

Reconciliation rewa



A vision and strategy for Aboriginal education has had long-lasting benefits for a Tasmanian senior secondary college. Danielle Townsend reports.

An Aboriginal flag flies proudly in the main street that runs through the centre of Claremont College. It is the only flag displayed and its symbolism is more than simply window-dressing.

Though Aboriginal students make up less than 10 per cent of its student population, this senior secondary college in Tasmania has made reconciliation an important school strategy.

The work of the college was recognised earlier this year when it was given the AEU National Reconciliation Award. But according to Arthur Hamilton, advanced skills teacher at the college responsible for Aboriginal education, there are greater rewards for all students, staff and the community.

Claremont College is situated in the northern suburbs of Hobart in Tasmania and has approximately 1,100 students enrolled in years 11, 12 and 13. The student population is drawn mostly from the local area but also attracts students from rural areas up to two hours away because of its unique programs.

“What we set out to do, quite consciously, is to create an environment where Aboriginal students were happy, feel supported that our culture’s recognised and they’ve got the sort of supports they need to stay on campus and complete year 12,” says Hamilton.

When Hamilton began work at Claremont College in 2001 it was a case of “right person, right place, right time”. The college had just negotiated its partnership agreement

with the local community that included a review of Aboriginal education, a mandated priority area. Hamilton had been in an executive job with the state government, managing Aboriginal education, so his background of strategy and national research put him in an ideal position to develop the college’s plan.

The first step was to set up staff reference groups to develop position papers in four priority areas: cultural education for Aboriginal students, Aboriginal studies on the curriculum, professional development for staff and a support program for students and their families.

A strategic plan soon followed the position papers and after consultation with the community and college management, programs were put in place. This may seem like a lot of paperwork but Hamilton explains that to ensure the program would be resilient and lasting the college needed to be strategic.

“If you haven’t got long term plans the short term ones don’t work,” says Hamilton. “And we’re actually talking about long term issues. They’re not going to be solved tomorrow.”

Wisdom and support

The support program for students and their families involves an Aboriginal project officer who assists with the “nuts and bolts issues” of Abstudy payments, housing, dealing with authorities and finding accommodation. The officer also spends a great deal of her time on personal follow-up of attendance, home visits and telephone contacts with home.

Principal Lynne Hanlon sees attendance and retention as key issues. “In 2002, retention of Aboriginal students to the end of year 12 was 55 per cent. It’s early days yet—halfway through the year—but our current retention rate for these students is 92 per cent,” she says.



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At one stage this year, Hanlon set a benchmark for absences and tried to see every student in this category individually.

“I felt the time I spent on this was an excellent investment for me, both in terms of getting to know some of our most ‘at risk’ students, their backgrounds and needs, and in working with them to take positive steps towards success,” she says.

Aboriginal elder Aunty Eva Richardson is a visible and important part of the support and cultural program for students at the college. Richardson, who is a recognised artist in basketry with work in the National Gallery of Australia collection, is the college elder-in-residence, available to all students and staff at the college.

Richardson is in the Aboriginal student centre one day each week to talk with students. Her undoubted wisdom, knowledge of her culture and her support have had a marked effect already on many students.

“At Claremont College, we’re learning from the past and investing in the future,” says Hanlon.

The student centre is primarily for the use of Aboriginal students and provides a ‘room of their own’ including a sound system, computer, workstations and furniture for socialising. But, according to Hamilton, it is not just Aboriginal students who use the centre.

“Aboriginal students invite their friends into the centre. My own national research has told me that kids have friends, [and] they don’t choose them along racial boundaries. We don’t say you have to leave your friends at the door, we just say they have to follow certain rules.

“We expect Aunty Eva to be treated in a certain way—by all of us. And we operate to a set of cultural values. We have set things up in a way that everyone can feel

Pictures

- 1 Aboriginal garden at Claremont College
- 2 L-R Lynne Hanlon, principal, Malcolm Campbell, student, Katherine Hey, Aboriginal MHA, Aunty Eva Richardson, college elder-in-residence.
- 3 Flag in main street
- 4 Snake sculpture in Aboriginal garden
- 5 Sculpture at Claremont College
- 6 Student painting in Aboriginal students’ common room

comfortable about being invited into our environment, understanding that they are coming into an Aboriginal environment.”

Everyone benefits

Integration is a critical part of the reconciliation message and it fits well with the culture of friendliness, inclusion and mutual respect that pervades Claremont College.

“Teachers here believe passionately in social justice and in equal outcomes for our students,” says Hanlon. “We check constantly to ensure our practices match our beliefs and that is a major reason why we run such a comprehensive professional development program,” she says. Recently all staff attended a dramatic performance by Tammy Anderson of her life as a Tasmanian Aboriginal.

By the end of 2002, 92 per cent of staff had attended a program of Aboriginal cross-cultural awareness training and the target is 100 per cent by the end of 2003.

The AEU is not the only organisation to recognise the unique work being done at Claremont College. Researchers from Melbourne University were recently at the school looking at Aboriginal students and vocational education.

Most importantly, the college’s reputation among the Aboriginal community appears to be growing. Hamilton says that raw data suggests that many Aboriginal students who used to favour the college’s large open learning program are now choosing to attend the campus. “Most of our students are actually on site, getting all the things we think are really important about being in an educational institution, besides just being in class.” ■

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