



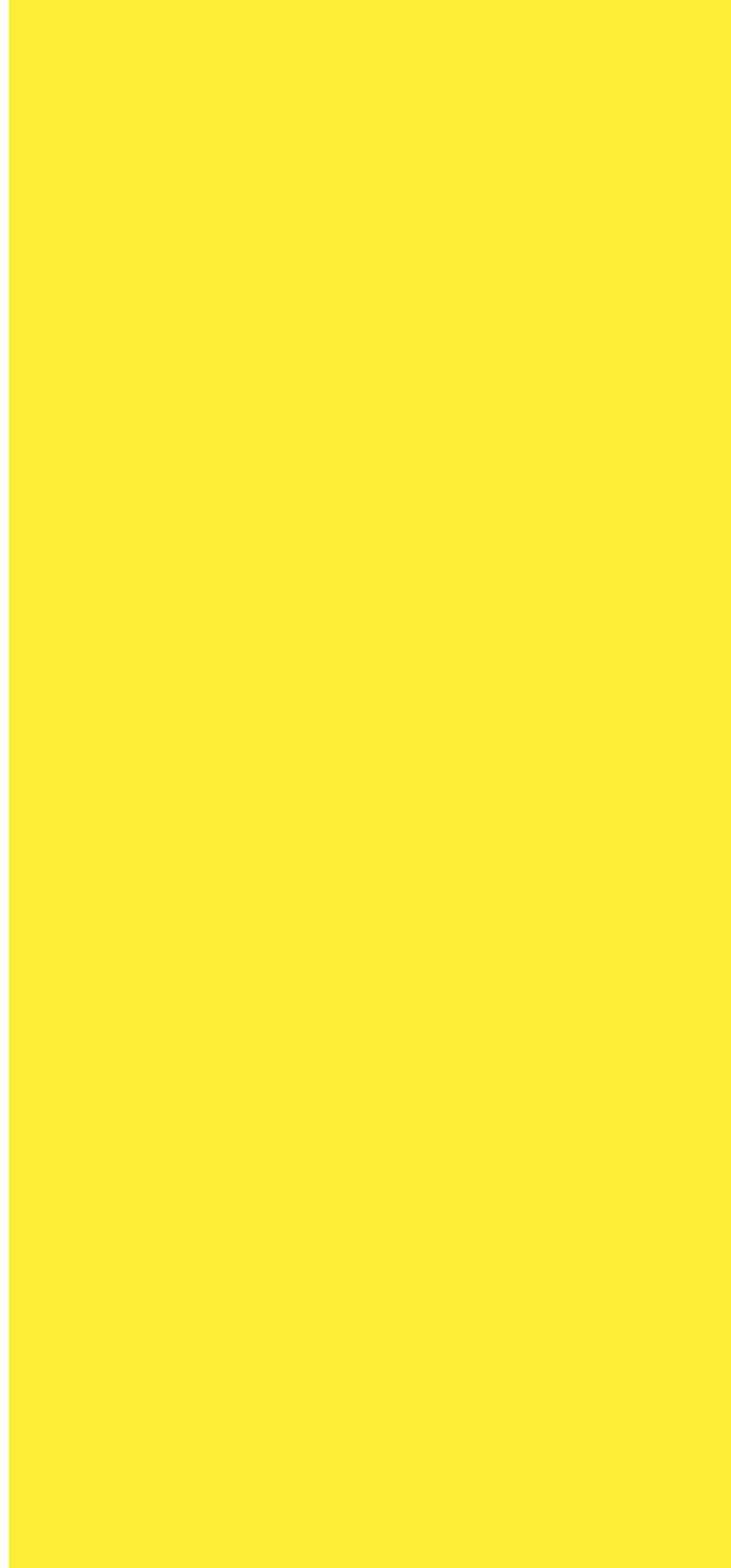
Polly Farmer Foundation Follow the Dream Impact Evaluation

Final Report | March 2024

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Executive summary

Introduction

The Polly Farmer Foundation (PFF) delivers strengths-based academic enrichment programs that empower Aboriginal students to complete school and move into successful post-school pathways. PFF's work is driven by the idea that "education is the key for Aboriginal people to take their rightful place in modern Australian society" (Graham 'Polly' Farmer MBE). Today, the Foundation runs four programs - **Follow the Dream, Learning Clubs, STEM Centres and the Alumni Network** - at over 138 locations nationwide.

In 2023, PFF engaged Innovation Unit to undertake an impact evaluation, in order to gain a better understanding of the outcomes experienced by program participants, learn what is working well, and identify areas for improvement. In addition to gaining insights at a point in time, the evaluation is designed to test methods for collecting, analysing and communicating data so that PFF may adopt these in the future. The evaluation is focused on PFF's flagship program Follow the Dream - acknowledging the important role that the other programs play - and at a national level.

About Follow the Dream

PFF's Follow the Dream (FTD) program is an academic support program delivered in secondary schools around Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It engages the following participants and stakeholders:

- Program participants - secondary school students
- Program staff - program managers, program coordinators, and tutors
- Families
- Schools
- Partners and supporters

FTD is delivered through 36 secondary schools around Australia who host the program, and 71 outreach schools where students are supported by FTD staff based at a nearby host school.

Context

It is widely known that there is a significant 'gap' between the experience of and success in education by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people compared to other students. This has nothing to do with the capacity or intelligence of young people and everything to do with the legacy and continuing impacts of colonial dispossession. The impacts of intergenerational trauma, disadvantage and poverty, along with ongoing experiences of racism and discrimination, mean many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people do not have the same opportunities as other students to feel safe and welcome in the school environment, develop core capabilities, access relevant and enriching experiences, achieve their desired academic outcomes, and ultimately pursue their post-school goals.

What the program does

Follow the Dream provides holistic academic support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secondary students, across the five pillars of Belonging, Capabilities, Experiences, Academic and Empowerment. This evaluation validates the importance of each pillar and the theory that capabilities, belonging and experiences are foundational to students experiencing positive academic outcomes, which in turn leads to empowerment.

Program features targeting academic achievement are core to the program and include after-school tutoring, personalised learning plans, and mentoring. Complementing these are enriching experiences such as camps, excursions and incursions, support to address practical, social and emotional needs, and help in preparing for the transition to post-school endeavours.

Whilst focused on supporting students during their schooling years, empowerment throughout life is the ultimate goal of PFF's work. FTD aims to have lasting positive impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, supporting them to have good choices in career and life, being able to pursue their aspirations, and inspire others.

Key findings

Overall, FTD is successfully enabling young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 'follow their dream'.

Quantitative data shows FTD students perform better, on average, than other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

67%

of Year 12 FTD students achieved WACE in 2022 compared to 41.5% of all WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

(Department of Education WA Annual Report 2022-23)

Alumni of the program strongly consider that the program is part of what contributed to academic success, helping them finish school and pursue higher education opportunities.

96%

(n=23) of alumni strongly agreed "FTD encouraged me to consider more ambitious and aspirational post-school options"

“

I wouldn't have gone to uni if it wasn't for Follow the Dream.

Follow the Dream alumnus”

“

Being able to graduate school, I attribute most of that to Follow the Dream. I know I wouldn't have graduated school without that after-school tutoring.

Follow the Dream alumnus”

This research suggests that **the program does this by creating and enhancing students' sense of belonging in and enjoyment of school, providing practical and necessary supports to grow life skills and solve immediate problems, and providing experiences** that enable students to see different futures for themselves.

75%

(n=18) of alumni and 55% (n=71) of current students agreed FTD "is something that makes them enjoy school" more*

74%

(n=97) of current students strongly agreed "I feel like I can go to Follow the Dream staff for help"

Within the program, **the role and value of personal connections that the students make with each other and with other adults are a key part of success.** We heard that seeing and meeting other young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were succeeding in their life paths was strongly encouraging for current students.

“

I really like the community [FTD] provides, the ability to connect to culture and learn from other Indigenous people.

Follow the Dream alumnus”

Ultimately, alumni said that FTD was part of what gave them the confidence and inspiration they needed to go on to succeed, and they **credit the program, in part, for them being able to live lives they feel empowered in.**

100%

(n=24) of alumni strongly agreed FTD helped them follow their dream

88%

(n = 21) of alumni strongly agreed FTD helped them be a more confident person

*Response options for this question were "more", "about the same", or "less"

Recommendations

We have identified a small number of recommendations here for suggested program improvements, which PFF may wish to consider.

A number of suggestions relating to the program coordinator role, specifically:

- **Program coordinators greatly influence the effectiveness of the program and quality of students' experiences, however their roles and responsibilities within the school (outside the program) sometimes conflict with FTD responsibilities.** Program coordinators report being expected to fulfil responsibilities for the school beyond their FTD role, including classroom teaching as well as provide mentoring and support to other staff. It might be that the FTD role needs to be more carefully protected - or responsibilities clarified - to ensure program coordinators are able to fulfil expected responsibilities.
- **Program coordinators are being expected to meet basic practical support needs that aren't strictly part of their job.** Program coordinators are going 'above and beyond' for students, helping with urgent practical needs (like addressing challenges at home or accessing uniforms or transport). While not strictly part of their role, these are meeting critical gaps for children, without which students can't succeed.
- **The support students receive in 'Year 13' is critical to whether they can achieve their post-school goals; program coordinator expectations and roles here seem to vary.** There may be a need to more intentionally and consistently provide such support and/or to consider where it should come from.

FTD is delivered through various models. **Stakeholders expressed a strong preference for the host school model**, as it:

- Allows for more regular engagement - and therefore stronger relationships - between program coordinators and students
- Reduces the effort students need to make in engaging in the program (e.g., less time to commute to after-school tutoring)
- Is more likely to mean FTD has a dedicated space, and
- Offers the program coordinator a greater opportunity for deeper influence in their school.

In addition, we note:

- **Engaging alumni in more and different ways could improve the experience for them, and multiply the value of PFF's programs for future generations.** Greater alumni engagement through events and activities is beneficial for the alumni themselves as it can offer continued networking and relationship building. It can also flow onto benefits for current students by having a larger pool of role models to draw on for activities such as incursions and excursions. A more formal mentoring offering could also be considered - noting the value of personal relationships that has been raised throughout this research.
- **Some stakeholders questioned whether ATAR/Year 12 was the right goal** and questioned if there was scope within PFF for students to consider a broader range of post-school options and the pathways for pursuing them, including vocational training and work. This might also enable FTD to be more inclusive of a broader range of students.

“ I had goals for myself, and didn't really have that before. I didn't really know what I wanted to do after school. [FTD] made it more realistic for me - other people are doing this stuff, I can do it too. ”
Follow the Dream alumnus

“ For our family we acknowledge that the current FTD Program Coordinator had played a major part in the development and journey over our child's high school years, having the right person in this role goes a long way in assisting the best outcomes for the student, school and families. ”
Follow the Dream family member

Introduction

Introduction

Background

For 25 years, the Polly Farmer Foundation (PFF) has been delivering **strengths-based academic enrichment programs that empower Aboriginal students to complete school and move into successful post-school pathways**. PFF's work is driven by the idea that "education is the key for Aboriginal people to take their rightful place in modern Australian society" (Graham 'Polly' Farmer MBE). Today, PFF runs four programs at over 138 locations nationwide.



Follow the Dream



STEM Centres



Learning Clubs



Alumni Network

PFF has grown from the Gumala Mirnuwarni "coming together to learn" program of 23 students in Karratha when Graham 'Polly' Farmer started the organisation in 1997; now, **over 2,700 students participate annually in 57 primary and high school programs around Australia**.

Evaluation purpose

In 2023, PFF engaged Innovation Unit to undertake an impact evaluation, in order to gain a better understanding of the outcomes experienced by program participants, learn what is working well, and identify areas for improvement. In addition to gaining insights at a point in time, **the evaluation is designed to test methods for collecting, analysing and communicating data so that PFF may adopt these in the future**. It builds on previous evaluations, taking a whole-of-organisation perspective and providing PFF the foundation to measure their own impact on an ongoing basis.

Evaluation scope

The scope of the evaluation is as follows:

- **National (WA-NT-SA-NSW)**, noting the majority of programs and therefore stakeholders are in WA.
- **Focused on the impact on individual students**. However, this is considered in the context of families, schools, and broader communities both in the way this context can create conditions for students to thrive, and acknowledging the potential ripple effects of student outcomes on others around them.
- **Primarily focused on Follow the Dream (FTD)**, PFF's flagship program, acknowledging the important role that the other programs play in addressing needs of young people at different stages of their education.
- **Measuring what matters to PFF**. Data is regularly collected and reported to a variety of partners. In this evaluation, we focused on collecting, measuring and reporting on the things that best support PFF to tell the story of the difference it makes to young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- **Prioritising student experiences during and soon after their program participation**. The evaluation prioritises capturing the experiences of current students and alumni 1-3 years out, which provides us with the most useful picture of post-school transition. As time elapses, alumni stories become less useful for evaluation of the program - because other things happen, and because it is hard to know whether they are typical or exceptional.

The following aspects are not in scope for this evaluation:

- Detailed program evaluations of primary programs (Learning Clubs and STEM Centres) and Alumni Network.
- Impacts at a whole-school level, for example changes in cultural safety.
- Cost-benefit analysis of PFF's programs.

Key evaluation questions

The evaluation focuses on the following questions about FTD:

- What is the problem PFF is aiming to solve (the context)?
- How is the program being implemented? What activities occur?
- To what extent does the program produce or contribute to the intended outcomes? What contributes to achieving the outcomes?
- How well does the program work?

About Follow the Dream

What are the main FTD activities?

PFF's Follow the Dream (FTD) program is an academic support program delivered in secondary schools around Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. By participating in the programs, students experience a range of activities that enrich their learning and empower them to pursue their post-school aspirations. Key program features include:

- After-school tutoring sessions (3-4 days per week in school terms).
- One-on-one academic and career mentoring, supported by personalised learning plans.
- Camps, excursions and incursions, including career camps, university tours, workplace visits, guest speakers, and cultural activities.
- Support to access awards, scholarships, internships and work experience.
- Provision of support to address practical, social and emotional needs.
- Invitation into the Alumni Network and other opportunities that continue to support young people as they pursue their post-school aspirations.

Who is involved?

Program participants are all high school students of participating host or outreach schools. As at Semester 2 2023, there were 2,375 FTD participants.

Program staff are employed by either PFF or the relevant state government education department. Across Australia, they comprise the following:

- 3 program managers (all PFF employees), each responsible for a different group of school-based FTD programs (as well as other PFF programs in some cases), and 4 regional managers (in Alice Springs, Groote Eylandt, West Pilbara and East Pilbara).
- 37 program coordinators (6 PFF staff, 22 WA Department of Education staff, and 9 from WA Department of Education-PFF industry sites) who coordinate FTD for a host school, and in some cases outreach schools as well.
- Over 200 tutors who are engaged by individual schools based on the number and needs of the students participating in the program (approximately 1 tutor per 10 students).

Families of students are encouraged to engage with FTD and support students' participation and success in the program. The broader **school community**, particularly staff, are also engaged in the delivery of the program, for example by liaising with program coordinators about students' academic progress.

Program partners and supporters include the WA Department of Education, Australian Government National Indigenous Australians Agency, and corporate sponsors.

Where does the program take place?

Follow the Dream is delivered through secondary schools around Australia, with a concentration in Western Australia where the organisation is based. In addition to the 36 schools that host the FTD program (below), there are 71 outreach schools where students are supported by FTD staff based at a nearby host school.

FTD Host School Locations

Western Australia (Regional)

Albany
Broome
Bunbury
Carnarvon
Derby
Esperance
Geraldton
Hedland
Kalgoorlie
Karratha
Katanning
Kununurra
Newman
Northam
Tom Price

Cecil Andrews
Fremantle
Gilmore
Governor Stirling
Hampton
Mount Lawley
Mandurah
Sevenoaks
Swan View

New South Wales
Muswellbrook

Northern Territory
Alice Springs

South Australia
Port Augusta

Western Australia (Metro)
Belmont

Methodology

Evaluation Design

A **desktop review** was conducted in order to establish context and assist in the design of evaluation indicators and data collection activities. This included:

- Program documentation, including the PFF website, PFF Strategic Plan, past evaluations, marketing materials, FTD data collection tools, and program agreements.
- Relevant research and policy documents, for example the Australian Government's Closing the Gap national agreement.

Focus groups were held with the PFF board and management, program coordinators, and alumni to guide the development of the evaluation indicators and design of the data collection tools. A total of six program coordinators and four alumni were engaged in this process. A further three program coordinators were engaged in one-to-one phone interviews.

Limitations

There was limited engagement with alumni from regions outside Western Australia; as programs have been running longer in WA areas, there are significantly fewer alumni from outside WA in PFF's alumni database.

Four regional WA schools were not included due to a separate evaluation running in that area.

We acknowledge that people who choose to respond to surveys or participate in interviews are likely to be those who are more engaged in the program and possibly have had more positive experiences, particularly in the case of alumni, which may affect the results presented here.

Data Collection

Surveys were conducted with four key stakeholder groups - **current students, alumni, family members, and program coordinators** - in order to capture the experiences and perspectives of different stakeholders, focusing on current and recent program experience. They were administered during the period 6 November to 1 December 2023. Program coordinators and alumni were emailed surveys directly from PFF management, while links to the online student and family surveys were distributed via program coordinators. Data was collected directly into the online survey tool managed by the researchers, ensuring respondent anonymity and confidentiality was maintained. A printed version of the survey was also offered (although not used).

Five alumni interviews via video conference (up to 1 hour) were conducted in November 2023 with **people who had participated in FTD 3-10 years ago**. These were designed to understand possible longer-term impacts of the program on program participants and their careers, any support they may have received from PFF after high school, and their reflections on what worked well and areas for improvement. Participants were recruited through an expression of interest process, prompted by emails sent by PFF to alumni in their database.

Of the five alumni interviewees:

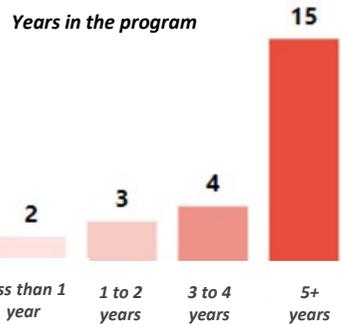
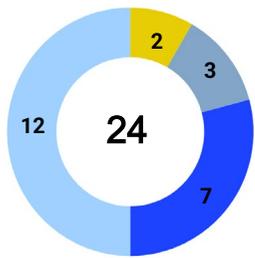
- Three were male and two female.
- All attended schools in WA.
- Four attended regional schools and one attended a school in Perth (noting some attended multiple schools).
- The range of years past high school was 4-9 years.

A full breakdown of survey responses is outlined over the page.

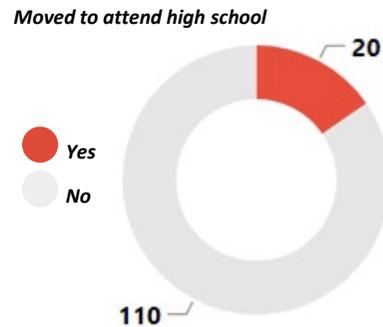
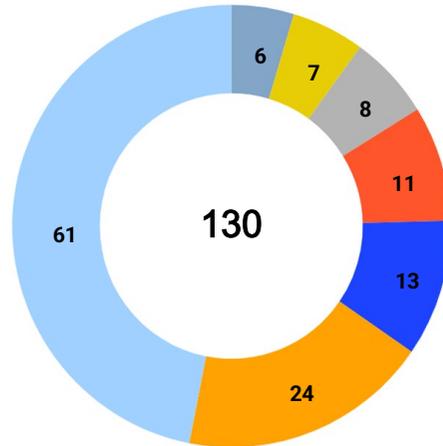
Summary of survey responses



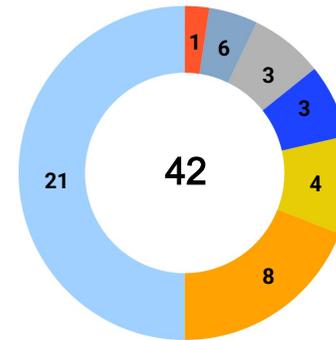
24 Alumni
of a possible 223 alumni contacted to participate (who left high school in the past 3 years)



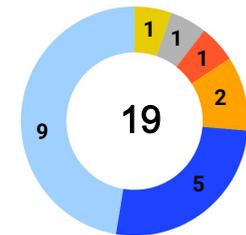
130 Current Students
of a total of 2375 current students at the time of survey



42 Family Members
of current students



19 Program Coordinators
of a total of 31 contacted to participate



Key:

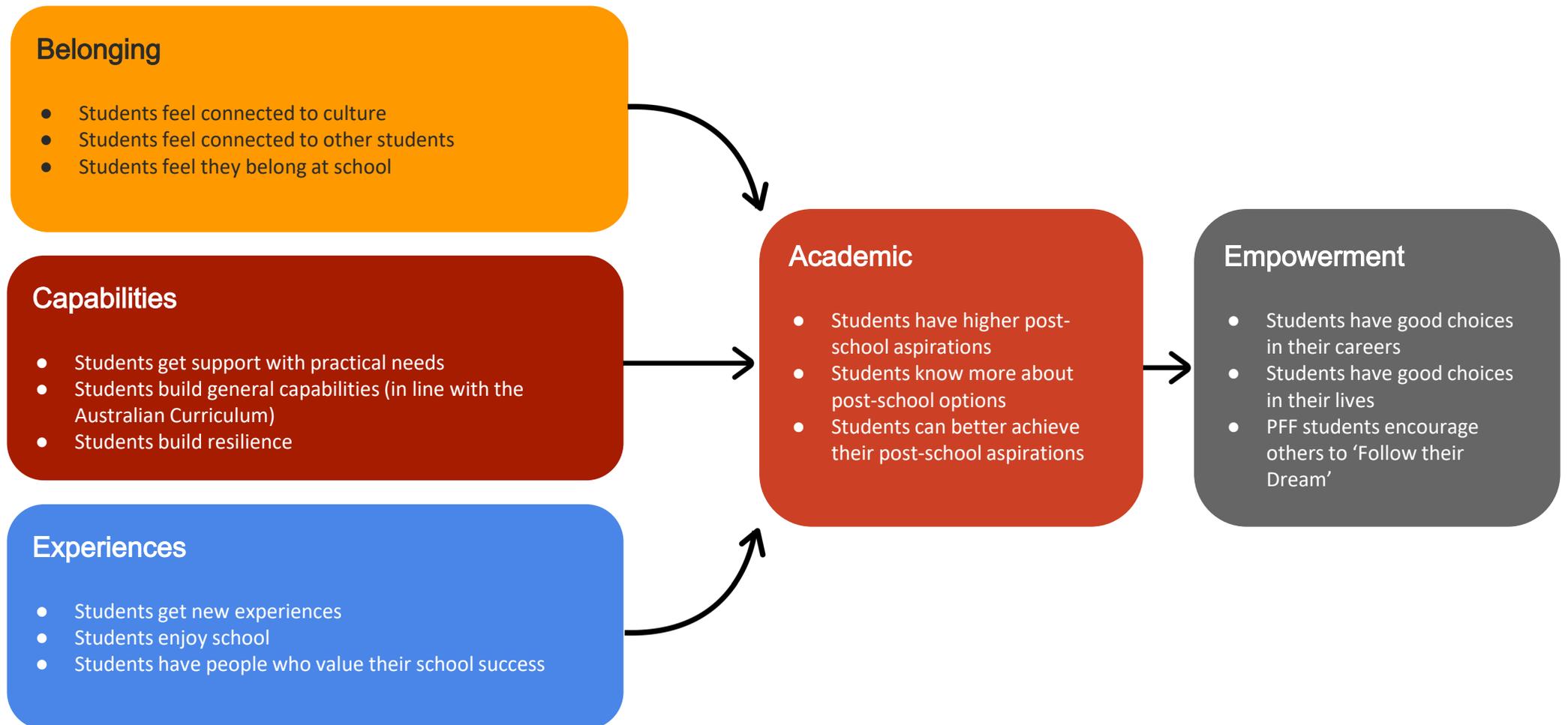


- WA Regional
- WA Metro
- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other

Note: Circles not to scale.

Program outcomes

In designing the evaluation, the existing five pillars of PFF's work - **Belonging, Capabilities, Experiences, Academic and Empowerment** - were identified as a suitable framework for mapping FTD participant outcomes. A theory emerged that capabilities, belonging and experiences are foundational to students experiencing positive academic outcomes, which in turn leads to empowerment. This is reflected in the image below and developed in more detail in [Appendix 1](#). See [Appendix 2](#) for the measurement framework, which demonstrates how the indicators and data collection methods relate to each pillar.

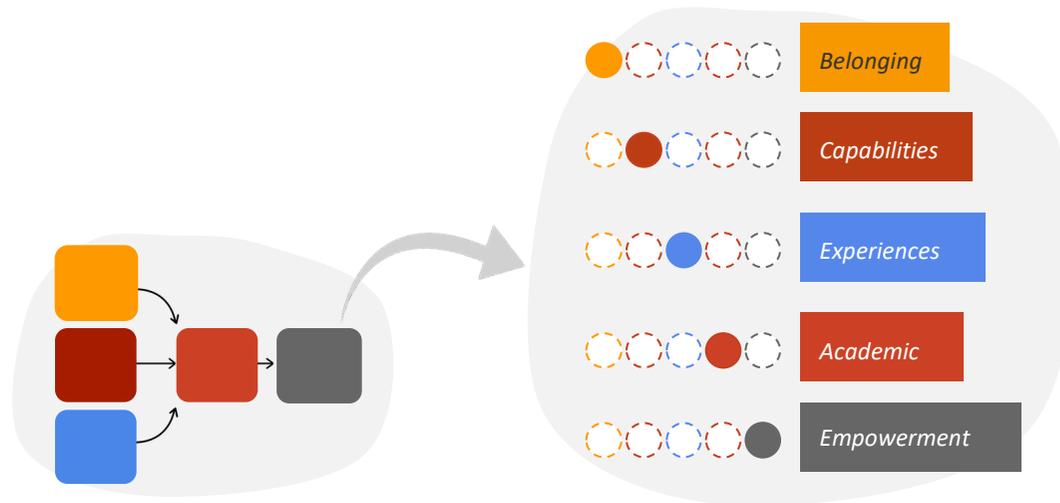


Key Findings

How to read the report

Section markers

The key findings of this report are organised by the 5 pillars of the program (Belonging, Capabilities, Experiences, Academic, Empowerment). The current section is indicated by a key in the top right corner of each page.



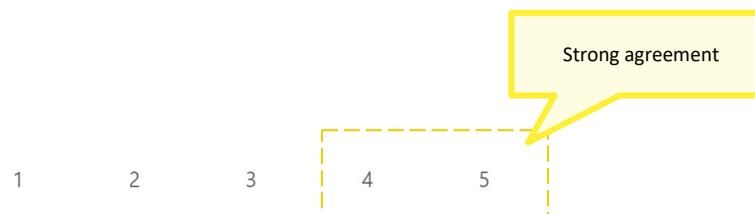
Understanding the data

In our analysis of the data, 'Strongly agreed' has been used to describe respondents' selection of a 4 or 5, in a scale of 1 = "not at all" to 5 = "a lot".

Where responses to a question indicate 'more', the possible responses offered were "more", "about the same", or "less".

Note that survey questions were all optional, so some respondents did not answer all questions.

A full list of survey questions can be found in [Appendix 3](#).

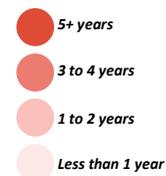


Data colours

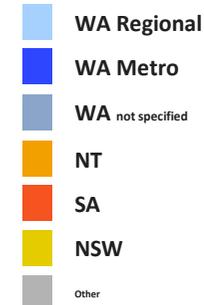
The main colour used to present the data is Polly Farmer Foundation red.

In some graphs, survey responses have been further categorised (years in the program, if the student moved to attend high school, region of the respondent). When this is the case, keys are provided alongside each graph.

Years in the program



Moved to attend high school





Belonging

Why can belonging be lacking in schools?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can experience unique feelings of disconnection from their school, due to experiences of discrimination, isolation, not being able to find others with shared experiences, and feeling burdened or singled out during cultural activities.

This is all exacerbated in a school environment that lacks cultural safety and/or where a student is from the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family at their school.

Conversely, feeling strong in your culture and part of a community can be protective factors for young people, helping them feel safe and connected.

“It’s scary when you’re the only Aboriginal student in school - lots of stereotypes and prejudice... You want to wear your colours but you’re the only one. It’s hard to stand by yourself.”
Follow the Dream alumnus

“It wasn’t just jumping straight into homework. Seeing mates, having a feed, tutors there to help you with stuff that you don’t understand. When I was young I didn’t want to get straight into homework, just want to yarn with mates.”
Follow the Dream alumnus

“It feels like a family. I couldn't say that about any other educational program I've been in.”
Follow the Dream alumnus

“The bond the students have made with one another and with the staff show a great support team and not only the students felt support but, the parents too.”
Follow the Dream program coordinator

How does the FTD program aim to promote belonging?

FTD aims to create a sense of belonging and safety through providing culturally safe and supportive staff, activities and physical spaces. This supports students to strengthen their connection to culture, to other students, and with their school, leading to wellbeing, self-sufficiency, and personal and cultural identity.

The staff (with qualities such as kindness, respect, listening to understand, and being responsive to students’ needs) are a part of how this is expressed, and also what can help build bridges to other school staff. The physical space where FTD tutoring takes place also plays an important role in building a sense of community and belonging.

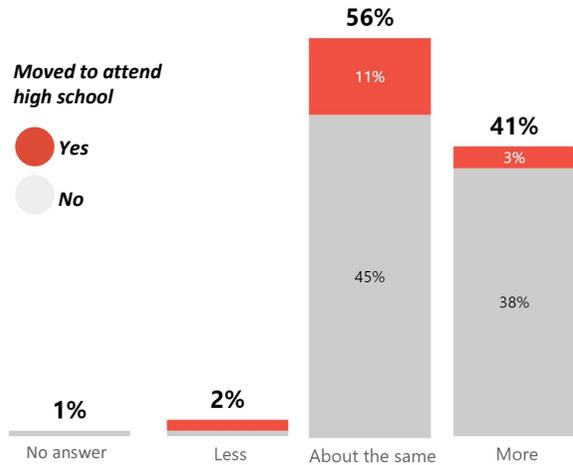
“[Program coordinators] can provide a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.”
Follow the Dream alumnus

“I really like the community [FTD] provides, the ability to connect to culture and learn from other Indigenous people ... Makes you feel more connected to other Aboriginal kids.”
Follow the Dream alumnus

What did the surveys tell us about the extent to which FTD promotes belonging?

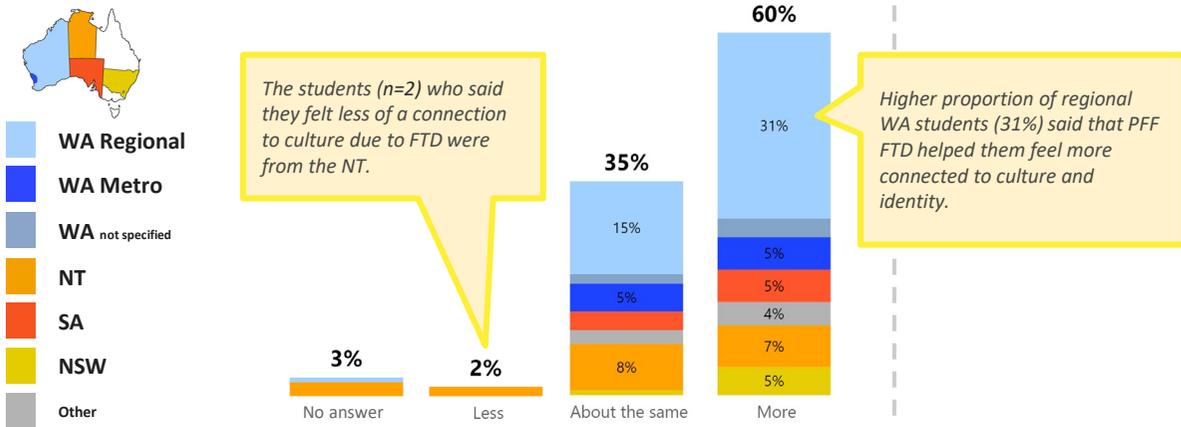
Belonging (students)

Q. Being in PFF FTD is something that makes me feel I belong at my school.



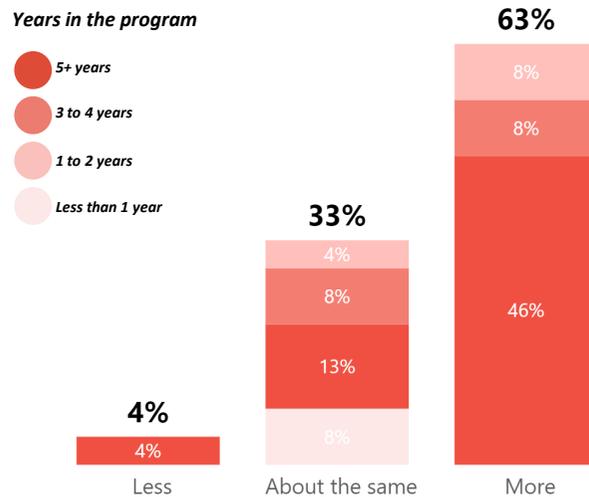
Connection to culture (students)

Q. Being in PFF FTD is something that makes me feel connected to my culture.

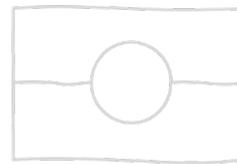


Belonging (alumni)

Q. PFF FTD made me feel like I belong at my school.



Connection to culture (alumni)

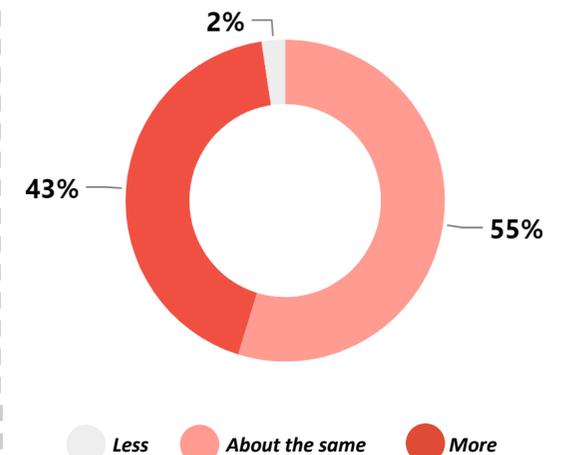


83%

(n=20) of alumni strongly agreed PFF FTD helped them feel connected to their culture and identity

Family trust

Q. Since our child has been involved with Polly Farmer Follow the Dream, I feel I have a trusted contact to speak with at the school.



What is it about FTD that promotes students sense of belonging?

As shown in the previous page, students and alumni generally said FTD increased their sense of belonging at school.

The right staff were consistently recognised as the most important success factor for FTD. As one person said: “the types of people they find and bring in as tutors are the reason it works so well.” Alumni talked about key success factors of staff such as being good at listening, understanding, and responding appropriately, and showing respect for students’ opinions and needs, for example coordinators who asked students for their advice on who should be a tutor in the FTD program. We also heard that the role FTD staff play in creating a bridge between FTD and the rest of the school can be enhanced when tutors are recruited from the school itself. Where an opinion was expressed, alumni said having an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background was less important than these factors.

Shared experiences amongst peers was also key. Positive shared experiences include camps; as one alumna said: “knowledge is passed between kids [on camps], when we come back to classroom, everyone feels more comfortable with each other.” Sharing experiences such as struggles with school work, also builds bonds and connections. Many alumni described their FTD experience as being like a ‘family’, and spoke about long-lasting and ongoing friendships.

Over 80% of alumni, and the majority (60%, n=78) of current students strongly agreed FTD helped them feel more connected to culture, particularly through:

- Meeting other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across their school (and other schools in some cases),
- Dedicated cultural experiences such as camps or excursions (particularly those that engage local Elders),
- Activities during tutoring time such as being encouraged to research one’s own cultural background, and
- Meeting role models (FTD alumni and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students).

Families praised FTD in the survey for “connecting our children to their culture” and “connecting with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids and great role models”.

Having a trusted person at school can also help engage families, which further contributes to students’ sense of belonging. When surveyed, 43% of families said this happens *more* due to FTD (55% said it was *about the same*.)

A suitable physical space can make a big difference for students’ sense of belonging, in particular we heard that a dedicated space works best. A past student said, “having a room that is designated for the FTD students is very beneficial for making the students feel welcomed.” There are practical benefits of having the FTD space on site at school, but in one location there has been a FTD building outside the school (nearby) and this was viewed favourably by alumni who experienced this, one commenting, “for me I found it much better, you’re leaving school, your own little space, rooms, kitchen, that for me is what I enjoyed most about it.”

“ There was still racism but could talk about these experiences with a trusted person [the program coordinator]. ”
Follow the Dream alumna

“ It felt really nice to have an area where you're encouraged to let your culture out. ”
Follow the Dream alumna

“ They get the tutors that give a s**t. That’s something that really stood out to me, that made the program really enjoyable. If we didn’t have tutors like that, it wouldn’t have been what it was. ”
Follow the Dream alumna

What changes could better support belonging?

PFF could play a role in advocating for better cultural safety in high schools.

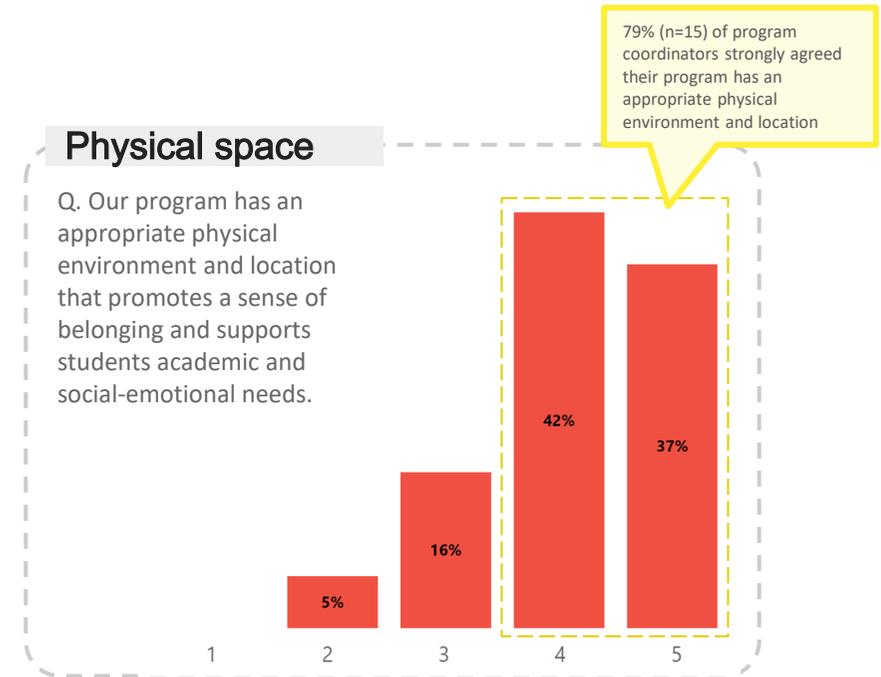
People talked about things that could improve cultural safety, like:

- Staff having training about what they should/shouldn't say (to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children) and "understanding what kids are going home to and that they're not just naughty", as described by one student.
- True Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history (e.g., frontier wars) embedded across the curriculum, not only in specific education programs.
- Incorporating more cultural activities and connection with local Elders.

While these go beyond the scope of current staff roles, PFF could potentially play a role in advocating for such changes in schools, to increase feelings of belonging and safety. We note that schools with few or no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers were more likely to be experienced as unsafe, and that younger teachers tended to be more willing to learn and develop their cultural awareness.

Several respondents across alumni, students and program coordinators suggested improvements to the space where FTD activities are primarily delivered, including the request to have an on-site FTD space (where this is currently not the case). Of note, 7 of 11 students from SA (64%) commented they would like to see their location improve, some citing the age of the building. Two students from NT commented they would like to see their FTD space improve (e.g., making it more colourful). Program coordinators in SA and WA commented they would like to improve their FTD space.

Three current students said they felt *less* like they belonged due to FTD but did not provide any reasons, while one family (from regional WA) indicated that they feel *less* like they have at trusted contact at their school, citing a disconnect between FTD and the rest of the school. One alumna who said they felt unsupported said, "I had limited support from teachers and unfortunately not a lot of funding at all to help with university excursions, or any one-on-one help with the coordinators and even food for our sessions" comparing this to a more positive experience they previously had at a different FTD school. Continued monitoring activities may help identify issues that arise at an earlier stage so that these cases can be identified and addressed.



“ Having a dedicated area for FTD on site at school is more effective than students needing to travel to another school. ”

Follow the Dream alumna



Capabilities

Why are capabilities important?

Core capabilities, including resilience and the confidence to try new things, is associated with achieving academic success, pursuing ambitious career pathways, and being able to achieve one’s aspirations in life. The ongoing impacts of colonisation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including impacts such as intergenerational trauma and disadvantage and poverty, can mean that young people can struggle to develop these core capabilities at the same level and time as non-Aboriginal students.

“The biggest changes I see are growth in leadership and confidence to trust himself.”
Follow the Dream family member

“[FTD] supports children in everything, whether it be personal, physical and mentally and helps bring out kids personality.”
Follow the Dream program coordinator

“The biggest changes I see for my students are much more confidence, responsibility for their actions, and willingness to take on leadership roles.”
Follow the Dream program coordinator

“When I’m stuck with anything with life I go to see [program coordinator] for advice.”
Follow the Dream alumnus

“The biggest changes I see for my students is them growing in confidence amongst their FTD peers and taking that confidence into their classrooms and communities.”
Follow the Dream program coordinator

What does the FTD program do to develop capabilities?

FTD supports students in developing general capabilities such as personal and social skills (like building positive relationships, working effectively in teams and leadership skills), critical thinking, and ethical and intercultural understanding*. This occurs through regular mentoring and tutoring to help to build capabilities in planning, goal setting, critical reflection, and teamwork.

Where needed, FTD staff can also identify where students have unmet basic needs or issues (such as challenges at home, missing meals, or transport issues) and help students address these. This often means liaising with school staff or other people in students’ lives.

Students are also encouraged to build resilience through undertaking and reflecting on new and different experiences, such as camps, as a way to build confidence.

*These are critical components of ‘General Capabilities’ in the the Australian Curriculum (<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/>)

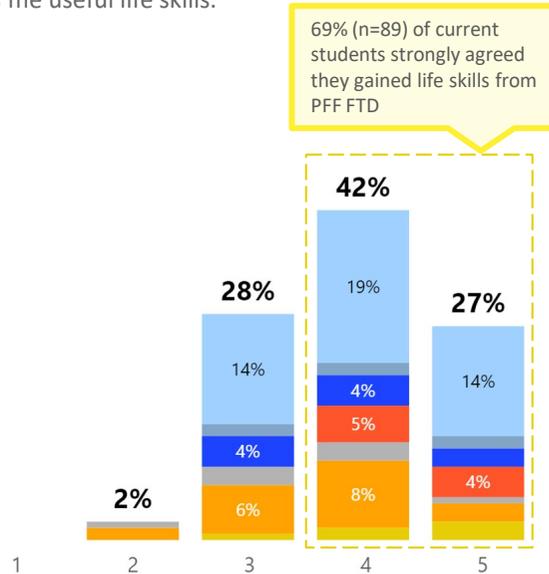
What did the surveys tell us about the extent to which FTD promotes capabilities?

Life skills (students)

Q. PFF FTD gives me useful life skills.

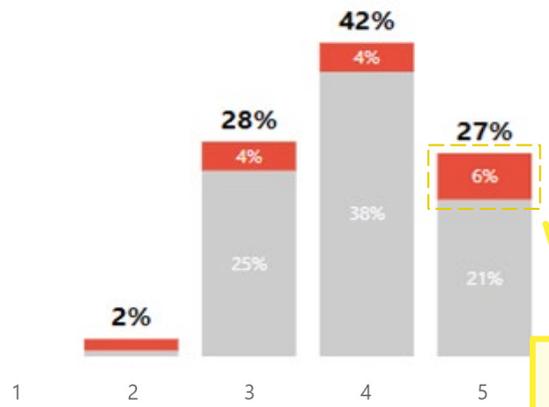


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- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer



Moved to attend high school

- Yes
- No

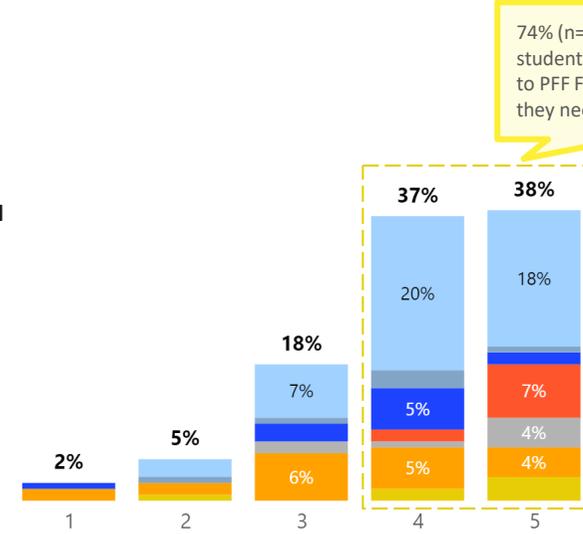


Staff help (students)

Q. When something doesn't go right, I feel like I can go to PFF FTD staff for help.

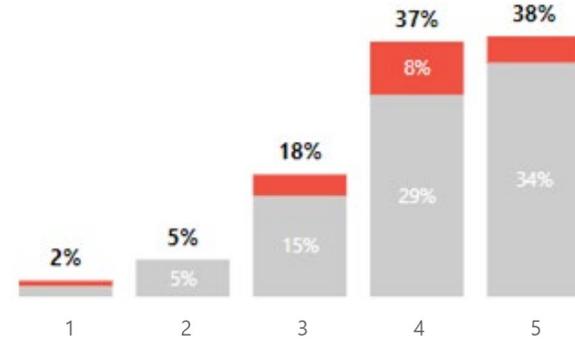


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- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer



Moved to attend high school

- Yes
- No



What did the surveys tell us about the extent to which FTD promotes capabilities?

Confidence (alumni)

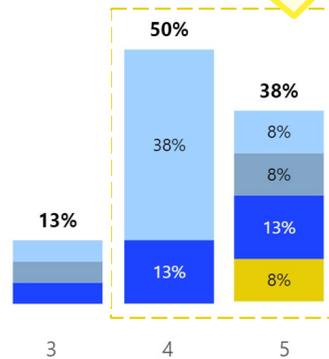
Q. Being in PFF FTD helped me be a more confident person.

Further categorised by region.



- WA Regional
- WA Metro
- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer

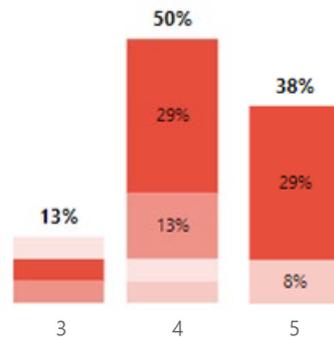
88% (n=21) of alumni agreed PFF FTD helped them be a more confident person



Further categorised by years in the program.

Years in the program

- 5+ years
- 3 to 4 years
- 1 to 2 years
- Less than 1 year



Confidence (families)



83%

(n = 35) of families strongly agreed "our child's confidence has grown since joining PFF FTD"

Immediate needs (PCs)



79%

(n=15) of program coordinators strongly agreed "the opportunities and support we provide address students' immediate needs"



What is it about FTD that promotes students' capabilities?

As shown in the previous page, families (83%, n=35) and alumni (88%, n=21) strongly agreed that participating in FTD helped students be more confident.

The individual mentoring and guidance from FTD staff, particularly program coordinators, was considered to be key in this. Alumni spoke about good experiences with program coordinators where they were “on my side” and “had faith in me”. Another explained how their program coordinator “actually listens and understands - not to change you but help you see.” Students reported positive flow-on effects from confidence, such as that improved grades led to greater confidence, which creates a positive reinforcing cycle.

The majority of current students (69%, n=89) strongly agreed that FTD gave them useful life skills. They said specifically that:

- Camps and career or university open days provide opportunities for relationship building and networking - these, in turn, help to build confidence.
- Excursions provide different opportunities for working in teams and building relationships with other students.
- Regular routines such as setting goals for each tutoring session or updating learning plans contribute to developing skills in goal setting, time management, and independent study.

The majority (74%, n=97) of FTD students said that FTD staff are people they can go to for help. Many identified specific needs, including immediate practical needs, for which they had needed and received help from FTD. These included:

- Food at after-school tutoring sessions,
- Transport support, particularly in regional areas with large distances to commute home,
- Referrals to the school counsellor,
- Getting help to access youth accommodation for students who were not safe at home,
- Support after deaths in the family, and
- Help with accessing uniforms.

What changes could better support capabilities?

Program coordinators report spending considerable time addressing students' immediate needs. This might sometimes mean going beyond their role responsibilities.

FTD could consider reviewing program coordinator job descriptions in light of the range of practical needs that students are presenting with, and/or consider how to work with schools to get these needs met in other ways. If the latter, it is important to consider that the FTD program coordinator may be the most trusted person in the school for the students and that this may be influencing their decision to confide in the program coordinator or ask them for help.

There were additional specific suggestions including a before-school activity such as breakfast, particularly for students who cannot attend in after-school hours, and additional transport (dedicated FTD bus, for example).

“ [Program coordinator] was there to talk to when family members died, walked me to class. ”

Follow the Dream alumnus

“ I like how I can do after-school study without worrying about calling a drive home. ”

Follow the Dream current student

“ They provide us with food and drinks which I am extremely grateful for. ”

Follow the Dream current student

Experiences

Why are experiences important?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can face barriers to participating in some experiences, for example where the activities are not relevant or culturally secure. For some students, cost to participate is also a major barrier. This puts them at a disadvantage to non-Indigenous students. A variety of different and new experiences can increase students' exposure to different opportunities that enrich their learning, help them enjoy school more, and encourage them to broaden their horizons when considering options for their future.

“ I loved the activities and the trips that allows me to have a wider perspective of what I can do in life and how I can get there. I also loved making new friends on these trips - some that I'm still in contact with.

Follow the Dream current student ”

“ Having cultural activities and not just homework time definitely encourages students to attend more and enjoy themselves.

Follow the Dream alumnus ”

“ The smiles on their faces as they enjoy spending time with other FTD students and FTD staff.

Follow the Dream program coordinator ”

What does the program do to support experiences?

Experiences are an important part of FTD, providing program participants with culturally relevant opportunities that target particular needs and help them enjoy school. Some of these experiences also help connect them with a network in which academic success is celebrated and validated.

While experiences vary across different program locations, they commonly include:

- Trips to universities.
- Excursions to career expos, university open days, and workplaces.
- Incursions, for example bringing guest speakers (including FTD alumni) in to speak to students.
- Cultural experiences, including camps in some areas.
- Reward days or activities, offered as encouragement for good behaviour, finishing work or achieving goals.

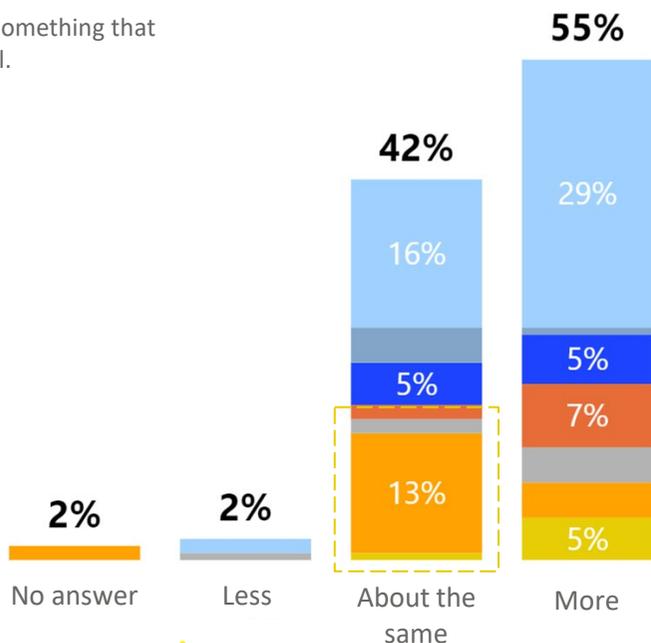
What did the surveys tell us about the extent to which FTD experiences are positive for students?

Enjoying school (students)

Q. Being in PFF FTD is something that makes me enjoy school.



- WA Regional
- WA Metro
- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer



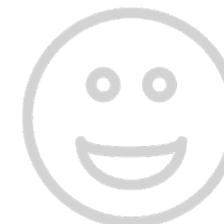
For the 2 students said they enjoyed school less since being part of FTD (1 from regional WA and the other unknown), no reasons were provided.

NT student responses were less strongly associated with enjoying school more

Enjoying school (alumni)

Q. After joining PFF FTD, I enjoyed school... (more, about the same, less)

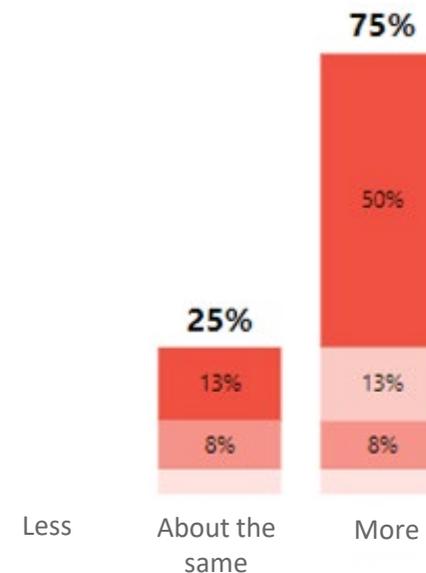
75%



(n=18) of alumni agreed PFF FTD helped them enjoy school more.

Years in the program

- 5+ years
- 3 to 4 years
- 1 to 2 years
- Less than 1 year





What is it about FTD that supports experiences well?

The majority (55%, n=71) of current students and 75% (n=18) of alumni said that FTD helped them enjoy school more. Some family members also commented on the impact of FTD on school enjoyment, for example “[my child] looks forward to going to school because she loves going to Polly Farmer.”

When students and alumni were asked what they liked most about FTD in the survey, camps and excursions were the most common responses. While students focused on the enjoyment or fun of these activities, alumni said the diversity of different experiences and opportunities offered supported them in setting post-school goals and pursuing them.

Overall, the experiences provided go beyond providing information, and offer students opportunities to build relationships with each other and important connections beyond their school. Alumni said that the relationships they built during camps were as important as the information they received, and that building connections with older students and the staff based in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander support programs made the transition to university a lot easier.

“ University camps make you realise what’s next.
Follow the Dream alumnus ”

“ I’d like FTD to be more interconnected with other places, in order to create more of a FTD community. I went to FTD at Derby and although I had a great experience I believe it would have been improved I had had more experiences with other FTD facilities.
Follow the Dream alumnus ”

“ I think getting the FTD students from other/close schools together for shared events would help facilitate a better relationship between the students that would help in higher education.
Follow the Dream alumnus ”

What changes could support better experiences?

Experiences clearly positively impact school enjoyment, relationships and post-school outcomes. The ability to expand the offering is limited by budget and capacity of program coordinators. Program coordinators said that more streamlined processes for accessing funds would help, as well as more administrative support in planning them and completing required documentation.

Program coordinators’ own connections and networks (e.g., with contacts at universities and workplaces) strongly influence the effectiveness of experiences. The capacity of program coordinators to spend time building relationships and maintaining them is often limited, while staff changes in partner organisations pose additional challenges. It could be worth considering increasing resourcing for this.

Students, alumni and program coordinators all saw opportunities to strengthen connections between FTD locations through experiences. From student and alumni perspectives, connecting to other FTD schools could open up opportunities to do events together, build more relationships with other young people with shared interests, and learn about the experiences of students and alumni from different parts of the country. From program coordinators’ perspective, in addition to these benefits for students, connecting more with other FTD schools could help staff share their experiences and ideas with each other.

For FTD schools in remote areas, there may be a greater need to travel to expose students to more opportunities. Many of the regional FTD schools already offer university camps and other experiences, but this is not consistent across all areas. One alumnus commented “you can’t be what you can’t see”.



Academic

What do we know about academic outcomes for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?

There is a widely known ‘gap’ between the experience of and success in education by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people compared to other students.

Specifically, in Western Australia, in 2021*:

- 61.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 20-24 years old had a year 12 or equivalent qualification, compared to 90.4% of non-Indigenous people.
- 37.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had completed a non-school qualification of Certificate III or above compared to 73.4% of non-Indigenous people.

This gap has nothing to do with the capacity or intelligence of young people and everything to do with the legacy and on-going experience from colonial dispossession.

“ I think [FTD] is an amazing program for children and my daughter not only loves it but it has made a huge impact on her learning achievements as well as her attitude toward going to school. Without the help of this program my daughter would have fallen behind in her school work.

Follow the Dream family member

“ My attendance rate was shocking, I missed around 3 months of school a year. Having [FTD] support was essential just to pass ... By year 12, I had 100% attendance.

Follow the Dream alumnus

“ If [my child] didn't have the support of Follow the Dream, she would not have completed year 12.

Follow the Dream family member

“ Follow the Dream has given me a support system within school and has encouraged me to aim for pathways that I didn't believe I had the capabilities of before being in the program.

Follow the Dream current student

What does the FTD program do to improve academic outcomes?

FTD provides targeted assistance to secondary students that promotes academic achievement and active school participation. In addition to the experiences and activities mentioned earlier, this includes:

- After-school tutoring, which typically runs for three or four afternoons each week. Students are able to work on classroom content where they need additional support, as identified by the student themselves or their teachers in conjunction with the FTD program coordinator. Tutors provide direct support to students in sessions while program coordinators liaise with teachers and provide students with individualised support around learning plans and career mentoring.
- Specific help to students with the transition to post-school pathways such as finding and applying for scholarships, finding accommodation, connecting with university contacts, developing study skills, and creating resumes.

*Australian Government, Closing the Gap <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area6>

What did the surveys tell us about the extent to which FTD is supporting academic outcomes?

Post-school options (students)

71%

(n=92) of current students agreed "FTD helps me think about different options they could pursue post-high school"

Preparing for transitions

87%

(n=20) of alumni strongly agreed "FTD helped prepare me for important transitions"

Post-school aspirations (alumni)

96%

(n=23) of alumni agreed "FTD encouraged me to consider more ambitious and aspirational post-school options"

Long term aspirations (PCs)

95%

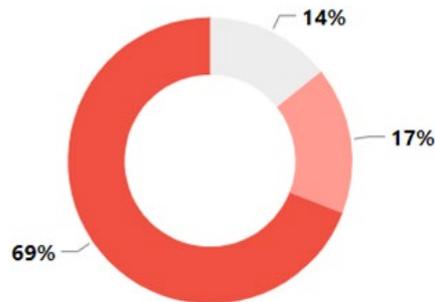
(n=18) of program coordinators agree that "the program supports the development of students' long-term aspirations"

Learning potential

69%

(n=29) of families agreed "FTD helped my child achieve their learning potential" more

Less About the same More

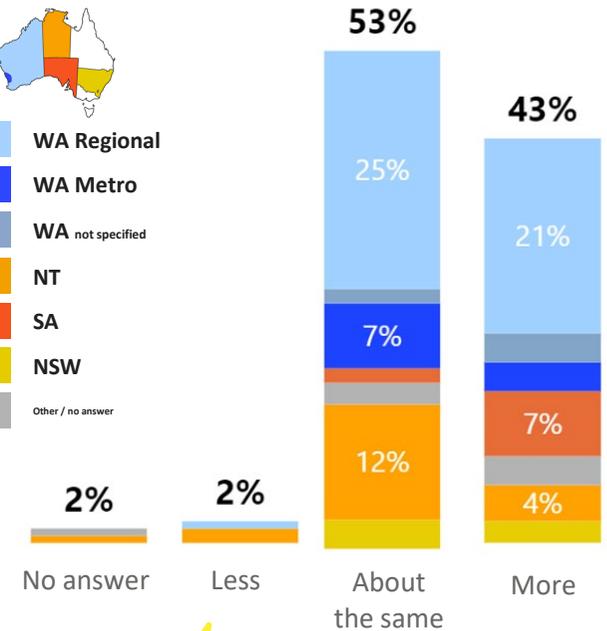


Prioritising school (students)

Q. Since being in PFF FTD, I prioritise school in my life... (more, about the same, less)



- WA Regional
- WA Metro
- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer



Only 4 students said they think about different post-school options less (2 of whom are in the Wheatbelt).

A higher proportion of students from South Australia reported prioritising school more after being a part of PFF FTD.



What's working to support academic outcomes?

Program statistics available for WA show FTD students, on average, have stronger academic results than the average for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, 67% of Year 12 students in FTD achieved WACE in 2022 compared to 41.5% of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Department of Education WA Annual Report 2022-23). **Survey results support this, with 86% (n=36) of families strongly agreeing FTD helped their child achieve their learning potential.**

Direct support for students' individual learning needs, particularly through after-school tutoring, was one of the most highly valued aspects of the program. **Engaging the right tutors was the key success factor, with 'right' described as a combination of subject matter expertise, general capabilities and personality.** As discussed in 'Belonging', tutors who are respectful of students and demonstrate care and commitment to students help create a safe space, which is more likely to result in students attending, engaging, and ultimately learning.

Alumni described how they came to understand the value of tutoring and extra time at school as they got closer to finishing school. In addition to the need for a good ATAR (for those wanting to go to university), **relationships with other students and tutors were noted as important in following through with these commitments.**

There is strong agreement across the board that FTD supports students in considering different post-school options and setting aspirational goals. Students and alumni said that **the experiences - university camps, career days, or visits to workplaces, where students are exposed to different possibilities and hear directly from people who have pursued different pathways - are critical** in contributing to this. Even where the focus of the experience is not aligned to a students' existing interests, they said it helped them decide what they might do (or not do) in their future. Alumni also said that a single experience could directly impact their decision to pursue a particular career path - for instance by being inspired by a university student who spoke about a course of interest on a university camp.

The experiences and capacity-building components offered in FTD are working as intended to support young people to successfully transition from high school into post-school life.

Overall, 87% (n=20) of alumni agreed FTD helped prepare them for important transitions such as these. One alumnus said that the university camp taught them "how to be a uni student - what grades are needed, how to study, how to teach yourself, how to plan, set goals." Commonly, we heard that FTD helped with deciding a post-school pathway, building a good resume, and researching opportunities and options (for example, scholarships, courses, and university accommodation).

“ The thing I really like about FTD are the tutors who take time out of their lives to help us at Polly Farmer with our school work, to guide us to a better future.
Follow the Dream current student ”

“ Getting uni tours and enrolment support is one of the main reasons I ended up making my choice to go to uni.
Follow the Dream alumnus ”

“ It is a safe place for me to study, a very comfortable environment, and without Follow the Dream I don't think I would succeed in my school life.
Follow the Dream current student ”

“ I had goals for myself, and didn't really have that before. I didn't really know what I wanted to do after school. [FTD] made it more realistic for me - other people are doing this stuff, I can do it too.
Follow the Dream alumnus ”



What changes could better support academic outcomes?

Program coordinators, alumni and students from different areas reported the need for more tutors in the program. Budgets for this might be a limiting factor. Some also made suggestions about what kind of tutors were employed, for example: “we may benefit more from having class teachers (English, Maths, etc.) ... as much as our current tutors help us, we need a different seeing eye when doing subjects that the tutors may say look good but teachers say completely different.” Some program coordinators and students also suggested **expanding FTD tutoring and support to in-school hours** (in addition to after-school hours), particularly in rural areas.

The needs of students change over their years of schooling and the program needs to be responsive to this. The focus on academic performance increases as students get closer to finishing school, while some program coordinators reported wanting more targeted support for younger students. One past student also commented that a separate space for the younger students could be warranted as they can be “loud and immature.” While it is important for younger students to have the freedom to build relationships and enjoy their participation in FTD, upper year students need a comfortable and quiet place to concentrate.

A couple of family members commented that at their child’s school there is a disconnect or lack of communication between FTD and the rest of the school. This means mainstream teachers do not always take on feedback or requests from FTD, and students may not be getting the support they need. If the underlying cause of this primarily sits with the school, PFF will need to play an advocacy role.

Alumni saw value in more broadly describing “post-school success”, and felt that FTD focuses primarily on university as the “best” post-school pathway.

They suggested:

- More support or encouragement to pursue Tafe, apprenticeships, or work.
- Mapping out different pathways to end goals, including those that show ‘stepping stones’ (e.g., if you want to be an electrical engineer but not study straight away, start off becoming an electrician).
- Highlighting more local opportunities (particularly for regional students), for example excursions to different local workplaces and career options, not just universities in metro areas.

The current priority on academic success may lead to some students who demonstrate less academic potential feeling out of place or excluded from the program. FTD is intended to support students who show a commitment to their academic development. In practice, entry is at the discretion of the coordinator and therefore varies across schools; some alumni said they had not been academically inclined when they started, but become so once they started to succeed.

However some students suggested it was the academically stronger students who tended to be involved, with one student saying **they would like FTD to be “more inclusive and supportive for struggling students.”** Program coordinators said that having a mix of students in the program with different levels of academic engagement generally benefits the program overall. This might be something that FTD staff consider for the future, in the context of the total package of support offered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools.

“ Encourage options besides university pathways... There was that thing of ‘if you don’t do uni you will kind of fail in life.’ ”

Follow the Dream alumnus

“ I personally didn't see much support or encouragement to other students to pursue TAFE or other professional competencies. ”

Follow the Dream alumnus



Empowerment

Why is empowerment important?

Whilst focused on supporting students during their schooling years, FTD aims to have lasting positive impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that build on but go further than school achievement, encompassing outcomes such as good choices in career and life, and being able to pursue their aspirations, and inspiring others.

Success in a chosen path goes beyond entry into university or starting work. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who commence a post-school qualification are significantly more likely to drop out, with first year attrition of 27% compared to 14.5% for non-Aboriginal students (in 2020).*

Young people need consistent, supporting and ongoing help to succeed, as the realities of post-school life set in - finding and keeping housing and jobs and overcoming setbacks.

“ They allow us blossom in their own way but importantly with a bit of guidance so we are able to have a future we deserve. They allow us to explore so many options for our futures and allow us to change our minds and consider every possibility. ”

Follow the Dream alumnus

“ [FTD] creates opportunities and experiences for Indigenous kids to feel empowered and embrace their aboriginality. ”

Follow the Dream alumnus

“ My children are looking forward to the future. ”
Follow the Dream family member

“ Many students keep in contact with me for years to come. ”
Follow the Dream program coordinator

What does the program do to support empowerment?

Once they finish Year 12, FTD participants are sometimes offered further support into 'Year 13' (a colloquial term for the first year after high school) and beyond.

Alumni talked about continuing to go to FTD for:

- help with resumes, job references, and application forms (e.g., for scholarships, enrolment),
- access to information about various opportunities (e.g., jobs, scholarships, further education),
- preparation for interviews,
- career guidance; and
- emotional support.

For regional schools, program coordinators can also support students during their physical transition from a regional location to a city to attend university, such as helping to find and keep accommodation.

In addition to support, program coordinators may invite alumni to return to their school in a 'role model' capacity, for example to provide a speech that aims to inspire current or potential future FTD students.

Once FTD students have finished high school, they can stay connected to PFF through the alumni network, to connect with other alumni (e.g., through events) and help inspire others to follow their dreams.

*Australian Government, Closing the Gap. <https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area6/higher-education-commencement-attrition-and-completion-rates>



What did the surveys tell us about the extent to which FTD is supporting empowerment?

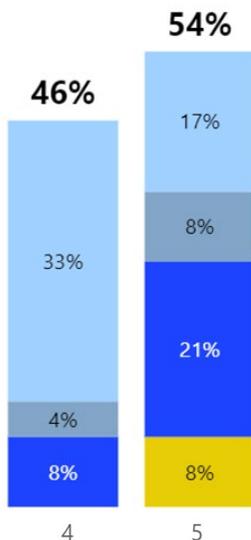
Following the dream

100%

of strongly alumni agreed that "overall, being in PFF FTD helped me follow my dream."



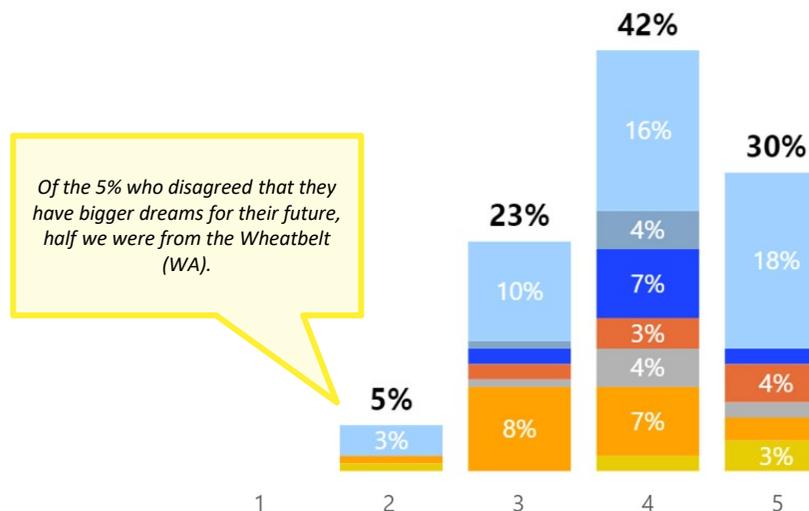
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- WA Metro
- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer



Bigger dreams (students)

Q. Since being in PFF FTD, I have bigger dreams for my future.

Of the 5% who disagreed that they have bigger dreams for their future, half we were from the Wheatbelt (WA).



Achieving goals



92%

(n=22) of alumni strongly agreed "the support I got from PFF FTD helped me achieve my post-school goals."

Student pride

91%

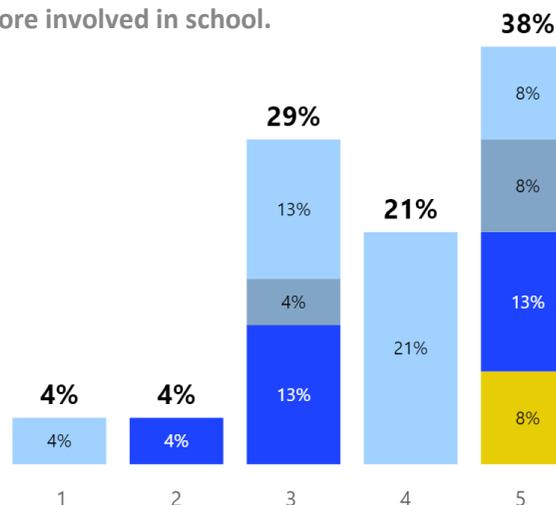
(n=118) of current students strongly agreed that "I'm proud of being a PFF FTD student"

Encouraging other children (alumni)

Q. Being in PFF FTD encouraged other children in my family to get more involved in school.



- WA Regional
- WA Metro
- WA not specified
- NT
- SA
- NSW
- Other / no answer



Good to be a part of



98%

(n=41) of families strongly agreed that "PFF FTD is good for our child to be a part of."



What's working to promote empowerment?

These are strong indicators that FTD is having its intended impact in empowering young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- 100% of alumni strongly agreed that FTD helped them follow their dream and 92% (n=22) strongly agreed FTD helped them achieve their post-school goals.
- 98% of families strongly agreed FTD was good for their child.
- 72% of current students strongly agreed that they have bigger dreams for their future since being part of FTD.

Program coordinators are continuing to provide useful help and support in the years beyond high school. Alumni said that contact helped keep them on track, as well as connecting them with information and opportunities (such as scholarships).

Current FTD students are really encouraged by seeing FTD alumni visiting the program coordinators at the school, as it signals that the program coordinator will stay in contact with them after year 12, as well as being an opportunity for role modelling and mentoring between alumni and current students.

Some alumni (3 of 5 interviewees) shared their experience of following in the footsteps of their FTD mentors by getting involved in similar education programs (or in some cases FTD itself) in their own careers, continuing the program's impact on future generations. For some, this is a short-term or part-time endeavour, while for others it is a long-term career choice.

FTD impacts are flowing to siblings and other members of students' families: 59% (n=14) of alumni strongly agreed FTD encouraged other children in their family to get more involved in school. In some cases, older children in FTD actively or through role modeling encouraged younger children to join. Because the program was co-ed - not single gender like some programs - gender was not a barrier to family members participating in FTD together, which can be motivating as well as practical (e.g., commuting home at the same time).

Alumni also said that family members influence the decisions of others. As one alumni said: "my brother and sister went to university, if they hadn't then I wouldn't have."

“ I didn't think to work in schools, didn't want to come back to school. But now I am an AIEO [Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer] and studying teaching. Seeing the improvement in kids - their mental health and grades - is motivating, what keeps you in the job. ”

Follow the Dream alumna

“ Being able to graduate school, I attribute most of that to Follow the Dream. I know I wouldn't have graduated school without that after-school tutoring. It would've been very depressing being the only student not to graduate with peers. ”

Follow the Dream alumna

“ If wasn't for Follow the Dream, I might not have finished school... I would've been in trouble more than I was. ”

Follow the Dream alumna

“ I didn't think about uni until Follow the Dream provided opportunities to learn about it... I wouldn't have gone to uni if it wasn't for Follow the Dream. ”

Follow the Dream alumna

“ Without Follow the Dream, I wouldn't have built my resume, finished year 12. I'd probably still be living with grandmother or brother. I definitely wouldn't have the life I have now if it wasn't for Follow the Dream. ”

Follow the Dream alumna



What changes could better support empowerment?

Whether or not a FTD student receives support after they have left high school is largely dependent on their program coordinator. We heard there is considerable variation in this support. As the figure (right) shows, the majority of program coordinators said they spend less than half their time supporting students year 13 or after, while 26% (n=5) said they spend at least half their time on this, with reasons for the variations including:

- capacity of the individual program coordinator,
- the length of time the program coordinator has worked at the school,
- how connected students remain to the school (i.e., program coordinators find it difficult to stay in contact with alumni who have moved), and
- whether students participated in FTD at their own school or through outreach.

The extent to which Year 13 support is intended in the model is not clear. However, PFF may wish to consider if and how this could support better outcomes.

Alumni are more likely to engage with their program coordinator from high school than directly with the PFF organisation, particularly if they have a strong relationship with the coordinator. Alumni could benefit from a more coordinated approach from PFF, including consistently and persistently promoting the alumni network to Year 12 students as a starting point. This could help distribute more information to more former students.

Some alumni expressed a desire for PFF to play a role in facilitating mentoring relationships beyond high school years. Throughout this report the value of direct connection in supporting people has been reinforced, and people spoke of the potential value of mentors: "someone to look up to, someone to feed ideas to, get feedback from, learn from, motivate you ... who has grown up in a similar situation." Program coordinators similarly suggested that FTD participants need more mentoring during and after high school, including Aboriginal mentors and mentoring during the transition to university or when relocating (e.g., from regional to metro).

“ I would love to allocate more time to engaging with my Alumni, but time and workload is a big factor. It was different in a host-only site, as I felt I had more time to engage with Alumni/Year 13's and support their post-school pathways more. ”

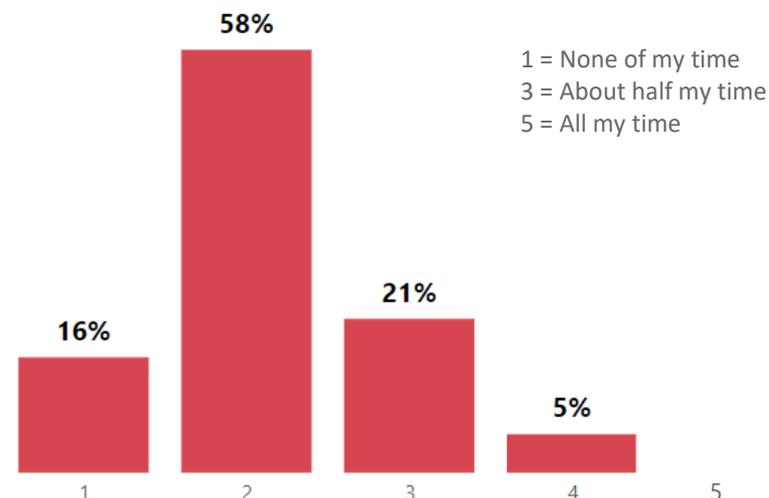
Follow the Dream program coordinator

“ [Students] receive lots of support in their time in FTD and this support drops away very quickly. They need someone to check in with them, keep them on track and help them identify where to go when they need help. ”

Follow the Dream program coordinator

Time spent on "Year 13" support

Most program coordinators (74%, n=14) spend less than half their time supporting students in "year 13" and beyond.



Conclusions

Summary of learning and recommendations

Overall, FTD is successfully enabling young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to 'follow their dream'.

- Quantitative data show FTD students perform better, on average, than other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Alumni of the program strongly consider that the program is part of what contributed to academic success, helping them finish school and pursue higher education opportunities.
- This research suggests that the program does this by creating and enhancing students' sense of belonging in and enjoyment of school, providing practical and necessary supports to grow life skills and solve immediate problems, and providing experiences that enable students to see different futures for themselves.
- Within the program, the role and value of personal connections that the students make with each other and with other adults are a key part of success. We heard that seeing and meeting other young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were succeeding in their life paths was strongly encouraging for current students.
- Ultimately, alumni said that FTD was part of what gave them the confidence and inspiration they needed to go on to succeed, and they credit it, in part, for them being able to live lives they feel empowered in.

In many cases, the students may have achieved this on their own. However, **the stories we heard suggested that some students are facing major challenges in succeeding in many school environments, and need the kind of practical and emotional support fostered by FTD to make it.** In some specific cases, alumni said that they had been heading in a different and less positive direction, and that FTD was part of what helped them turn their lives around.

Longer engagement in FTD is generally associated with more positive impact. Acknowledging that it is impossible to know if students who stay in the program longer benefit more, or students who benefit more stay in the program longer.

While it is impossible to know which came first, alumni looking back describe being less engaged in FTD in earlier years and realising the benefits of FTD in later years. Some also came to see the value of FTD in younger years in giving them a safe space to connect with their peers and build relationships with staff, which supported successful outcomes in their upper high school years. This suggests the relationship at least in part goes from length of time to impact, as well as the other way and **suggests a role for actively keeping students engaged with the program, even (especially) in the tough times.**

“ I definitely wouldn't have the life I have now if it wasn't for Follow the Dream.”
*Follow the Dream
alumnus*

“ The earlier students engage with FTD the more successful both the students and the program will be. I strongly encourage family involvement for long term success.”
Follow the Dream family member

We identified several suggestions relating to the program coordinator role, being:

- **Program coordinators greatly influence the effectiveness of the program and quality of students' experiences, however their roles and responsibilities within the school (outside the program) sometimes conflict with FTD responsibilities.** Program coordinators report being expected to fulfil responsibilities for the school beyond their FTD role, including classroom teaching as well as provide mentoring and support to other staff. It might be that the FTD role needs to be more carefully protected - or responsibilities clarified - to ensure program coordinators are able to fulfil expected responsibilities.
- **Program coordinators are being expected to meet basic practical support needs that are not strictly part of their job.** Program coordinators are going 'above and beyond' for students, helping with urgent practical needs (like addressing challenges at home or accessing uniforms or transport). While not strictly part of their role, these are meeting critical gaps for children, without which students cannot succeed.
- **The support students receive in 'Year 13' is critical to whether they can achieve their post-school goals; program coordinator expectations and roles seem to vary here.** There may be a need to more intentionally and consistently provide such support and/or to consider where it should come from.

FTD is delivered through various models. **Stakeholders expressed a strong preference for the host school model**, as it:

- Allows for more regular engagement - and therefore stronger relationships - between program coordinators and students,
- Reduces the effort students need to make in engaging in the program (e.g., less time to commute to after-school tutoring),
- Is more likely to mean FTD has a dedicated space, and
- Offers the program coordinator a greater opportunity for deeper influence in their school.

Creating stronger connections between program coordinators of different locations - for example in opportunities to share practice and learn from each other, or by collaborating on student experiences - could help increase consistency across the FTD program. For some aspects of the program, however, PFF would need to play a role in advocating for change in schools (e.g., for greater support from school leadership and or for higher levels of resourcing).

“ I was lucky enough to have amazing support and great teachers and tutors to help me find new pathways and opportunities for my future at one of the schools but unfortunately at the other school there was not as much support. There was limited support from teachers and unfortunately not a lot of funding at all to help with university excursions, or any one-on-one help with the coordinators and even food for our sessions. I think everyone in the program no matter what school or district you're in should all get equal opportunity and support. ”

Follow the Dream alumnus

“ Making sure the best person is in the role as Program Coordinator. For our family we acknowledge that the current FTD Program Coordinator had played a major part in the development and journey over our child's high school years, having the right person in this role goes a long way in assisting the best outcomes for the student, school and families. ”

Follow the Dream family member

Engaging alumni in more and different ways could improve the experience for them, and multiply the value of PFF's programs. There are opportunities for alumni engagement such as through regular events and ensuring a range of different opportunities. Greater alumni engagement is beneficial for the alumni themselves as it can offer continued networking and relationship building. It can also flow onto benefits for current students by having a larger pool of role models to draw on for activities such as incursions and excursions. It would also support the development of a more formal mentoring offering (as suggested in the Key Findings for Empowerment on p.32).

Some stakeholders questioned whether ATAR/Year 12 was the right description of 'success'. While acknowledging the reality of the role these things play, some questioned how students could be encouraged to consider a broader range of post-school options and pathways, including vocational training and work, in addition to university education. This might also enable FTD to be more inclusive of students who would benefit from support to achieve life goals that are broader than further education or training.

Contact us

The contacts in relation to this document are:

Jay Martin

jay.martin@innovationunitanz.org

0407 160 019

Claire Dodd

claire.dodd@innovationunitanz.org

0403 845 124

www.innovationunit.org