

## **STUDENT RETENTION IN BOARDING SCHOOLS FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS**

Student Retention (or lack of student retention) is probably the biggest issue faced by schools and residences that cater for Indigenous students. It seems to be an issue faced by all schools and residences although some organizations have better Indigenous retention than others.

Strategies fall into the following groupings:

### *Before Student Arrives at School / Residence*

- Student Screening
- Partnerships

### *After Student Arrives at Schools / Residence*

- Sympathetic Environment
- Engaging Activities
- Home Contact
- Visualisation of Achievement
- Suspension / Expulsion
- Incentives

## **Before Student Arrives at School / Residence**

### **Student Screening**

It is important to carefully screen all students who apply to come to your residence. This is best done by visiting the student in their own environment, interviewing the student, parents, previous school/s and possibly community leaders. Students may have a history of,

- short stays at residences, (travelers!!)
- poor behavior (including violence to persons)
- life control problems (drugs, solvents etc)
- significant involvement with courts.

Students may also be young for their age (immature) and just not ready to leave home and go to a Boarding school.

You may choose to accept a student with some of the above problems (particularly if there are clear reasons why a behavior may have occurred) but at least you know from the start the real situation. Some residences are 'budget driven' to accept a certain number of students regardless of screening outcomes.

There is an argument that all students should have an opportunity and a second or third chance. While this is a valid argument, we have come to the realization that our core business is to provide quality education and residence care. We are not trained or equipped to deal with complex behavior and life control problems. We should encourage the establishment of more "second chance" type programs so that these students can be accommodated in programs equipped to deal with these issues.

There is also the issue of the existing students who are just normal students entrusted to us by parents in good faith. These parents do not expect that their students will be in contact

with, and possibly influenced by other students who have complex behavior and life control problems.

We have found that effective screening and selective enrolment increases retention and provides a pleasant working environment for staff and students. An effective screening process generally consists of pre-agreed parameters for enrolment and a committee to review applications and make decisions.

### **Partnerships**

Once the student has been enrolled we are in a partnership with the students family. It is important that the parents (or guardians) are very aware of the implications of enrolment and the importance of support for the school and the student during the students stay at the school. The family should understand the purpose of the student attending the school, educational and other outcomes, and the importance of the student completing the enrolment period. We advise parents that a student is expected to attend for the full term and if they return prior to the end of term (without a satisfactory reason) it is unlikely they will be accepted back at school. Wongutha's educational program is organized to ensure that a student completes units of work during one term so that if a student does not return for the following term they have completed units and resume satisfactorily if they return in the future. If a student leaves mid term, it is unlikely they will have completed units and they have effectively wasted their own time as well as that of teachers.

Establishing a partnership with parents is important and can best be done with face to face meetings rather than long distance communication. Relationship is foundational to Indigenous culture and establishing a relationship between the parent and the school or school representative is an important part of beginning the partnership that will support the student and aid retention.

## **After Student Arrives at Schools / Residence**

### **Sympathetic Environment**

It is important that the student has a residence environment that is friendly, familiar and sympathetic to the needs of Indigenous students. This can be partly achieved by ensuring that as many as possible of the residence staff are Indigenous. At Wongutha students share rooms (two students per room) unless students specifically request a room on their own. Food, activities, music, physical surroundings can all be adjusted to make the environment friendly and familiar.

### **Engaging Activities**

Students need to be engaged in varied and interesting activities during leisure time. These activities should include a range of sporting activities, outings and opportunities to be involved in art / craft activities. Bush outings and activities similar to what the students would be involved in at home will all help to keep the student engaged and content. Students who are bored will not remain at the residence.

### **Home Contact**

Students should contact home communities regularly and should be provided with the means to do this. This usually means access to a phone but some schools also use email.

### **Visualisation of Achievement**

It is important that students are aware of their own achievement and have constant reminders of their own achievement at school and also in the residence. This can be wall charts showing progress, trophy displays, and notice boards.

### **Suspension / Expulsion**

Suspending students removes a problem student from the campus or residence and gives notice to other students that certain behavior will not be tolerated. However suspension does not help retention and other disciplinary strategies should be fully exhausted before suspension is activated. The other problem with suspension is that a student is returned to a home community to a situation where they are unoccupied and vulnerable. Many students are sent to residences for social rather than educational reasons (parents wish to remove students from local influences or from an environment that they consider harmful, or parents feel that going away to school will broaden horizons etc) and return to the community or town is not helpful to either the student or the parents. Suspension should be a very last resort.

### **Incentives**

Some residences operate incentive programs to encourage good behaviour and progress, but also to encourage students to stay for the full year. Wongutha operates a program called "Go for Gold" (a behavior and effort index) where students are rewarded by increased pocket money (the range is from \$8 a week to almost \$40 a week so the program is taken seriously by students) and increased privileges. Retention is a factor in this program and students are aware of the rewards and the reasons for the rewards. Students who achieve three "gold" by the year end have a special holiday in Perth at the end of the term.

There are probably issues that I have not covered, things you disagree with and strategies that have been effective for you. It would be helpful to have some response to this paper (even by phone 08 90754011 work 08 90715337 home or email [kindlewood@wn.com.au](mailto:kindlewood@wn.com.au)) so that we can keep this discussion going with a view to learning from and building on each others experience.

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