

Solid Aboriginal staff

Making the most of your school's AIEOs (ATAs and AEWs)

Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), Aboriginal Teachers' Assistants (ATAs) and Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) implement 'school initiatives, including managing student behaviour, dress code, homework policy and school-based programs' (DET, no date). Furthermore, **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can provide unique and important services to schools with Aboriginal students.

- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) usually possess networks that enable them to build and strengthen relationships between the school and the local community. Developing relationships with Aboriginal students and their families takes time. **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) need to be supported to yarn and listen to what is important to the parents of Aboriginal students. Informal meetings, such as barbeques, morning teas and particularly home visits, can facilitate this.
- Community networking or brokerage is essential to developing relationships of trust. Having 'brokerage' can reassure Aboriginal members in your school community that school guidelines and practices are **cultural secure** for their children. **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can be utilised as 'brokers' by:
 - meeting with parents and carers at their home
 - organising school events that celebrate Aboriginal culture (e.g. NAIDOC week activities)
 - co-ordinating inter-sectoral collaboration (e.g. with local police)
 - creating a friendly and welcoming area on the school grounds for Aboriginal students and parents and carers
 - supporting Aboriginal students attending the school
 - attending all meetings involving Aboriginal students and/or family members with school staff (acting as a mediator when necessary)

AIEOs (ATAs or AEWs) 'provide knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, language and culture in schools' (DET, no date).

- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can provide background information to assist parents and carers of Aboriginal students to have positive interactions with non-Aboriginal staff. For example, **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can:
 - advise non-Aboriginal staff on family relationships or kinships (such as aunties, uncles, cousins and grandparents) and the appropriate family member to contact when necessary
 - advise non-Aboriginal staff of significant events, such as deaths or burials, and when it is appropriate to follow up on absent students or contact a family member

- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) can increase awareness of Aboriginal culture by:
 - welcoming new families to the school or new staff to the school community
 - conducting professional development sessions for non-Aboriginal staff to increase their understanding of Aboriginal culture
 - contributing to the development of curriculum material and activities that celebrate local Aboriginal culture
 - representing Aboriginal worldviews in the school council
 - advocating for **cultural secure** practices to be included in school guidelines
- **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) should also be invited to participate in school planning for:
 - the promotion, implementation and championing of behaviour management programs
 - curriculum that positively represents Aboriginal worldviews
 - inclusion of Aboriginal literature in the school library
 - attendance strategies that are relevant to Aboriginal students

Aboriginal teachers

Aboriginal teachers are unique to each school and act as role models and community advocates. Aboriginal teachers bring an Aboriginal worldview to their field; they become an invaluable resource for enhancing the school's capacity to connect with Aboriginal students and their families. Furthermore, Aboriginal teachers are able to offer relevant solutions to issues faced by Aboriginal children and community within the school setting.

- **AIEOs** (ATAs and AEWs), Aboriginal teachers are excellent resources for facilitating the development of locally relevant and **cultural secure** bullying prevention and management strategies. Aboriginal teachers also have networks that enable them to disseminate information and gather support for programs within the school and the wider community.
- Aboriginal teachers can also develop the confidence of **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) and encourage them to seek meaningful careers in education. The role model that an Aboriginal teacher presents cannot be underestimated in terms of its value to other Aboriginal staff and the wider community.

Other non-teaching Aboriginal staff

All Aboriginal staff can be positive role models for Aboriginal students. Students may form or have relationships of trust with non-teaching Aboriginal staff – For example, the gardener or administration staff. It is important to acknowledge the valuable contribution these staff make toward supporting Aboriginal students to feel comfortable and connected to the school.

Cultural security and bullying

AIEOs (ATAs or AEWs) are expected to support regular ‘attendance... [and] school initiatives, including managing student behaviour, dress code [and] homework policy’ (DET, no date). **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) have the capacity to develop locally relevant and **cultural secure** initiatives. Strong school leadership is required to enable **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) flexibility to respond to the feedback they receive from the parents and carers of Aboriginal students.

‘Brokerage’ is two-way communication, where both parties are equally informed. It is an essential element in maintaining a **cultural secure** school environment for Aboriginal students. Brokerage acknowledges that an understanding of local Aboriginal culture is essential to the development of locally relevant and **cultural secure** bullying prevention and management practices. It is essential that **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) and Elders be consulted in the development of behaviour management guidelines.

One example of a **cultural secure** bullying prevention and management guideline would be that **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) are present every time an Aboriginal student and their family member meets with a staff member (unless there is an express request they not be present) to provide the student and his/her family member with confidence that they will be heard. Another example would be a guideline that supports **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) to receive training (such as mediation/counselling) to develop meaningful partnerships with parents that help to increase Aboriginal students’ education outcomes.

Cultural secure bullying prevention and management strategies are more likely to be developed if a **cultural secure** school environment has already been established. **Cultural security** is a process whereby the ‘legitimate cultural rights, values and expectations of Yamaji (Aboriginal) people’ (Western Australian Health Department, no date) are acknowledged and validated.

Principals can promote the importance of establishing and maintaining a **cultural secure** environment by:

- ensuring that all staff are encouraged and supported to undertake **cultural security** professional development
- seeking guidance from **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs), Elders or other local Aboriginal community members on cultural matters
- acknowledging the expertise and valuable contribution of **AIEOs** (ATAs or AEWs) in supporting Aboriginal students
- including cultural content in the curriculum; this provides Aboriginal students with an opportunity to celebrate their culture