported based on need.
- The UK National Audit Office (2006) identified five key actions in turning around poorly performing schools:
 - improving school leadership and the role of the governing body
 - improving teaching standards
 - better management of pupil behaviour
 - collaboration with other schools
 - 'fresh start': schools get extra funding, change their identity and governing body, and get new staff.



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Further reading and links


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Contacts

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