



# From little things, a bigger message grows

Building a stronger connection to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and Country.

BY **LEANNE TOLRA**  
PHOTOS **ANTHONY McKEE**





When Phillippa Adgemis became principal at Coldstream Primary School in Melbourne's northeast in 2016, the school community did not acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Adgemis and placement teacher Yvonne Thurgood, a Noongar woman, began to acknowledge Country at briefings each morning and included it in weekly assemblies. They found prominent places to display the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags and adopted a whole-of-school approach to inclusion.

Together, they audited the school's teaching to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. In addition, the school observes significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dates in activities and staff have participated in Community Understanding and Safety Training (CUST). In recognition of their ongoing work and school programs, Adgemis and Thurgood are the 2023 winners of the Arthur Hamilton Award for Outstanding Contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education.

Today the Coldstream Primary School community recognises the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the

Traditional Custodians of the land on which the school stands, and its students have developed their own daily class and weekly assembly acknowledgements.

There are four Aboriginal children at the primary school and four children at the school's kindergarten. Other families are beginning to discover their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry as they learn more, too.

## IMMERSION IN CULTURE

The school has celebrated Harmony Day since 2017 and each year teachers and students adapt Dreamtime stories into plays to perform for the local community.

"Hundreds of community members joined us that first day. Local Traditional Custodians performed a Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony and children participated in activities including boomerang making and Aboriginal-themed colouring," says Adgemis.

"Playgroup, kinder and long day care children from neighbouring areas and other primary schools attended and were gifted with showbags including Aboriginal-themed colouring books and pencils.

(from left to right) Phillippa Adgemis, principal at Coldstream Primary; Yvonne Thurgood (left) celebrates the Arthur Hamilton Award with a student.

## IN SHORT

// Phillippa Adgemis and Yvonne Thurgood of Coldstream Primary School in Melbourne's northeast are the 2023 winners of the Arthur Hamilton Award.

// The educators have successfully incorporated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, cultural learnings and celebrations into their school's curriculum.





(from top) Phillippa Adgemis with a student from Coldstream Primary; (below) Adgemis (centre) and Yvonne Thurgood (far right) with students and the Arthur Hamilton Award – funding from which will go towards training that supports staff to develop and embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.



the Traditional Custodians of where our school is built,” she says.

Thurgood, who is the school's Marrung leader, says she was not encouraged to recognise her own Aboriginality when she was growing up.

She has learned much about the culture of her mob and teaches and shares it with her students. Together they use Noongar words wherever they can, and Thurgood teaches Wurundjeri Woi wurrung words where she can.

### STRONG CONNECTIONS

The school has also engaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators to deliver sessions on traditional craft, bush tucker, medicines and connections to the land.

In 2019, the school applied for a grant to develop a Koorie hub supported by Wurundjeri Elder Brooke Wandin, who helped to develop modules of learning to consolidate cultural understandings. Wandin visited classrooms to support learning and help embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the curriculum.

Adgemis says the school has also included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-themed furnishings and toys in its early years rooms and has engaged mentors to run specialised programs for its Wurundjeri children.

“We have also commissioned a series of murals depicting the totems of the children as known to us – and involved First Nations children – and all the children in the school have participated in their creation and installation,” says Adgemis.

Adgemis says the school plans to use the grant money provided by the Arthur Hamilton Award for staff to undertake

“It has become a regular March event at our school and First Nations plays and themes are at the centre of our study leading up to the day,” says Adgemis.

“This immersion of culture has been systematic and as we have progressed, we have included all significant events including NAIDOC Week, Sorry Day, Indigenous Literacy Day, Reconciliation Week.

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**Where possible we reference First Nations culture as an underpinning of our lessons and always link back to the Traditional Custodians of where our school is built.**

”

**Phillippa Adgemis**  
Coldstream Primary School

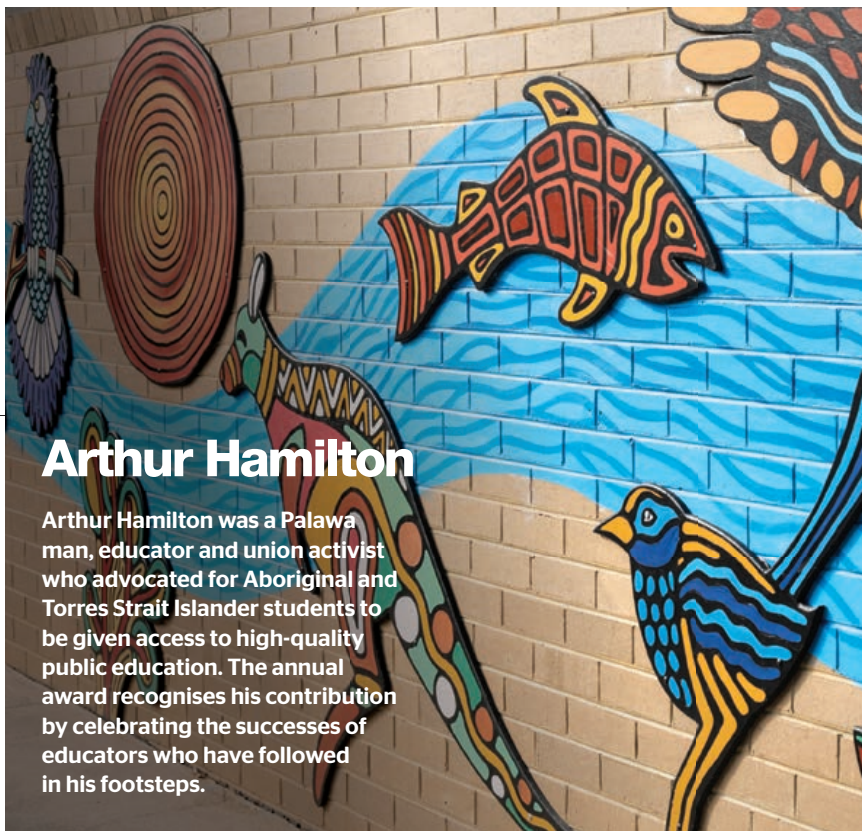
training through the Strengthening Professional Capabilities of Principals in Koorie Education (SPPIKE) program. The program supports Victorian principals and education leaders to develop and embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

**Leanne Tolra** is a freelance writer and *Australian Educator's* sub-editor.



## Arthur Hamilton

Arthur Hamilton was a Palawa man, educator and union activist who advocated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be given access to high-quality public education. The annual award recognises his contribution by celebrating the successes of educators who have followed in his footsteps.



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