

The History Of

# The Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School

Acacia Ridge, Queensland

The Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School (hereafter referred to as the Murri School) was first established in 1986 with an aim to promote the development of Indigenous students as independent and skilled people who are culturally, morally and socially responsible, employable, capable of self-fulfilment and of contributing to society. In 1987, the school received full registration status with the Queensland Department of Education, which certified its application requirements with the Association of Independent Schools of Queensland and agreement with the Commonwealth.

This milestone in Indigenous Education was for the school's community, a significant move towards eliminating barriers that impede Indigenous students access to, and participation in, mainstream primary education.

For the first ten years of operation, the school was located in a leased, disused Catholic primary school in Highgate Hill. This situation was not ideal as there were no playing areas for the children and access only to three classrooms. The school was asked to relocate during 1995 as the site did not meet Workplace Health and Safety standards and cost of upgrade was well beyond the means of the Parish Council. The school secured a two year lease from Education Queensland on closed inner city school.

The move to this premises meant a marked improvement in the overall environment of the school, however, space allotted meant there was still a restriction on enrolments. We were able to increase enrolments to some degree with the move but were very quickly filled to capacity.

The school's Board of Directors and staff were untiring in their efforts to obtain Crown Land and/or financial assistance to purchase suitable land or site. This in turn meant that the school was not in a position to make application to Block Grant, due to the non-ownership of land and basic space and facilities to secure a grant.

In 1997, the school was successful in its application to the Commonwealth to secure funds to purchase our current site at Acacia Ridge.

The Murri School has a proven record of performance in advancing the educational attainment of Indigenous students, with particular reference to:

- addressing the non-attendance, learning difficulties and retention rates of Indigenous students in compulsory schooling;
- encouraging Indigenous community involvement in local educational decision – making processes.

The school's role and function within the Indigenous community is an established mechanism directly aligned and currently responsive to the following priorities:

- improving Indigenous literacy
- improving Indigenous numeracy
- increasing the employment of Indigenous Australians in education and training
- improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students
- increasing Indigenous enrolments
- increasing the involvement of Indigenous parents/community members in educational decision making
- increasing professional development for staff involved in Indigenous education

In line with these priorities, the school has adopted key priority areas that are reflected as national priorities of the AEP:

1. Making educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians similar to those for non-Indigenous Australians;
2. Setting literacy, numeracy and employment targets;
3. Involving Indigenous parents in their children's education;
4. Expanding secure employment and training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all levels, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers;
5. Ensuring appropriate professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education;
6. Developing and extending culturally inclusive curricula;
7. Involving Indigenous Australians in educational decision making;
8. Achieving literacy and numeracy outcomes for Indigenous Australians similar to those for non-Indigenous Australians; and
9. Addressing the development of sound foundation competencies.

It could be argued that there are other educational facilities available to parents and children in the Acacia Ridge area. However, the Murri School is not about denying the important aspects of contemporary education playing a vital role in the future of Indigenous children, nor is it about creating a 'black' separatist education for Indigenous people. It is about creating a choice that Indigenous people in the catchment area have in terms of the schools available for their children or as a school that they can access even if they choose to send their children elsewhere.

It should be noted that the formation of the school was not motivated by how poorly Indigenous students were performing in mainstream schools. It was also based on a clear understanding by parents and community leaders that cultural beliefs and practices were an integral part of the whole development of children – of all their academic, psychological, social and spiritual aspects. This is no different a stance to that adopted by other secular, or class-based groups in mainstream public or private schools.

Indigenous cultures in this context play an intrinsic role in developing and negotiating the acquisition of 'western' education skills and abilities, because there is no covert promotion in teaching approaches of any 'deficit' or 'impediment' to learning. As a result, the school ethos is based on debunking populist views that conceive Indigenous cultural differences as being so profound as to render mutual understanding or meaningful exchange, whether inside or outside classrooms, as exceedingly difficult if not impossible.

School staff hold the view that, while equitable participation policies for Indigenous students in mainstream schooling systems is important, these should be balanced by alternative choices in schooling for Indigenous families and the communities they inhabit.

Providing this choice can contribute to how Indigenous people articulate their self-determination in educational outcomes for both students and their families. Many children in our current population have been excluded or repeatedly suspended from the mainstream schooling system. The Murri School thus provides access to education for students often denied them elsewhere.

The opportunity exists to create in-depth learning by developing education leaders who work with school staff and the community to build a collective educational vision that is clear, compelling, and connected to teaching and learning. This collective vision would help focus attention on what is important, motivates staff and students, and increases the sense of shared responsibility for learning where collegiality and co-operation are the keys to real educational success for Indigenous children.