

# Koories turn the key

Koorie educators play a key role in the Wannik strategy to raise Indigenous achievement and their work is at last being recognised with higher pay, greater autonomy and support. **Rachel Power** charts progress.



Sam Kirby, Thornbury Primary School  
PHOTOGRAPHER: THOM RIGNEY

**S**AM Kirby, Koorie educator at Thornbury Primary School, has entered the sector at a time of unprecedented change in Indigenous education — change he sees as necessary and long overdue.

“That’s the step they needed to take,” he says. “There needs to be a lot more onus on educators in terms of professionalism and providing a service to kids.”

Sam is one of the newest members of Victoria’s Koorie support workforce — a workforce that is integral to *Wannik: Learning Together — Journey to Our Future*, the Victorian Government’s education strategy for Koorie students launched in February 2008.

The roles and responsibilities of Koorie educators (KEs) have been completely redesigned, in light of the Wannik agenda to radically improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

Rebadged as Koorie Education

Support Officers (KESOs), the focus of their work is shifting dramatically from inside the classroom to outside, and from acting as de facto teaching assistants, to becoming “engagement officers” — helping to re-engage those students who feel marginalised, and their families.

The shift is accompanied by higher salaries, greater job security, improved professional development and training — and a new sense of autonomy.

“I like in my job that I have the freedom to move around the school where I’m needed,” Sam says. “If I see boys who are feeling really angry or upset, I can focus on them. We can play basketball, use up some energy, or they can help me set up a lesson.”

“If there’s too much structure, we’ll just be seen as another teacher, but you want to be seen as a friend or an uncle, someone they trust they can turn to.”

For Darryl Andy, Koorie educator at Bairnsdale Secondary College in East Gippsland, the new Koorie Workforce Plan is recognition that the position is a “24/7 gig”.

“You’re not just in the classroom. You’re at the football games, down the street after school, at the shops.”

It used to be a dead-end job in terms of promotion, he says. Now he is excited by the potential for financial and professional gain. “My expertise and leadership qualities have been soaring higher and higher in this job.” Tertiary study and teacher-training are the logical next step in his career.

## “A huge win”

For Wannik project director Tim Fitzgerald, the Koorie workforce plan is a “major action” within the Wannik reforms.

Its impetus came from Peter Buckskin’s review of Koorie educators, one of a number of

studies conducted as groundwork for the reforms.

“Basically, (it) told us that Koorie educators were underpaid, under-resourced and required an expanded repertoire of skills,” Fitzgerald says. “This is what has led to the new positions and significant upgrading. It’s unprecedented.”

But the mechanism for the restructure has been last year’s Education Support Agreement. That was “a huge win for the AEU,” says Fitzgerald, an AEU member. The union was a strong advocate for Koorie educators throughout negotiations.

The AEU’s Carolyn Clancy believes that Wannik could become the model for the rest of Australia.

She says the strategy, devised by the Education Department and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), is already creating far greater awareness of Indigenous issues throughout the education sector, and has lifted the profile of the dedicated Koorie workforce.

Some department negotiators had little understanding of what KEs did in schools, she says, and didn’t realise that many were undergoing training at their own expense.

“It’s great to see a pathway to ongoing employment for the dedicated Koorie workforce, and to really value what they bring to the job,” she says.

This led to the development of the Wannik program of reforms.

Wannik project director Tim Fitzgerald says the aim is to create a culture of high expectations for Koorie students, with individualised learning plans and explicit accountability mechanisms.

Intensive literacy and numeracy programs are being introduced for students achieving below expected levels, as well as additional support and incentives for top students.

There is also a focus on creating an environment that respects, recognises and celebrates cultural identity through practice and curriculum. ♦

Fitzgerald also describes as “groundbreaking” the professional learning package for Koorie educators, involving individual PD plans and case management to build on strengths and weaknesses while acknowledging what staff have already done.

He understands that there may be some angst in the education sector, particularly over the decision to bring KESOs under the auspices of their region, instead of their school. Regions will decide where KESOs are based, but principals have been reassured that long-standing relationships will be recognised, he says.

At Thornbury, Sam Kirby says it’s logical to move staff to where the demand is, but that it “wouldn’t make any sense” to transfer those who have established long-term relationships with kids, teachers and the local community.

His principal, Kathleen Noonan, says her Koorie educators already work out in the community, with students in nearby schools.

“I do see that we need to support all Indigenous kids across the region, especially those in schools with small numbers of Koorie students, where their identity is not being celebrated.”

Lionel Bamblett, general manager of VAEAI, says the regional deployment of workers is necessary to address the spread of the Indigenous student population (see box, left).

“We need to look at how we can support students and families, and a static base won’t do that. So we need a regional network arrangement.”

Carolyn Clancy says the main challenge for schools will be to look at different ways of utilising the Koorie workforce.

“In the past, it’s all been very ad hoc. KEs have often been used as a kind of integration aide in the classroom. Now their role will have much more scope, liaising with the community and building the

responsibility and awareness of all staff.”

## A way forward

The response so far among principals with well-established Koorie workforces has been positive — with some reservations.

Northland Secondary College principal Raffaella Galata-Brown says she is “delighted” to see a proper career structure and adequate funding for Koorie educators after years of paying her long-term KE a higher wage out of her own budget.

“It’s high time,” she says.

“They have been undervalued and underpaid for way too long. It’s appalling the amount of work they’ve had to do on such a low wage.”

Noonan, at Thornbury PS, agrees that a properly organised career path is long overdue. Despite her efforts to pay higher duties allowances where possible, she has had a consistently high turnover of Indigenous staff because “the pay was so bad and the

job had little PD and no progression”.

“It is such a complex role and the poor educator is often the meat in the sandwich,” she says. “They are dealing with attendance issues, student welfare, home visits, looking at why kids might not be succeeding.”

“Indigenous kids in schools come from lots of different mobs. The KE might not be seen as having any authority, but is still expected to provide the panacea. There’s a lot of mediation involved, and that does require a lot of sensitivity and skill.”

From next year, schools will be expected to work with regional Koorie Education Teams on all aspects of Indigenous education, and Wannik specifically.

Fitzgerald says every region is currently developing its plan. But despite early consultation, Noonan says she has since been left in the dark as to how the new arrangements will operate next year.

“We’re preparing for 2010 and I still don’t know the position of some of my staff members,” she says.

She believes consistency of practice across the state will be necessary to develop Wannik as a strong strategy.

“The reason the roll out of the Early Years Literacy Program was such a success was that every school was working with the same materials, we had access to professional development for the early years

co-ordinator, we knew what our objectives were, and we had the resources to do it.”

She says she is still waiting to see the Koorie Education Learning Plans (KELP) proposed for Term 1, 2009.

“It’s nearly two years and we still haven’t seen KELP. We went ahead and designed a plan to meet that part of Wannik, using our own money and CRT time, because we see it as important.”

Wayne Harradine, a Koorie Educator for more than 17 years, says Wannik is a “great initiative; a structured way forward that is based on community partnership.”

He is currently working with Koorie literacy coach Pamela Dowling to implement the Koorie Literacy Initiative at Warrnambool East Primary School. The intensive coaching program supports teachers to create change in classroom practice and improve student outcomes.

“Through Wannik, all staff must be cross-culturally trained. It’s really opened the eyes of classroom teachers, and is helping them to build a relationship with students.”

Dowling has been training teachers in Koorie English, so they recognise that certain words are being consciously used by students and don’t treat this as incorrect usage.

She has also organised a Bush Tucker Day at the school, when

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## Why Wannik

**O**N ALL measures, Indigenous Australians lag behind other Australians in educational achievement.

Koorie students make up only 0.9% of the student population in Victoria, the lowest proportion of any state or territory. Nine out of 10 are in government schools.

However, their numbers are widely dispersed, with pockets of high concentration. In 2007,

two-thirds of schools had at least one Koorie student, but only 72 schools had 20 or more. These 72 schools account for 35% of all Koorie students.

The challenges posed by this pattern of enrolment led the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to conduct a comprehensive review of education for Indigenous students, including the role of the Koorie support staff.



Pamela Dowling and Wayne Harradine with students  
Sam Morris and Hayley Eldridge at Warrnambool East Primary School  
PHOTOGRAPHER: VICKY HUGHSON



Darryl Andy, Bairnsdale SC  
PHOTO: MARK NEWMAN,  
STRONGER SMARTER INSTITUTE

## Hard questions, good answers

Koorie kids were effectively segregated at one Gippsland college — until respect and recognition helped turn things around.

WHEN Koorie educator Darryl Andy arrived at Bairnsdale Secondary College “five short years” ago, he had serious doubts he’d made the right move.

“There was a classroom full of Indigenous kids and they were segregated. I couldn’t believe my eyes,” he says. There was no clear plan or strategy to improve outcomes for the students, who make up 5% of the college’s 1,100 roll.

Andy was being treated as an integration aide, with teachers calling on him to contact parents, outfit kids with materials and play an advocacy role for Indigenous students being disciplined.

“That’s not what I signed up for,” says Andy, who spent 20 years in the building industry before deciding to put his people skills to a different use. “I wanted more time working with kids in the classroom and out in the community.”

He began “asking questions that needed answers” and so started a dialogue with then new campus principal Graham Blackley, who had also recognised the need for change.

In 2004–05, Blackley and Andy attended professional development seminars with the Dare to Lead initiative and with Dr Chris Sarra’s Stronger Smarter Institute in Queensland, and “things just started to click”.

“We got different things out of it, but when we came back we were both really excited, knowing that change was possible,” Andy says. “Here was a totally different discussion around Koorie education.”

Blackley recognised Andy’s capacity to lead change, with the support of a team ready to tackle the issues head on. The first step was to challenge some deeply ingrained values and attitudes among staff that Aboriginal kids dropping out of school was “a normal thing”.

“We ran a survey asking staff whether they think Aboriginal kids are equally capable of learning alongside everybody else,” Andy says. “The fact that most said yes was a victory right there.”

In 2007 the school launched its own Koorie Education Plan, which made the success of Koorie students a responsibility shared by all employees of the college.

“It’s a very simple plan,” says Andy. “We took the focus right off the kids and onto staff. It’s about having high expectations of every student, from wearing the uniform to performance in the classroom. Most of the things in our plan are what we’re seeing in Wannik now.”

The plan states: “If teachers believe the child will learn, then the child will learn. ... For some students, the classroom may be the one place that is demanding, challenging and supporting, where the children are believed in.”

The college has built “acknowledgement of country” into all formal events and displays information on each campus about the area’s Indigenous history, land and language. It has also strengthened its partnership with the Local Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group.

“Relationship-building is central to the plan,” Andy says. “Aboriginal people learn best through relationship; it’s cultural practice for our kids and it’s an opportunity for teachers to become better teachers.”

Students are kept well-informed about what to expect. Andy also promotes the plan out in the community and says parents support it 100%.

“Our interactions with families are not hostile anymore,” he says.

As a result, attendance rates have leapt from 21% to 80%, and suspensions and class exits have plummeted.

“We’ve had a great response from staff, which is why we’ve had such a good result,” he says. “There’s still room for improvement, but the gap has almost closed.” ♦

— Rachel Power

# Koorie Workforce PLAN

AS EDUCATION support staff, Koorie educators (KEs) are employed under the ES Agreement. But until now, almost all were employed in Range 1 — the lowest, least autonomous rung on the ladder — and most were in fixed-term or casual positions.

All those in the Koorie education workforce are now eligible to translate to the new Koorie Engagement Support Officer (KESO) classification.

Those who meet the criteria immediately will be offered ongoing employment, without advertisement, at ES Range 4 — which pays up to 65% more and recognises significantly greater autonomy. At the top of the range, pay is \$81,653.

Others will enter a transition process to gain the required skills and qualifications on a three-year contract, during which they will be placed in Range 2 or 3, depending on experience. After this transition, if successful, they too will be given ongoing positions. By 2012, all should be on the Range 4 pay scale.

All current and new staff will be eligible for department-funded professional development.

So far, all but two KEs have signed up to the new role. An additional 27 positions have been created under the reforms. ♦

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parents are invited in to work with the Koorie educator to prepare food for staff and students. The day coincides with their regular Attendance Day Awards, which honour even small improvements in attendance.

In Koorie education, it’s usually the simplest programs that work best, says Harradine. “But it’s not just one-way traffic. A school’s Koorie education officer has got to work in with the principal and other staff, so that there is real integration going on among the students.”

He is excited about the workforce reforms. “It’s about actually paying us

a rate that matches our expertise and changing the role so it’s more about broader engagement.”

Bamblett says the VAEAI will be closely monitoring the rollout of Wannik, including the support programs for KESOs.

“We need high expectations in the classroom and we need to match that with high aspirations for our kids on our side,” he says.

“We’ve been talking about this for years — people wanting to move to a higher salaried position and take more responsibility — so we want it to work.” ♦