



# Case Study: Yipirinya School

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## Context

Yipirinya is an independent, non-government Northern Territory school that caters for First Nations children from Transition to Year 10. Students typically identify from one or more language groups: Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Aranda. Located to the west of Mparntwe (Alice Springs), it is classified as a 'remote' school (see Figure 1).



The name of the school, Yipirinya translates to 'caterpillar' which is the major Dreaming story of Mparntwe. Arrernte people believe that the region was created by the sacred totemic ancestral being, the caterpillar. The Yipirinya became the ridges of Tjortija (West and East MacDonnell Ranges) that surround the town.

Figure 1. Location map for Yipirinya School, Northern Territory



Since 1978, the school has used a two way approach to education. It seeks to build a community of support around its students. By teaching students two ways (bicultural and bilingual), they remain strong in language and culture to start their learning journey in identity, connection to Country and kinship. This is actioned through teaching and learning experiences in story, dance, art and songlines. The school combines curricula to suit the needs of students. These include: the Australian Curriculum, the Early Years Learning Framework and the Northern Territory Indigenous Languages and Culture Curriculum.

The school is governed by an Aboriginal School Council that consists of a group of eight local members, two from each of the language groups: Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Western Aranda. The council is an incorporated body. The 2023 members have had long term connections to the school. The current executive leadership team consists of a Principal (the Secondary Hub Coordinator) and three Assistant Principals (one the Early Years Hub Coordinator/Teaching and Learning, the another the Lower Primary Hub Coordinator/Operations Inclusion and Wellbeing and the last the Upper Primary Hub Coordinator/Language and Culture. Two of the Assistant Principals are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent (see <https://www.yipirinya.com.au/school-council/>).

The school values are: *Be a learner, be responsible and be respectful*. Around the school, the values are presented in the four languages. Luritja (Nintirru tjaku, Antani tjukaru, Palya nyinantjaku), Central Arrernte (Akaltye-irretyeke, Antarnte-arrerntyeke, Mwerre anetyeke), Warlpiri (Pinarrijarriya, Warra-warra kanyi, Ngurrjurlu nyinaya) and Western Aranda (Kaltye-irretyeke, Ntarnte-arrentyeke, Marre netyeke).

The school has a distinctive community-driven history. In the early 1970s, town camp elders believed that government schools did not cater for their children as language and culture was not valued in their learning. Children and their families felt ostracised, bullied and a lack of belonging. Instead, elders sought for children to be strong, confident learners. In 1978 the Yipirinya School Council was founded and then in 1979, the first classes began in town camps. These classes were held under trees and in make-shift shade structures. In 1981 the council applied for formal registration. However, this was initially declined. This decision was appealed to the Supreme Court and then in 1983, Yipirinya School was registered. It was in 1984 that the current location on Lovegrove Drive was offered and the first stage of building began. By September 1988, the first stage of building was completed and the second stage by November 1989. The establishment and development of the school is a story of struggle and resilience (see Figure 2)

Figure 2. Yipirinya School: A Story of Struggle and Resilience



Over the past two years, staffing in the school has increased dramatically. In 2021, *My School* data states there were nine teaching staff and 16 non-teaching staff (see Table 1). This increased significantly in 2022 to 20 teaching staff and 55 non-teaching staff. Data from this project reflect another staffing increase in 2023 with over 109 staff (over 70 percent identifying as First Nations people.) Within the staff there are several local First Nations staff members who are qualified primary education teachers. These staff members are Luritja, Eastern Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Aranda leaders who have worked in the school for decades.

At the beginning of 2023 the school classroom structure was redesigned from the typical year level division of students (e.g., Year 1, Year 2). Currently the structure consists of a preschool, four lower years (students in Transition to Year 3) classes divided into the four language groups (Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Western Aranda), four upper primary years (students Year 4 to Year 6) classes divided into the four language groups and two secondary classes (male and female). In each of the classes, there are at least two staff members, one Western and one Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri or Western Aranda, depending on the class cohort language group. The school accentuates its unique structure as "it is the only school of its kind in Australia that teachers four Aboriginal languages and English" (<https://www.yipirinya.com.au/yipirinya-today>).

The school site comprises eight classrooms, an early years centre, a language and culture centre, a computer lab, home economics kitchen, art and craft rooms, commercial kitchen with dining room for the nutrition program, indoor gymnasium/multi-purpose hall with a performance stage, music room and woodworking studio, 25m swimming pool, outdoor 3x3 basketball court, oval, 40-bed camp ground accommodation and administration area. In November 2022, a storm ripped sections of the roof off two buildings: the secondary and the administration areas. As a result of the storm, a range of renovations have been undertaken on the site (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Opening of Renovated Buildings and Garden Following the 2022 Storm



School partnerships include with the Department of Education Student Engagement, Territory Families, Tangentyere Council, and the Youth Outreach Re-engagement Team (YORET). These partnerships seek to provide the best possible student outcomes.

According to the 2022 *My School* data, there are 273 student enrolments which is comprised of 139 boys (51 percent) and 134 girls (49 percent). Records from interviews highlight 2023 enrolments have increased to more than 302 students. Attendance rates from 2021 *My School* data are reported as 31 percent. Results for 2022 are not reported and are not yet available for 2023, but attendance rates are expected to have improved.

Data from this project revealed Yipirinya School is currently financially operating on an annual budget of \$15 million (hence, 302 enrolments equate to approximately \$49,000 per student) This is a dramatic overall increase from the most up-to-date *My School* data (2021) which reports an annual funding of \$4.7 million with 108 enrolments which equates to \$44,000 per student. Additional details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. School profile, Yipirinya School, 2014-2022

Year	Per cent First Nations Students	Per cent speaking Language other than English	Enrolment	Attendance rate, % (Term 1)	Teaching staff	Non-Teaching staff
2014	100	90	138		16	34
2015	99		187	59	14	44
2016	100	100	153		12	28
2017	100	99	140	52	16	22
2018	100	94	142	41	12	18
2019	100	88	164	34	10	16
2020	100	94	106		15	20
2021	100	100	108	31	9	16
2022	100		273		20	55

Source: My School <https://myschool.edu.au/school/50161>

## Methods

This project used a mixed methods research framework, both qualitative and quantitative. Over the next section, the participants, data collection and community-based researchers for the case study are outlined.

## Participants

There were three types of participants in the study: students, staff and community members.

#### *Students*

Nine students aged 15 years and above, were interviewed. The age of the students was taken from the date of signed informed consent. Prior to data collection, the community-based researchers met with the local Batchelor researcher to discuss which students would be best to speak to ensure informed consent could be given from caregivers.

#### *Staff*

Twenty staff were interviewed. The ages of the staff varied from early 20s to late 60s, with varying experience in the school. Some staff had worked in the school since it began, others had only begun in 2023. Many of the staff were interviewed by the community-based researchers.

#### *Community members*

During the data collection period, 26 community members were interviewed. The community members were connected to school and their ages varied from mid 20s to mid 50s. Throughout the research process participants were reminded of the practices of confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal in plain language.

### **Data Collection**

Data was drawn from once or twice weekly visits to the school during Term 2, 2023. The data collected of:

- 45 interviews (nine student, 20 staff and 26 community members).
- Online survey (final number to be determine at the end of data collection period).

*Figure 4. Community-based Researcher Training held at Yipirinya, March 2023*



### **Community-based Researchers**

Prior to the data collection period, community-based researchers were identified within the school community. After discussions with those people, they were invited to participate in a two-day community-based researcher training program at the school. The training focused on ethics (consent, confidentiality, privacy, withdrawal, benefits, risks), data collection methods (surveys, interviews, storytelling, yarning circles), recording tools (digital recorders, phones) and finally, role plays (see Figure 4). Four community-based researchers completed the training, and they were integral to the research process as they were able to enhance the validity of the research findings as they confirmed with each other and mitigated researcher bias.

## Research Questions

Two research questions guide the project:

1. What has impacted student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools in Northern Territory and Western Australia, and how (including COVID-19 and other events)?
2. What targeted educational support structures, practices and strategies lead to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools of Northern Territory and Western Australia?

Considering the research questions, six case study specific findings are described below.

## Findings

This section investigates the findings specific to this case study, Yipirinya School on Arrernte Country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The overarching finding of the study indicates that attendance alone cannot be the sole measurement of school success, rather engagement needs to be the focus. To unpack this finding, this section is divided into six themes namely, relationships, purpose, flexible school structures, cultural safety, metrics and holistic needs.

### Relationships

For many First Nations peoples, connection through family is an essential societal value in everyday life. Over the course of the data collection period at this case study site, relationship and connections was a key reoccurring theme. For many of the Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Aranda students social relatedness is organised through the Law. Across central Australia, the classificatory section system, known as the kinship system, regulates how people relate with one another across all aspects of everyday behavioural patterns in life, marriage, funerals, land ownership and ceremonial life. When students step into the school setting, the societal value of relationships is not surrendered at the gate. Yipirinya School has rebuilt its workforce with Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Western Aranda people (from 25 staff in 2021, 75 in 2022 to 109 staff in 2023 with over 70 percent identifying as First Nations people). By having kinship family members in the school setting, both teaching and non-teaching staff, students expressed a sense of connection through their existing familial relationships that intertwines them into broader society. This finding reinforces the need for remote schools to invest in local workforce. Yet, simply employing a local work force cannot be the solution. Instead, local staff must be invested in through authentic, non-tokenistic approaches with access to training packages, by overcoming power imbalances with equal pay, initiatives, professional development, housing, incentives, qualifications, salary, and the bridging the digital divide. For non-local school leadership and staff, this requires an inward analysis to possible gatekeeping practices. Data from this case study indicated the gatekeeping reality is not perfect at Yipirinya however, the school's transparency and willingness to try innovative localised solutions is evident. Additionally, the way the school was conceived may have contributed to the localised power, ownership, and authority over the school. Many of the Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Aranda staff have been involved in the school for decades. In one instance, it was one teacher's father who was part of the Supreme Court team in the 1980s advocating for the school to be formally registered. For school engagement, these long term, intergenerational staff connections and relationships are fully supported by students and the wider community.

### Purpose

Another emerging theme from the case study data is the link between attendance, engagement, and retention to purpose. Purpose can be described as having contextual meaning and connection to real life. At Yipirinya School, the data indicated that staff, students, and community members all expressed the need for learning to have meaningful connections to everyday life. Yipirinya School carries out purposeful learning through a strengths-based approach with on Country learning and language programs. Currently the school runs on Country trips once a week in their language groups. Students in their language groups also participate in a once-a-term, three-to-four-day on Country camp. As an independent school, Yipirinya has financial agency over budgeting decisions, and uses resources to build engagement and purpose into learning. While there were some concerns with the process (i.e., some staff stated the on Country trips were more like

excursions, organised by non-local staff and some students expressed they'd like more cultural learning on those trips) overall, the data indicated that on Country learning programs and language curriculum were a reason for attendance in school as they gave contextual meaning and purpose to their learning. Data from this project indicated that while change was good, any changes to school structure should go through local governance and leadership structures.

### **Flexible School Structures**

Interview data reveals that a flexible school structure is a strategy that has resulted in a perceived increase in attendance, engagement, and retention. In 2023 Yipirinya School implemented a new school structure (as discussed earlier) which transitioned from a typical Year level divided school to a preschool, four lower years (students in Transition to Year 3) classes divided into the four language groups (Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Western Aranda), four upper primary years (students Year 4 to Year 6) classes divided into the four language groups and two secondary classes (male and female). The school structure was adjusted to suit the linguistic needs of the students. Interview data suggests that attendance, engagement, and retention levels have been improved. This finding suggests that if schools are going to adjust school structures, these changes should go through legitimised local governance and leadership structures.

### **Cultural Safety**

The data for this case study suggested that all three participant groups (students, staff and community members) reinforced the importance of cultural safety for improved attendance, engagement and retention. Luritja, Central Arrernte, Warlpiri and Western Aranda staff highlighted the need for more cultural awareness training for non-local staff. Intercultural training and cultural inductions encourage students, families, and the wider community to respond, engage, and return to non-local staff who display understanding, empathy, and a willingness to learn about their socio-cultural values, practices, knowledges, and languages. Local staff who had been at the school for decades mentioned that in the past there had been intercultural training and cultural inductions which promoted cultural safety. However, in recent years, the training had dropped away. Interviews with Yipirinya School leadership team reinforced the responsibility of higher education training providers to educate local preservice teachers. Non-local preservice teachers should be equipped with foundational cultural awareness to knowledges and history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, importance of kinship and family, impact of colonisation on First Nations people, trauma of Stolen Generations and the ongoing impact of intergenerational trauma, tools for reconciliation, understanding of the concept of *The Uluru Statement of the Heart* and the First Nations Voice to Parliament referendum. This style of training would offer non-local preservice teachers the tools they need to enter remote schools with fair, safe, and respectful approaches with students, their families, and local staff.

### **Metrics**

During the data collection period, a recurring theme was the link between remote school funding models and the associated metric systems. At Yipirinya, funding is based on enrolments. The data revealed the school invested between \$30,000 and \$35,000 in the eight weeks prior to the census day/period to get students to school. When reflecting on the current annual budget (\$15 million, therefore, 302 enrolments equate to about \$49,000 per student), the \$30,000 to \$35,000 census investment is less than one enrolment, so the return on investment is potentially significant. This data highlighted the need to reconceptualise metrics and calculations. By focusing on enrolments rather than attendance, Yipirinya School has been able to take calculated financial and cultural risks to provide a range of holistic, wrap around services. This finding highlighted the need for funding models and metrics systems to be reconsidered, particularly in remote schools, where small changes can have a large impact on school funding. The other point relating to metrics here is that the focus on enrolment leading to a census period—but not after—may mean that impetus for retaining children during the rest of year, may wane.

### **Holistic Needs**

Yipirinya School has two distinctive holistic wraparound services: the *Happy Heart Hub* and the *Sunset Program*.

The *Happy Heart Hub* began in 2022 and is a collection of allied health workers that support individual student needs. The program employs 11 fulltime on site local and non-

local staff which includes case managers, youth workers, a physiotherapist, a psychologist, an occupational therapist and play therapist. The program is run by the Inclusion and Wellbeing Team and seeks to holistically support students and remove barriers. The *Happy Heart Hub* program aims to assist students in connection, co-regulation, concentration, behaviour, emotions, and de-escalation by linking with therapy services, building management plans, and putting in place support systems through both Western and cultural practices and knowledge.

The Sunset Program began in April 2022 and provides engagement initiatives to students outside of school hours (school holidays, weeks, after school, public holidays) which targets the more marginalised students in the school outside of school hours through connection to sport, Country, arts, literacy, and education. The program is partly funded by the Department of Education Northern Territory (\$275,000). In addition, Yipirinya School puts double that amount into the program. These programs link students with local and non-local support staff and could be viewed as a holistic intergenerational learning hub or centre incorporating Western evidence-based support and cultural knowledge systems.

## **Implications**

The research at Yipirinya has provided valuable insights into attendance, engagement, and retention in one remote central Australian school. What has been revealed in the study is that dual focus should be placed on attendance and engagement. We argue that purposeful engagement needs to be at the heart of remote schools which will subsequently influence attendance and retention. In other words, attendance and retention follow engagement, not the other way around.

To understand the contextual meaning of ‘purposeful engagement’, local staff and community members must be central to the school’s leadership, governance, staffing, curriculum, programs, and partnerships. Local people provide the knowledge to the school about what measurements of success should be. As a result, Western and cultural (knowledge and language) programs can be designed to meet the needs of the students.

The importance of authentic, non-tokenistic community decision making also emerges as an important finding from in this case study. As discussed in the findings section, a key component to Yipirinya School’s operation plan is strong local employment within the school. The employment of local First Nations staff strengthens the foundational importance of relationships. Another implication of the project is the need for an improvement to non-local school staff training and awareness. Cultural inductions and awareness programs are essential for respectful and safe school environments.

Unexpected events like COVID-19 and the weather event of 2022 at Yipirinya School demonstrated how a flexible and innovative approach to teaching and learning in remote locations can benefit the students, families, and wider community as they become active agents in decision making. The data revealed that the participants enjoyed spending more time on Country with their families as purposeful cultural learning become the norm. While people did express concerns around the fear of the pandemic, often the fear was balanced with the benefits. The implication from this finding is that families want to be more involved in their children’s learning and the success needs to be determined by families.

Regarding the weather event and the school being closed as two buildings didn’t have a roof, the participants of the case study referred to the positives over the negatives. The participants repeatedly discussed the enjoyment of school being spread across various locations in Mparntwe (i.e., a university, a restaurant, on Country in partnership with another organisation Children’s Ground, and a publishing company). A consequence of this weather event reinforced the participants desire for learning to be integrated into the community and not solely in the confines of the school gates.

### Summary of implications

1. Invest in local workforce (e.g., training packages for local staff).
2. Improve non-local training and awareness (e.g., intercultural training, preservice teachers, cultural inductions).
3. Focus on language and culture from a strengths-based approach (i.e., return to post 1970s research as it still hasn't been actioned in policy or practice).
4. Funding model and metrics need to be addressed.
5. Governance and leadership require localized *real* control, not tokenism.
6. Intergenerational learning hubs and centres.

### Concluding Statement

*The Researching School Engagement of Aboriginal students and their Families from Regional and Remote Areas* project aimed to understand: the impact of unexpected events, including COVID-19, on educational outcomes for students; support for disengaged students to improve educational outcomes; support for school attendance and completion; and investigate targeted educational support for students. The Yipirinya School case study's findings translate directly to strategic policy and recommend practice. The key finding of this project highlights the need to place dual importance on attendance and engagement. The definition of 'attendance' should be reconceptualised to meet the localised, holistic needs of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. Alone, the measurement of attendance fails to capture the complexities and nuances required to provide contextually purposeful teaching and learning.

In this case study, two major unexpected events that have impacted student attendance, engagement and retention were discussed: COVID-19 and a weather event. A reoccurring pattern across both events was the unexpected positives. While participants commented on the fear and uncertainty of COVID-19, the stronger narrative of the data indicted the positive aspects of the pandemic: more time on Country with family. Similarly, participants referred to both the positives and negatives of the weather event. While the school was forced to close and classes to relocate across the town, the participants of the project enjoyed being linked to different organisations. The data reinforced that it can be easy to extract the negative impacts of unexpected events yet, the positives may outweigh as schools are focused to find innovative, community-led, less institutional solutions to teaching and learning.

In relation to improved student attendance, engagement and retention in remote and very remote schools, several targeted educational support structures, practices, and strategies have been highlighted in this case study. The findings of the project pointed to the importance of relationships, contextually purposeful learning, flexible school structures, cultural safety, the connection of funding to metric systems and the need for remote schools to be wrap around, holistic services. Over the data collection period, several remote school leaders that were interviewed for this project referred to the successes of Yipirinya School. These leaders described how they were adapting a some of the structures, practices, and strategies into their own schools.