A Work in Progress

Hunter Central Coast Region

Name: Karen Jones
Location: Central Coast of NSW, Hunter Region/Newcastle
Student population: 109,000
Aboriginal student population: 6,500

The Region relates to two Regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs)

Karen is the first Aboriginal School Education Director in NSW. She was appointed to this role at the beginning of the 2007 school year. She is responsible for the direct support of 31 schools in the ‘Hunter Central Coast 9’ group. Complementing this she has a particular strategic leadership role for Aboriginal education and training across the whole Hunter Central Coast Region which includes 299 operational schools. She works closely with a small team of regional Aboriginal staff made up of:

- John Oates, Regional Consultant Aboriginal Education and Engagement
- Rob Russell and Sue Stewart, Consultants Aboriginal Education
- Kelly Godden, Leigh Ridgeway, Sonia Sharpe and Kenneth Weatherall, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers

Data: In addition to monitoring NAPLAN and school based data, the region is looking to facilitate a focus group process with Aboriginal Education Consultative Group members to ask community members to assess how they see the schools functioning.

Results of cultural competencies inventory for staff will be collated over assessment at three different points of time.

Achievements

For schools who participated in Stronger Smarter leadership program:

- Improved capacity of these groups of schools (learning communities) for practical collaboration with Aboriginal communities as well as with each other
- Willingness to engage in professional reflection on data from the University of Newcastle in the Quality Teaching research study - Systemic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement (2004-2007) (SIPA) Professional learning, pedagogical improvement and the circulation of power
- Take up of opportunity to build leadership density by sending additional staff members to Phase 2 training.

For the regional Aboriginal education team who participated in Stronger Smarter development

- A new commitment to focus on the importance of building strength in Aboriginal identity
- Changed workshop processes incorporating traditional practices and processes
A refocusing of team support for schools.

The Hunter/Central Coast Region story:

Karen Jones' decision to seek the assistance of the Stronger Smarter Institute in the Hunter Central Coast Region was prompted after analysis and review with principals of particular schools involved in the Schools in Partnership (SiP) and Targeted Aboriginal Students Strategy (TASS) initiative.

SiP and TASS schools are selected schools with high density Aboriginal student populations which have received significant additional NSW government resources as part of the response to the Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrirnyma Yaarri Guurulaw Yirringin gurray Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future: Report of the Aboriginal Education Review in 2004.

In 2008 Karen noted that SiP and TASS schools were demonstrating significant achievements in most areas. However it was difficult for them to demonstrate a significant increase in Aboriginal community contributions to school decision making.

In her role as School Education Director with portfolio responsibility for Aboriginal education across the region, she was also vitally interested in the roles and capacity of the Aboriginal education and training regional staff who form a team located in three different offices across the region. Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers have a particular role in facilitating the partnerships between schools and their Aboriginal communities and the contribution they could make to meeting this challenge seemed important.

'I knew we needed to find some new ways to draw on the resources we have, to become more effective in our work with schools and to create opportunities for the schools themselves.'

What resulted was a program negotiated with the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute and conducted in the region with the goal of facilitating co-creation of future planning between the Aboriginal community and the educators. One specific day created the opportunity for the community to understand and be prepared to be 'at the table' for the initiative.

Leaders from the three SiP schools and one TASS school and the Aboriginal education team formed the nucleus for the educators group.

'And we were backed up in general by the Regional and local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups. There is great commitment from the leaders and members at both regional and local levels in this community organisation, to help us move forward on our goals.

Planned and unanticipated changes

'Each school that attended is on its own journey but I can see perceptible changes in all of them in their approach to partnership with families and the community which is great. There is a whole hearted commitment by staff in these schools.

'Since the program we have had teleconferences and discussions on School Development Days to share what's happened and to revitalize our connections and commitments.

'As a team we have certainly changed our approach to working with the community and our schools. When we reflected on our practice we were encouraged about our strong emphasis on 'Smarter' data and high expectations. What we realised though was that we needed to tune in much more to 'Stronger in Culture' as a basis for Aboriginal identity.'

'John Oates, our Aboriginal team leader, completely transformed his process for leading workshops and is modeling more culturally meaningful processes for all of us. For example we participated in a two day Regional Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee (RAEAC) meeting recently with community members. The focus was regional planning. Prior to this phase of our work, we would
probably have jumped straight in with the planning task at the beginning. This time we spent the first
day and a half building a scaffold to make sense of the planning task for the community members. We
opened with a smoking ceremony and followed this with some circle work and a flags activity. Many of
these processes were adapted from our learning with the Stronger Smarter Institute team. It worked
so much better!

'As a Team we have stretched our range of skills. In some cases we have adopted shared language
such as 'P1, P2 and P3' to help us shift into the most effective modes for the task at hand. Those
strategies have been very helpful in moving us into new possibilities. I noticed in the recent meeting
that this was also rubbing off onto the RAEAC - we are teaching the members these skills too.

'Of course this is a work in progress. But now that we have been able to respond to requests and
added a Phase 2 program for a second group of schools, I believe that we are well on the way to
achieving the education outcomes for all students that we have always worked towards.