

Gunbalanya School

Location: Northern Territory

“What a ridiculous concept that this white fella can come into such a culturally rich area and know what to do”

**John Bray, Former College Director, Gunbalanya School
(formerly West Arnhem College)**



Former Director, John Bray, says that when he arrived at Gunbalanya School in 2010, the school looked like it had been lost in time. There were low expectations and the existing status quo was just accepted. The broken windows and graffiti didn't really matter. After all, it was 'just Gunbalanya.' No student had ever graduated from Year 12, and it was accepted that if you wanted your child to finish school, you sent them to boarding school in Darwin.

John says he came into the school with preconceived ideas, "I'd been a Principal at other Indigenous schools, and ... I knew... you didn't need to tell me!" He says he came in with all his underlying assumptions, beliefs and values, believing that he knew how to 'fix' the school. In hindsight, John says, 'What a ridiculous concept that this white fella can come into such a culturally rich area and know what to do.'

John says the result of his preconceived ideas was dysfunctional relationships. He made a number of assumptions and came at relationships from a deficit mindset. In particular, this translated into the way he interacted with the local, female, Indigenous Principal. Relationships deteriorated rapidly, and there was no culture of trust within the school. The whole situation was disempowering, which filtered across the school, the staff and the



community. John says he had low expectations.

The impact

For John this was the start of a journey of transformation for the school. By 2016, the school was already seeing the results. Staff and community satisfaction were shown by high staff retention rates, and the number of Indigenous staff employed at the school. In 2010, the school was spending up to \$48,000 a year bringing in new staff to replace those leaving. The increased staff retention means that these costs have been significantly reduced.

One of the school's biggest achievements has been in Year 12. In 2010, after approximately 65 years of operation, there had never been a senior student graduate from the school. Students either left school in Year 10 or were sent to Kormilda College in Darwin to finish school. In 2012, the first two senior students graduated Year 12, and since that time another 20 students have graduated. In 2016, there were 32 students in Years 10, 11 and 12. In January 2017, Gunbalanya School became the first remote Independent Public school in the Northern Territory.

Staff and student Outcomes

95% Staff retention in 2015	Staff retention increased from 68% in 2010 to 95% in 2015.
64% of total staff are Indigenous	Indigenous staff numbers have increased from 11 in 2010 (36% of the total staff) to 38 in 2016 (64% of total staff).
22 students graduated from Year 12	Number of senior students (Years 10 to 12) increased from 12 in 2010 to 32 in 2016 Number of Year 12 graduates has increased from no graduates at all in 2010 to 2 in 2011 and up to 8 in 2015 (total of 22 graduates since 2011).
Community engagement	High levels of community and parent engagement in the school
Attendance improving	Attendance rates are improving – from 51% in 2010 to 56% in 2015.

Stronger Smarter in Action

In 2012, John attended the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program. He says that the Program made him realise that if he wanted to change the school, this change needed to start with himself. “We talk about changing people or culture, but it’s about changing the organisation, and that begins with yourself.”

John says he returned from the Program with a strength-based mindset and a greater understanding of how to develop positive relationships. He was more aware of his own lack of cultural competence. The Stronger Smarter Leadership Program asks participants to commit to personal and workplace challenges. John’s personal challenge was to repair the relationship with the School Principal. He arranged a meeting with the Principal where he sincerely apologised for his behaviours that colluded with a low expectations relationship. This was the first step in starting to build trust and mutual respect. As the senior leaders in the school were able to model High-Expectations Relationship, this gradually filtered down to the rest of the school. Only when this relationship and culture of trust was in place, could they start to find a way forward to begin the school transformation.

A pathway to school transformation

The pathway to school transformation began when John was able to work collaboratively with the Principal to

identify the existing strengths in the school and community and use these as a way forward. They were able to bring their strengths together and co-created a school transformation plan.

This involved engaging the local community in creating a vision that embraced a positive sense of identity in the school. They began by asking the school community three questions:

- ▶ What is so?
- ▶ What is possible?
- ▶ What is missing?

This approach ensured a strength-based mindset which started by identifying the great things already happening in the school community. They could then focus on whole school improvement and develop a strategic plan for the school. The implementation was adapted and changed based on outcomes and feedback from the wider community. The result has been the Gunbalanya **Pillars of a Deadly School Framework** for whole school



improvement which involves a foundational platform of High-Expectation Relationships of “how we work together”.

Innovative staffing models

A successful strategy at Gunbalanya has been to recognise the important role the Indigenous Principal was playing in the community and how this could support the school’s community engagement. John says, “We recognised that her role as a leader in the community was an important part of the school. So if she didn’t come to school until 10.00 am because she’d been up at 3.00 am working out local issues ... well that was OK. It didn’t mean she wasn’t doing her job”. The school has now been able to introduce an innovative school model where they employ another Co-Principal to support curriculum leadership in the school. The Co-Principal is able to lead the day to day teaching framework, allowing the Indigenous Principal to focus on community engagement.

Innovative curriculum approach

The focused approach of developing cultural competence among the staff, the process of asking the question of “how do we work together?” and the resulting culture of trust enabled the creation of collaborative cultures and innovative problem solving amongst the staff. A result of this was the 3 Domain Approach that is at the heart of the school and community framework. This Approach identifies three interdependent areas of the school community, each equally

important and resourced collectively – Class, Culture and Crew. The class domain is the English language domain of teaching through the Australian Curriculum. The Culture domain provides equal time and space for the local Kunwinju culture to be part of learning in school each day and delivered through the local Indigenous Associate Teachers. The Crew domain allows for a high standard of rich, diverse and extensive extra curricula activities where all families and community members can engage in after school activities that are relevant and useful for community. The interconnection of the three domains produces the platform for this unique school model.

Indigenous leadership

Employing more Indigenous staff in the school has been important. Cultural traditions were valued in the school with Men’s Business as a key feature. The employment of Senior Law Men within the



school enabled a cultural sharing of western and non-western values. Previously, senior boys returned from country into the school and implied that they did not need to show respect to the female staff. With the employment of the Senior Law Men within the school, this perception was challenged and the senior boys began to understand the need to show respect to all staff.

Innovative school models

The engagement of Indigenous community leaders within the school also allowed for greater involvement in decision making. One innovative change occurred at the beginning of 2012 when they adapted the school calendar to match with the long-standing traditional knowledges of the Kunwindu 6 Seasons Calendar. In Gunbalanya, the local Indigenous people go out to their

homelands in the dry season, often taking their children away from school. By

shortening the traditional school summer break in the December-January wet season to three weeks and moving the long break in the June-July dry season, the school has seen a positive impact on school attendance.

Another important change has been to recognise the importance of the Early Childhood years. The school instigated a partnership between the Department of Education, Department of Communities and Department of Health to establish the Child and Family Centre that caters for the 0-4 age group and assists with preparing children for school. This is one of only four centres in the Northern Territory.

Gunbalanya's transformation process

1. **Leadership and staffing:** Setting a culture of trust within the school.
2. **High Expectations:** Working with the school community to build a vision and strategic plan.
3. **High-Expectations Relationships:** The Gunbalanya Pillars of a Deadly School Framework for whole school improvement which involves a foundational platform of High-Expectation Relationships of "how we work together?"
4. **Innovative school and staffing models:** Co-Principals, valuing Indigenous leadership, adapting the school calendar, and the 3 Domain Approach.
5. **Specific support programs:** Early Childhood – Child and Family Centre. Cultural programs within the school.