



# Schools Up North

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Mental Health For Learning



## COVID-19 Discussion Paper



## **Schools Up North (SUN)... enhancing teachers' capacity to respond to youth mental health needs in remote Cape York and Torres Strait Island communities.**

### **COVID-19 DISCUSSION PAPER**

***Radical Preparedness:*** Educators, epidemics and experience-based planning for remote schools.

This discussion paper is the fifth element in an iterative process of engagement by the SUN Program with COVID-19 impacts in remote Indigenous education settings. It presents for consideration and response, issues raised during COVID-19-related work with educators and other professionals in the field, during and immediately after the phase of initial lockdown in the remote communities of Far North Queensland. Included are reflections on experiences to date and, on the basis of that, consideration of implications for the future. SUN's aim was to determine how best to support the mental health resilience of remote-dwelling, school-aged Indigenous youth through the schools, families and communities to which they belong during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

The purpose of this paper is twofold:

1. To document and disseminate these experiences and reflections to stimulate and encourage discussion among educators and with workers in other sectors, in order to inform preparedness and planning for the needs of remote Indigenous school-aged youth through the remainder of the pandemic and beyond;
2. To solicit feedback across sectors to further refine the materials presented here, and to influence the development of relevant policy, planning and practice.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to individuals, families, communities, services, sectors, governments and nations. The measures taken in Australia have, to date, largely spared its populations from the direct impacts in terms of mortality and morbidity. However, the social consequences have been significant and the short to intermediate-term future is unpredictable. Regardless of the effectiveness of pandemic responses, those uncertainties are unlikely to disappear and the longer-term future will involve ways-of-being and -doing markedly different to the pre-pandemic world. All services and sectors must, necessarily, accommodate to what is now openly termed a 'new normal' despite that 'normal' being unknowable. As the second wave of infections in Melbourne in 2020 has shown, even in Australia pandemic-related events can outpace planners' vision and capacity. The challenge – for all – might be considered in terms of ***radical preparedness***. Radical preparedness demands a capacity to consider the unthought – which at times may be the unthinkable. It demands considering challenging – at times existential – questions that begin with: *what if...*

This is particularly relevant for the education sector which has critical roles (pedagogical and more broadly social) and relatively standardised practices reliant on good relationships between teachers and students. These relationships are the foundation of educational practice; they are disrupted during COVID-19. Those groups already at risk in terms of educational attainment due to social disadvantage are likely to also be at elevated risk of both the direct and indirect health and social effects of the pandemic, the consequences of which will be enduring.

Indigenous Australians fall into this category and while the admirable responses of remote communities and their leaders have so far prevented the tragedies seen in Indigenous populations elsewhere in the world (the United States and Brazil as examples), they will not be spared the impacts of broader societal changes. These impacts on education, employment, prosperity and quality of life will, inevitably, have greatest negative impacts for those who are most disadvantaged.

This discussion paper emerges from an ongoing process which draws on educators' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic thus far in Far North Queensland, to imagine what it will mean to be prepared for the *what if* in relation to the needs of remote Indigenous school-age youth.

### **YETI: SCHOOLS UP NORTH (SUN) PROGRAM**

With the ultimate goal of improving the mental health and wellbeing of remote Indigenous school-aged youth, the Schools up North (SUN) Program (2017-present) seeks to enhance the adaptation of teachers new to the remote school environment to respond to students with challenging behavioural presentations and expressions of mental health need, thereby supporting continued educational engagement of vulnerable students. Three schools have participated to date:

- Tagai Secondary School (TSC) on Thursday Island associated with 16 primary campuses and two residential facilities for secondary students;
- Western Cape College (WCC) secondary campus at Weipa with two primary campuses and a residential facility for secondary students from across Cape York, and;
- Kowanyama State School (KSS), a P-10 school in a discrete Aboriginal community on the western Cape.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE COVID ROUND TABLE**

During the early-2019 COVID shutdowns, schools and other services were forced to accommodate to rapidly changing policies and procedures, and teachers experienced a seismic shift in daily teaching practice. Being for the first time reliant on communication with parents as a conduit to students, and unable to observe and interact with their students on a daily basis, teachers experienced high workloads and new practice demands in the context of restricted relationships. In response, the SUN project sought to align with the immediate needs of schools and teachers through an initiative that became the first step in a series of which this discussion paper is a further (fifth) level:

1. Through the first half of 2020 the SUN program shifted its proposed trajectory in an attempt to respond to COVID-19 impacts in Cape and Torres schools. Through online workshops, teachers from all three sites were provided directions to utilising resources relevant to COVID-19 so that teachers were able to appropriately relate with families and education workers in-community, and to integrate relevant material to support COVID-safe behaviours;
2. Responding to uncertainties voiced by participants, further online workshops were run with education leaders in each site exploring local implications of national and state policy directions in the context of the evolution of the pandemic;
3. With the future uncertain and educational workforce instability more likely, SUN and school leaders sought to understand how educators' experiences to date could inform future planning. When communities re-opened, SUN visited the three communities to discuss with schools and services how the shut-down affected them, their preparation for the ongoing 'new normal', and the prospect of one or more community closures through 2021-22. Through structured discussions across three stakeholder groups (young people; communities and families; and teachers and schools) informants highlighted the strengths and gaps in current service delivery, and exceptional emergent practices in response to the crisis that may be valuable to retain. Content analysis yielded five themes from the community discussions (Appendix 1).

#### **4. SUN 2020 Round Table:**

With the end of the school year approaching, SUN convened meetings to consider the broader planning implications of the findings from the remote school workshops. Held over two days (Oct 22-23) at YETI in Cairns, the SUN 2020 Round Table brought together secondary school leaders from the three sites with, on Day 1, regional leaders and representatives from the Department of Education (DoE) – informed by commitment to the Student learning and wellbeing framework; and, on Day 2, in addition to regional DoE representatives, other departments and services, including Queensland Health, Child Safety, PHN, RFDS and YETI. With a view to recognising the diversity of students' needs across systems, congruent models of population-oriented, needs-based levels of interventions across mental health and education were reinforced (Figure 1).

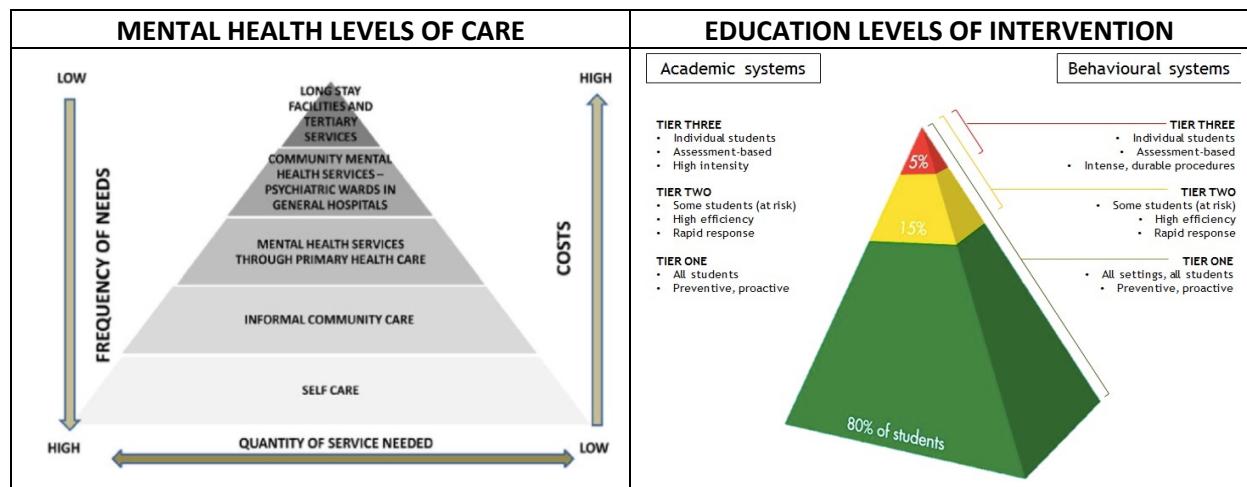


Figure 1. Tiered approaches to supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing

## OUTCOMES OF THE SUN 2020 ROUND TABLES

Five broad themes emerged from discussions held during the remote community workshops with education staff and with other service providers (Appendix 2 summarises key messages in each of the five areas). These themes were used to frame discussions with educators on Day 1 of the Cairns Round Tables. In the intersectoral meeting on Day 2 these were amended to incorporate the outcomes of Day 1. [Click here](#) to see a highlight from the Round Table, and [here](#) to see concluding remarks from participants.

## CONSENSUS UNDERSTANDINGS

The following section summarises the key consensus points from the overall process, falling into three areas: 1) the responsibilities and needs of education staff to address the additional vulnerabilities of remote area school-aged youth; 2) issues for schools and agencies serving the needs of remote communities, and; 3) sectoral-level considerations necessary to ensure optimal responsiveness regionally and at a local level. These are framed as core challenges.

### 1. How are the primary & collateral roles of teachers enabled to support the mental health resilience of school-aged remote Indigenous youth?

- Education staff have collateral roles in supporting developmental mental health needs of young people and these roles are both more demanding and more important in the context of the pandemic;
- The expanded roles for education staff (pedagogical and mental-health related) relate to increasing youth needs that are not uniform:
  - School-aged youth cover a range of needs (resilient/at risk/at need; engaged/contingently engaged/disengaged; Tier 1/Tier2/Tier 3...) – in the context of the pandemic there is **slippage** to higher level vulnerability and intervention need;

- While all youth are vulnerable to slippage, there is differential vulnerability such that identifiable groups are at risk of particular negative outcomes – disengaged youth; boarders; youth in final years of school...;
- COVID-19 related additional demands on education staff require: support and training for existing and novel pedagogical practices; guidance and support in collateral mental health-related roles, and; reliable access to resources to address personal emotional and social needs.

**2. What are the challenges and opportunities for schools and agencies and what is needed to enable their capability in expanded / new roles?**

- While there are general needs across all schools, the overall level and mix varies from site to site, particularly in remote settings, and are best understood and planned for locally, drawing on a nuanced appreciation of place-based issues and resources. Effective local solutions are enabled by flexibility within the constraints of effective and clear sectoral protocols and leadership;
- Localising solutions demands recognising the additional roles and responsibilities of community members and groups, and providing appropriate and accountable preparation, training, supervision and support;
- Uncertainty undermines capacity, encourages distrust and reinforces anxiety. Uncertainty is overdetermined and is influenced by: received reliable information (how much, how accurate, how understandable, how accessible); received misinformation (social media, gossip, politically motivated messaging...); the nature of implied COVID-related additional demands (that might demand accepting additional risk or inconvenience) and; contingent demands (where information – reliable or misinformation – impacts non-COVID priorities such as travel, work, substance use... - you hear what you want to hear);
- Population and subgroup messaging is critical and demands CONTENT that is timely, reliable, consistent and appropriate to target receiver characteristics and needs – and – requires DELIVERY that is accessible by target receivers; it's the MESSAGE **AND THE MEDIUM**.

**3. What are the challenges & opportunities to ensure community & sectoral consensus / collaboration in abnormal / new normal context?**

- As a system and community challenging event, the pandemic is also solution generating and capacity enhancing;
- Notwithstanding certain obvious problems, the initial responses to COVID-19 across sectors has demonstrated effective system responsiveness (given the unprecedented challenge). It has built on existing sectoral and service capacities and collaboration but also emphasises how the collaboration can be improved – service responsiveness in crisis should inform service capacity improvement overall;
- Pandemic-related sectoral and service protocols must be transparent (in terms of underpinning logic), consistent, timely, accessible and clear;
- Service responsiveness in crisis is built on baseline service capacity and coordination to address the differential needs of school-aged youth (leadership, skills of teachers and others to provide core mental health promotion...; capacity to identify and respond to additional needs of children at risk, such as trauma informed care...; defined mechanisms for referral and coordinated care provision to identified individuals at risk, such as Coordinated Care for Vulnerable Young People - CCYP...);
- Service responsiveness in crisis brings additional provider demands and stresses requiring planned support (appropriate pedagogical and mental health backup for teachers; training and support for allied workers and community members taking on additional roles; support for parents struggling with enabling home education...);

- Service collaboration with community agencies and individuals in crisis is built on existing relationships.

## **PRINCIPLES**

Through the course of this process a set of underpinning principles became evident which, to those participating, are understood to be essential in guiding responses to COVID-19-related response planning and service provision, and to preparing these systems for the possibilities of the post-COVID social and service landscape. These relate to three overarching principles of systems integration.

**System responses to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of school-aged Indigenous youth should ensure:**

**Functional access to an array of services capable of effectively addressing needs:**

- 1) Flexibility in policy and implementation to ensure real-time and place-based responsiveness to regional and local needs;
- 2) Comprehensive service provision accommodating all school-aged youth with differentiated interventions relevant to level of need;
- 3) Effective support for educators in both their pedagogical and collateral roles;

**Key values inform practice:**

- 4) Youth focused: health, safety and wellbeing of youth is paramount in planning and practice;
- 5) Durable engagement with community, with relationships enabling localised solutions, privileging Indigenous practices, guided by Indigenous leadership;

**Collaborative planning and practice:**

- 6) Effective interagency collaboration based on formalised agreements ensuring comprehensive and sustainable services, and needs-appropriate information sharing;
- 7) Agreed and effective communication mechanisms across and within sectors.

## **THE NEXT STAGE – FURTHER INPUT**

This is a work in progress and ***radical preparedness*** demands there be clear sectoral and institutional responses and guidance, but that this is framed by emerging evidence and experience. There is, then, no room for dogma or foreclosing on options and opportunities. We are well aware that we have not canvassed all relevant opinions and, in particular, have not included the voices of young people from remote settings. We realise that there is a rich lode of experience among other front-line providers, administrators and planners that has not been tapped and hope that this discussion paper stimulates conversations about issues and needs.

This discussion paper is, then, the fifth step in an ongoing process and we encourage readers who identify omissions or who have opinions about the preliminary findings presented here, to contribute to the process. We suggest that this would best be done by framing contributions around the five themes/questions that emerged from our in-community workshops:

1. Teacher impacts and consequences:
  - **Who/what supports teachers (in/out of community) to Keep Calm and Carry On – as effective teachers?**

2. Social, wellbeing & educational impacts on young people:
  - **Who/what supports teachers' responses to the problem of increasing youth MH vulnerability?**
3. Community reactions:
  - **Who/what mitigates increasing youth vulnerability from community impacts?**
4. Family & community capacity and responsibility:
  - **What/who supports community members taking on new roles (Ed, MH, CS....)?**
5. Service support availability and capacity in the future:
  - **What/who enables service coordination to support wellbeing and minimise youth developmental & educational impacts?**

*We look forward to receiving any thoughts and opinions stimulated by this paper and thank you for your input. Your responses will remain anonymous and be integrated into the next iteration which we hope to make available online soon, with the aim of casting the net wider.*

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**Appendix 1. Themes identified during structured discussions with educators and service providers in remote communities**

1. **Teacher impacts and consequences** describes impact on teachers due to: i) Uncertainty and lost sense of control & agency; ii) Workload; iii) Gaps in resourcing & infrastructure; and, iv) Potential staff shortages.
2. **Social, wellbeing and educational impacts on young people** describes the impact in young people living in remote communities, with the following subthemes: i) Uncertainty, loss of routine & stress, including loss of 'down time' & high phone use; ii) Risk of well students slipping; iii) Continued and reinforced risk for vulnerable young people; iv) Differential impacts by age, including the extra risks for seniors and recent school leavers.
3. **Community reaction** describes how communities have and are likely to react to shut-downs and the impact on the educational agenda, with several subthemes: i) Fear and anxiety, particularly for children and elders; ii) Isolation practice in a fluid family structure & community housing; iii) Constant stress without usual 'circuit breakers'; iv) and, Changing control over finances, including financial influx and availability of substances.
4. **Family & community capacity and responsibility** describes local community resources and responses to the conditions of shut-down, with subthemes: i) Specific challenges, including engagement of boarding students returned to community; and, ii) Community response, including disaster management plans, local agents and communication.
5. **Service support availability and capacity in the future** includes references to service limitations and responses during the shut-down and its ongoing impact. Subthemes include: i) Flexibility; ii) Opportunities; and, iii) Restricted service.

**Appendix 2: Issues raised at SUN Round Table workshops in relation to five key thematic areas**

<b>1. TEACHER IMPACTS AND CONSEQUENCES</b>	
<i><b>Impact on teachers due to: i) Uncertainty and lost sense of control &amp; agency; ii) Workload; iii) Gaps in resourcing &amp; infrastructure; and, iv) Potential staff shortages.</b></i>	
1	COVID as a disruptor; the pandemic is a challenge, but also an opportunity – for example to build and reinforce relationship with families and community leaders, to refine interagency cooperation, and to identify better-ways-of-doing.
2	COVID related impacts – stress, additional roles, new modalities, changed teaching roles and student numbers (with boarders in-community), teacher retention – IS CONSEQUENTIAL – it is more difficult to build capacity of teachers who are already struggling.
3	COVID related impacts extend to additional stresses and demands as community lockdown and other health-related community measures are relaxed – reorienting students and families to resuming school, challenges of returning boarding students to their schools or accommodating locally...
4	Additional expectations of teachers – pedagogical and social – require planning for how to enable additional skills in short time frame, and guidance and support in relation to collateral roles (for instance in supporting welfare and mental health of students).
5	There will be particular challenges to the cohort of new teachers arriving in-community during or immediately after the COVID-19 impacts.
<b>2. SOCIAL, WELLBEING AND EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS ON YOUTH</b>	
<i><b>Impact on young people living in remote communities: i) Loss of routine &amp; stress; ii) Risk of well students slipping; iii) Added risk for vulnerable young people; iv) Differential impacts by age, including the extra risks for seniors and recent school leavers.</b></i>	
1	<p>Universal impacts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 impacts all student-age youth increasing the propensity for SLIPPAGE of engagement in education to levels of greater vulnerability and need;</li> <li>• The loss of routine provided by school has broader social impacts and compounds difficulties of recommencing school – this is more pronounced for vulnerable children for whom routine is already fragile.</li> </ul>
2	<p>Differential impacts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• particular groups are at greater risk of slippage: youth with existing vulnerabilities are more likely to have untoward outcomes;</li> <li>• particular groups are at specific risk: older students of having school completion compromised; boarders may not return to school and/or are compromised by different systems; disengaged students will be even less likely to be re-engaged.</li> <li>• ESL and higher levels of literacy problems mean greater difficulties with distance education approaches for youth in very remote settings.</li> </ul>
3	The most vulnerable youth are identifiable early in the COVID response – they are those who are already disengaged or whose engagement is fragile, and those with existing mental health and special educational needs.
4	Youth with complex needs requiring multi-agency interventions are likely to increase in number with increased burden of need.
5	Individual youth needs for education and mental health support in the context of COVID are not static and will vary over time, with the risk that necessary interventions may be terminated prematurely as group needs are prioritised.
6	Compounding issues – social circumstances (such as overcrowding during lockdown) and particular activities (such as increasing preoccupation with social media) can have major

	impacts on mental health and educational capacity (for instance through disruption of sleep routines).
7	COVID-19-related responses privilege group needs (health promotion, universal prevention, selected prevention / tier 1 & tier 2 needs) but may undermine vigilance for individual needs and individual responsiveness (indicated intervention, early intervention / tier 3 needs).
8	Student voices have not been sought in relation to impacts and solutions.
9	Youth who have permanently disengaged/exited the education system (post-compulsory schooling) have needs – including continuing training, social and emotional needs.

### 3. COMMUNITY REACTIONS

***How communities have and may react to shut-downs and the impact on the educational agenda, with several subthemes: i) Fear and anxiety, particularly for children and elders; ii) Isolation practice in a fluid family structure & community housing; iii) Constant stress without usual 'circuit breakers', and; iv) Changing control over finances, including financial influx and availability of substances.***

1	Some COVID-19-related social impacts were unforeseeable but some were/are foreseeable: crowding in certain houses and its consequences (for instance, family violence); increased money with positive and negative implications; unemployment; activity restrictions; substance misuse... Being foreseeable, planning for such issues and groups should be prioritised.
2	Challenges across community of perceptions of risk and of timely, reliable and understandable COVID-19 related communication.
3	Concerns about school as place of safety vs place of risk in relation to COVID-19 infection, amplified for parents of boarding school students.
4	To access services in time of need there needs to be increased emphasis on ensuring awareness of service availability.
5	The additional demand for formal and informal support for families and youth in need carries additional demands to ensure that 'helpers' are supported in terms both in terms of performance and emotional needs.

### 4. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY & RESPONSIBILITY

***Local community resources and responses to the conditions of shut-down, with subthemes: i) Specific challenges, including engagement of boarding students returned to community; ii) Community response, including disaster management plans, local agents, communication.***

1	Managing community anxiety and reactions requires proactive planning and ensuring communication effectiveness – both message (reliable, appropriate, timely) and the medium.
2	School is a site and as an activity; with restrictions there is a greater need for planned activities for youth in community to maintain routine, provide diversion, ensure social connectedness and to preserve educational readiness. This needs to include addressing increased numbers of older youth returned from boarding schools.
3	Preparedness necessarily includes awareness of needs and resources. Routine disaster responsiveness should include pandemic-related mapping of community resources and identification of key central coordination structure – key organisations and individuals.

### 5. SERVICE SUPPORT AVAILABILITY AND FUTURE CAPACITY

***Relates to service limitations and responses during the shut-down and its ongoing impact. Subthemes include: i) Flexibility, communication & coordination; ii) Opportunities; and, iii) Restricted service.***

1	Rapid planning to COVID-19 has resulted in some models being ‘dropped’ into remote setting without sufficient consideration of local circumstances and needs.
2	In the context of COVID-19 similar experiences and needs have emerged across agencies and sectors – importance of sharing as a basis for collaboration. There are lessons to be learned in every sector on the basis of experiences in others.
3	Importance of clear sectoral policy and guidance but with capacity to adapt to meet local needs.
4	Communication (within and between organisations) and messaging (to students, families and communities) is critical – reliable, consistent, timely, appropriate and accessible – and must be informed by an understanding of competing misinformation and factors that reduce individual and group receptivity (competing priorities, COVID anxieties...).
5	COVID-19 has increased the need for ALL services for school-aged youth at a time when service availability has been compromised and/or reliant on alternative delivery mechanisms. Planners need to ensure functional access by ensuring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of problems that might arise (COVID-19 mental health literacy);</li> <li>• What services are available;</li> <li>• How to access appropriate services.</li> </ul>
6	Working within a service/sector ‘silo’ – the default operating mode – is particularly unhelpful in the context of COVID-19. Inter-agency and inter-sectoral collaboration has been best seen where there are formalised mechanisms with regular communication supported from the top. Around the needs of high needs youth (complex care cases) mechanisms for sharing of key information needs to be prioritised (as in CCYP).