



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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# Narrandera High School

## Inclusive education in NSW schools

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



This case study forms part of a series on inclusive education in schools. The NSW Department of Education is committed to building a more inclusive education system, one where all students feel welcomed and are learning to their fullest capability. Inclusive education means all students, regardless of disability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, nationality, language, gender, sexual orientation or faith, can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Inclusion is embedded in all aspects of school life, and is supported by culture, policies and everyday practices ([Disability Strategy \(2019\)](#)).

The department is committed to building the capacity of our mainstream public schools to meet the needs of their local students unless there are compelling individual reasons why a different option would better support the student. We acknowledge that this needs to be balanced against parental choice regarding the most appropriate setting for their child, and will continue to work with parents and education experts to individualise support so that every child can be engaged with learning and flourish at school ([Progress Report: Improving outcomes for students with disability 2019](#)).

## Introduction

Narrandera High School is a secondary school located in the town of Narrandera in the NSW Riverina region. Located adjacent to the Murrumbidgee River, the town is at the centre of a productive agricultural region. Narrandera High School is currently experiencing a growth in enrolments. There are 304 students enrolled at the school, an increase of 22% between 2015 and 2019. Approximately one-quarter (24%) of students identify as Aboriginal. Narrandera has a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) with approximately 50% of students in the bottom quarter of socioeconomic status. Students with disability make up approximately 20% of the student population, and the school has two multi-categorical support classrooms (MC). Students move between mainstream classes and the MC class depending on their needs.

Narrandera High School has embedded inclusive education in the school through building the capacity and confidence of staff, having a focus on behaviour management, providing individualised support for all students, and fostering links between the school and the community.

## What has worked to improve inclusive education at Narrandera High School:

- Building the capacity and confidence of staff in inclusive education through professional learning and teacher learning communities.
- Focusing on positive relationships and high expectations to improve behaviour.
- Having a clear focus on individualised learning needs, providing adjustments or differentiated teaching for students, and monitoring progress.
- Fostering links between the school and the local community to provide services and additional opportunities for students with disability.



“Inclusive education is [that] fair isn’t always equal ... it’s about making sure that we are able to provide whatever support that students need to be able to learn and access education.”

**Marni Milne, Principal**



## Building the capacity and confidence of staff to embed inclusive education

In recent years, Narrandera High School has made a significant investment in building the knowledge and capability of the school's staff to embed inclusive education. The staff have been open to new ideas and learning how to better support students with disability. Capacity building began by examining the school's legal and ethical responsibilities towards students with disability, including looking at the Disability Discrimination Act (1992), the Disability Standards for Education (2005) and reviewing the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. The principal then worked with material provided by NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) staff, to develop resources and professional learning for teachers and support staff targeted at inclusive education, suited to the context and needs of Narrandera High School and its students. A particular focus of the resources and professional learning was shifting the mindset of teachers away from teaching all students the same way. School staff learnt from the school's principal and deputy principal how to ensure all students can access the curriculum and achieve learning outcomes through the use of differentiation and adjustments. This included a strong emphasis on helping teachers understand that not all students need to demonstrate their knowledge in the same way. For example, English teachers could have one marking criteria for a task, but allow students to demonstrate that they had achieved the learning outcomes using different text types.

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"Staff professional learning ... is crucial. I mean, you can put all the resources in the world into things, but if your staff aren't on board and aren't speaking that language, it's a bit of a waste of time."

**Marni Milne, Principal**

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In order to make sure inclusive education became embedded in the school culture and not just a temporary focus, the school introduced ongoing strategies, such as teacher learning communities (TLCs). The TLCs involve teachers working together on targeted areas of the school's inclusive education strategies, undertaking classroom observations, providing peer feedback and participating in mentoring. Teachers have had their teaching load reduced by one period per fortnight to allow time to work with a teaching partner, reflect on feedback provided to them and set individual goals for improving their inclusive education practice. The principal sees the TLCs as a key support structure for teachers to embed the inclusive education focus at the school. There are plans to expand the TLCs in 2020 by introducing coaching for teachers in order to ensure the professional learning is sustained, ongoing and having an impact on teaching practice.



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"It's really important to make sure that staff are supported to be inclusive and understand that every student is different and unique and that's okay."

**Marni Milne, Principal**

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## Supporting students through a focus on positive relationships and high expectations

Narrandera High School's staff identified 'restorative practice' as a critical component of inclusive education at the school. Restorative practice at Narrandera High School involves a focus on positive relationships and high expectations as a means to support students and improve behaviour. For example, if a student acts in an inappropriate way, once everyone is calm the student and others involved have a conversation to understand what happened and why it happened rather than immediately jumping to consequences. The principal summarises restorative practice as, "connect before correct", meaning staff focus on connecting on a personal level with students before discussing behaviour issues. Every student identifies one staff member, and students with disability identify multiple staff members, to act as trusted adults and their advocates at school (that is, their designated 'go-to' person). The initiative aims to make sure every student is known, has their needs met and has someone to speak to when things are not going well, in order to prevent the escalation of issues into challenging behaviour and to avoid withdrawing students from school (such as through suspension). Restorative practice was initially introduced due to staff concern about data showing a large number of suspensions and violent incidents at the school. The school indicated that since the introduction of this approach they have had a significant decrease in the number of student suspensions.

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"It's about knowing each other's story and being able to talk through that ... So, those relationships have been [a] really important part of our practice ..."

**Marni Milne, Principal**

"[Positive relationships between staff] comes down a lot from Marni too, she filters down that care and nurture approach, so leadership's huge."

**Krystin Metcalf, Intervention Centre Coordinator**

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## A commitment to providing individualised support for all students

Narrandera High School believes that all students should be provided with the individualised support they need to be able to learn. The individual learning needs of students are identified and monitored through early and regular testing, particularly testing in numeracy and literacy. For example, the school uses the York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (YARC) to determine students' literacy levels when they first arrive at the school. If students require extra support, they participate in literacy intervention program MacqLit (Macquarie Literacy program) or literacy and numeracy intervention program QuickSmart.



Staff highlighted the principal's open-door policy, solutions-oriented approach and willingness to support new ideas as particularly helpful when considering different ways to support students' individual needs. Staff noted that both the principal and relieving deputy principal work with teachers who need extra support to incorporate inclusive education strategies for students with disability in their classrooms. For example, the relieving deputy principal reviews all assessment task checklists (where teachers note adjustments made for individual assessments for students with disability), and adjustments coversheets (which outline the teaching and learning adjustments made for students with disability). The executive team also use the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers during discussions with teachers about how they can best support individual students' needs. The involvement from the school's executive in these processes is particularly important given staff are still learning about best practice for students with disability. This additional layer of review encourages good-quality practice and provides teachers with opportunities to build their skills.

Every student at Narrandera High School has an individualised learning plan. Plans are developed in partnership with the student, their family and the student's year advisor and identify student strengths, needs and learning goals. Individualised learning plans allow each student to have a voice and take ownership of their learning. For example, during the development of their plans, students are given the opportunity to talk specifically about the support they need to succeed, which is then built into their plan. Regular meetings with the student and their family ensure that individual goals are reviewed, any adjustments can be arranged and relevant support can be provided.

Narrandera High School provides additional support for students' individual needs through two dedicated spaces: the Intervention Centre and the Aboriginal Learning Centre. These spaces were created by the school to cater for the increasing support needs of students. The Intervention Centre – designed to be a calm and homely environment for students – focuses on supporting wellbeing and learning, and managing students with challenging behaviour. The Centre offers a number of programs for students, for example, student social groups, reading programs, a breakfast club, homework help and volunteer groups who participate in community projects. Staff can refer students to the Intervention Centre if they believe the student needs additional support or is having difficulties with behaviour. The Intervention Centre's coordinator has been trained in the Berry Street Education Model, and uses trauma-informed practice and wellbeing practices to support the individual academic and socioemotional needs of students.

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“There are processes but there's room in the process for the individual needs of all of the students to be catered for.”

Parent

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Narrandera High School's Intervention Centre



The Aboriginal Learning Centre supports Aboriginal students of Narrandera High School with their wellbeing, learning and assessment tasks. The Aboriginal Learning Centre is a classroom space designed to be calming and culturally sensitive, where students can access extra support. The Aboriginal Learning Centre is staffed by one teacher and one Aboriginal education officer (AEO) who provide individual support to students as required, and work with families to keep them informed and engaged through telephone calls and home visits.

The school's commitment to providing individualised support for students includes asking for student feedback regularly to ensure the support is meeting students' self-identified needs. The school uses student survey results to help staff determine whether their practices are effective, and also more broadly to provide student feedback on the school's activities and inclusive education practices. The school's leadership team uses this data to support any staff who may need further professional learning on how to improve their teaching for students with disability. The principal stated that emphasising student input and giving students ownership of their learning has contributed to a reduction in suspensions and negative behaviour.

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"[Inclusive education means]... every person regardless of ability will have the support that they need to become the best version of themselves."

**Krystin Metcalf, Intervention Centre Coordinator**

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## Fostering links between school and the community to meet the needs of students

Narrandera High School engages with the community to provide services and additional opportunities for students with disability. The school has links with community agencies, government agencies and other services, including disability support agencies, family referral services, health and medical services and therapists, PCYC, mental health support, and government agencies such as Family and Community Services and Centrelink. The school also works with National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers from the local community. One example of how students' needs are catered to through community links is through the school's life skills cooking group. Some of the students in the group are uncomfortable in the large commercial kitchens at the school. To meet these students' needs, the school has engaged a local community organisation that is able to provide access to their 'home style' commercial kitchen, where students can cook in a more comfortable environment.

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"We go above and beyond, and I think it's because we love where we work and we love our community, and we just want these kids, students to achieve and be as successful as they can be."

**Joy O'Hara, Aboriginal Education Officer**

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Narrandera High School also works with the community to prepare students for life after school. Students with disability are engaging with employment agencies to develop work-readiness skills. For example, Kurrajong Waratah, an NDIS provider which offers supports and services for people with disability in the Riverina and Murray regions, employs some students in Years 11 and 12 to work two days per week while completing their studies. Links to the local TAFE have also increased student readiness for transition out of school. Some students, for instance, are completing a Certificate III course or are on alternative pathways with the local TAFE.

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"When you're in a small town like Narrandera, your school is not your school 9:00am to 3:00pm, and that's it. It is... a trusted place for a much broader support for families."

**Marni Milne, Principal**

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CESE would like to thank the Principal, Marni Milne, as well as other members of the school's staff Helen Langley – Relieving Deputy Principal, Jamie Gawne – Learning and Support Coordinator, Krystin Metcalf – Intervention Centre Coordinator, Joy O'Hara – Aboriginal Education Officer, Glen Borg – Aboriginal Education Officer and parents from Narrandera High School, for their valuable input into this study.

A network diagram with various sized nodes and connecting lines, set against a teal background.

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