Toormina High School
Connecting with community through language and culture

**Context**

Toormina High School is situated south of Coffs Harbour on the mid-north coast of NSW. The school has a student enrolment of 720, including 17 per cent of students who identify as Aboriginal and 6 per cent of students from a language background other than English. The school has a Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI) rating of 122 (2014/15 average).

In 2014, the school sought to re-engage the community and students with the study of a language other than English. Students had not selected languages beyond the mandatory Years 7 and 8 courses and junior students were generally disengaged in these courses. Undertaking a major change in curriculum offerings presented a valuable opportunity to engage the whole school community in the consultative decision-making process.

**Enhancing community consultation**

Following discussions with the school executive team, consultation began with the school community to canvass the reasons for the lack of interest and develop alternatives that had community support. The school established close links with the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG). Following the initial consultation with parents and local Aboriginal Elders, the introduction of an Aboriginal language course for all Year 7 students was proposed.

The school embarked on a wide consultative process. Local Aboriginal Elders were consulted, formally at the school's “yarn ups” and, informally, through word of mouth in the wider community by parents and teachers. Other members of the community, including parents intending to enrol their children in Year 7 (2015) were consulted via parent focus group meetings. Local AECG members were actively engaged in the consultation, providing introductions to local Aboriginal Elders, as well as sharing information regarding the proposal with the wider community.

**Achievements**

The local decision-making process resulted in:

- the successful implementation of a teaching and learning program in the Gumbaynggirr language for all Year 7 students in 2015, exceeding the original aim of trialling an alternative language other than English with at least one Year 7 class
- all Year 7 students making significant progress in the Gumbaynggirr language with 9 per cent speaking and reading fluently in the language by the end of 2015
- increased parental interest in all of the school’s programs, inspired by the interest in the teaching of the Gumbaynggirr language
- data related to enrolment, attendance, engagement and achievement suggesting that the successful re-engagement of the community had flowed on to improved student outcomes. For example, student whole and partial attendance rates for Year 7, 2015 improved by 4 per cent across the cohort and 12 per cent amongst Aboriginal students compared to previous years.

**Sustainability**

Toormina High School plans to continue yarn ups twice a term to seek and give feedback regarding the school’s programs and to make decisions about the extension of the Gumbaynggirr language course into Years 11 and 12. The principal and other members of staff seek to engage the wider community whenever possible, meeting regularly with the local AECG and ensuring staff members are present at community events. Professional learning about the Gumbaynggirr culture and language for all staff will be ongoing, with parents and the community invited to participate. Year 7 2015 students were provided with leadership opportunities to mentor and help teach the Gumbaynggirr course to Year 7 2016 students. The additional funding will support the extension of this community engagement.

For more information on Toormina High School visit their website.