

Living up to expectations

Inspired leadership at a Newcastle primary school has won Kerry Wellham the AEU's annual award for an outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. **Anna McAlister** reports.

When new principal Kerry Wellham arrived at Newcastle's Waratah West Public School in 2002, many of its Indigenous children were faring badly. A quarter of the school population was Indigenous but, by and large, their families were set apart from the non-Indigenous school community.

Clearly, improvements would have to come from the top.

"The big thing for us was changing staff conceptions and expectations," says Wellham, 2007 winner of the AEU's Arthur Hamilton Award for outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. "Most of the staff members—including myself—didn't understand what was important to the Indigenous families."

Wellham sought out local Indigenous people and asked them for advice. She appointed an Indigenous mentor—Ken Weatherall, who later nominated Wellham for this award—as well as a teachers' aide, as cultural consultants, helping the children

and educating the teachers. "We could sit in the staff room and have disagreements about Aboriginal culture without anyone feeling uncomfortable," she says. "We were able to discuss where people were coming from and then make decisions."

The staff made sure they welcomed Indigenous parents to the primary school, and they were soon attending special school events and socialising. Wellham knew things were going well when Indigenous and non-Indigenous children started playing together at each other's homes.

Taken for granted

But academic performance was still a big concern. In the past, it had been taken for granted that many of the Indigenous



Kerry Wellham (on right), winner of the 2007 Arthur Hamilton Award with Aunty Sandra Griffin, an elder of the Awabakal nation and school patron.



children would do poorly. "Sometimes, because of ignorance or racism, there are low expectations," says Wellham. "But it's about expecting that every child can learn, no matter the colour of their skin, or socioeconomics, or how big the

family is, or religious background—or anything."

The school's staff started to look at why their teaching methods needed adapting. They realised, for example, that the school's Basic Skills Test didn't account for the kind of skills the Indigenous children tended to have and the way they learnt.

Language was clearly a stumbling block. Many of the children were raised speaking Aboriginal English, and the teachers were inadvertently confusing them. Wellham cites the example of teachers talking about multiplication. "They say 'lots of', as in 'How many lots of lollies are in the jar?' But for Indigenous children, 'lots of' means you've got a lot. It's just different connotations for the same words."

With help from Indigenous colleagues, the teachers became more aware of important aspects of culture, such as eye contact being considered disrespectful in some families. They learned that Indigenous students can feel deeply humiliated if they are told off in ►



public. Many of the children who had achieved poor results in the past lacked confidence, so the teachers avoided confronting them with questions in class until they had received material with the answers.

There were also chronic, previously underestimated hearing problems to deal with due to the common ear infection otitis media, which is 10 times more prevalent in Indigenous children.

Indigenous maths

In 2006 the federal government's Quality Teaching Indigenous Project offered Waratah West a grant. They received \$80,000 to spend over four years on professional development in teaching numeracy to Indigenous children. "We started to look at the history of maths in Aboriginal culture," says Wellham.

"Indigenous people were doing quite complicated maths before the Europeans came along, but they did it a different way." This became the basis for a numeracy program. The teachers included many open-ended tasks, and found that what works for Indigenous students works for all students.

Last year the NSW Department of Education had all state primary



schools introduce personalised learning plans for Indigenous students. In consultation with each child's parents, the Waratah West teachers tailored a set of projects for the child in literacy, numeracy, social and behavioural areas (if necessary), leadership, and culture and identity. "Children were finding out about their totems, what country they were from, who their leaders were and what roles they themselves could have in the Aboriginal community in the future." By that stage the work was rarely remedial. Some was designed to extend students who were excelling. "The idea is that the plans increase parent involvement with the school. They were so successful, we've decided to do personalised learning plans for every child, Aboriginal or otherwise."

Wellham is very conscious of her leadership responsibilities. Last year she won a Dare to Lead award through the Australian Principals' Association Professional

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Development Council. "The project is daring principals to take on the challenge to actually lead in Aboriginal education," she says. "Often it's, 'Oh well, there's an Aboriginal person on staff, so they'll look after it all'. If that happens, the principals aren't taking the initiative. There's no leadership, so why would anybody else follow?"

No token thing

Due to a promotion, Wellham moved to a larger school this year, but her achievements at Waratah West will endure and continue to develop. When AEU federal secretary Susan Hopgood presented Wellham with the award at the AEU's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seminar in January, she highlighted that



Wellham had demonstrated strong, committed leadership and fostered "seismic lifts" in literacy and numeracy at Waratah West.

"The big thing for us was putting Aboriginal aspects into the curriculum so it wasn't a token thing," says Wellham. "History, art, that affinity with the land and animals—it's becoming more natural. As soon as you get that, your whole program changes."

When Wellham first came to West Waratah, Ken Weatherall told her there was nothing she could do about racism in the school community. But she proved him wrong. "One person can make a difference in reducing racism," she says. "They can make a bigger difference if everyone else goes with them." ●

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Resources

- Arthur Hamilton Award: www.aeufederal.org.au/Atsi/AHawd2007.pdf
- Dare to Lead: www.daretolead.edu.au
- Indigenous education resources: www.natsiew.nexus.edu.au

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In his honour

This annual award is named in memory of Arthur Hamilton, who was a teacher and long-standing member of the AEU's federal and Tasmanian branch executives. Hamilton, a Palawa man, died in 2004.