



Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

# **CASE STUDY RESEARCH FOR THE REMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE STRATEGY**

22 FEBRUARY 2016

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is a synthesis of the findings from a series of six case studies undertaken for the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). The case studies were undertaken on behalf of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) between June and November 2015.

### Project objectives and methodology

The overall objective of the case studies was to identify and document the key drivers of success in the selected sites, including contextual and general reasons explaining:

- how the RSAS model is working in each site
  - in what ways
  - who it is working for
  - in what circumstances.

The case study sites were selected by PM&C, in consultation with the state based departments of education, using the following factors as the basis for selection:

- an increase of school attendance of 5 percentage points or more from Semester 1 in 2013 to Semester 2 in 2014
- the RSAS model is perceived to be working well on the ground.

These dual criteria ensured that 'success' was not defined by the data alone. Three out of the six case studies met the 5 percentage point increase criteria and were also supported by perceived success of the implementation of the RSAS model. The PM&C Regional Network and the jurisdictional education departments nominated the remaining three sites because local intelligence indicated that these sites were operating well and were demonstrating innovation and evolution in their operationalisation of the RSAS model.

The case studies were conducted in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. Fieldwork consisted of face-to-face interviews with key informants in each of the six selected communities. In total some 92 people participated in the case studies, including RSAS coordinators, team members, school principals, PM&C network staff, and RSAS providers.

## KEY FINDINGS

This report synthesises the findings of the six case studies and identifies those factors that have contributed to the successful operation of RSAS in those sites. The analysis highlights a number of high-level factors that appear to strongly impact on success and could plausibly be considered to have widespread application to other RSAS sites.

### Program adaptability enables local problem solving

Analysis of how programs work to bring about social change has indicated that effective interventions must be tailored to local contexts if they are to be effective. Overall, case study participants felt there was sufficient scope for local adaption in RSAS to enable them to operate in a way that suited their local conditions. They thought that the ability to test approaches to working with families and students, and build on those that proved successful, was the greatest strength of RSAS.

## **Key success factors**

An overall analysis of the case studies indicated that the ability to adapt RSAS to local conditions is the crucial success factor.

In the case studies there were four additional high level success factors:

- An effective and relatively stable RSAS team
- A skilled coordinator
- Creating relationships with the community
- The RSAS team and the school working together

These four factors were common to all the six case studies. However, each case study site implemented their own local solutions to ensure they suited their school and community.

### **An effective and relatively stable RSAS team**

*The RSAS team needs the right local representation for the community to take notice*

For RSAS to be successful a fundamental requirement is an effective RSAS team. The creation of a team that has credibility in the local community can most effectively communicate the message about the importance of school attendance.

In the case studies a credible team was considered to be one that was broadly representative of key family groupings, included people who were generally respected or held positions of authority in the community, and had a mix of males and females. The inclusion of people who are respected in the community is important because these people are more likely to be taken seriously and listened to.

Broad family representation is important for cultural reasons because a team that is seen as being strongly aligned with certain family groups is likely to alienate other sections of the community. Those groups who feel alienated are unlikely to listen to a message about positive schooling if it is coming from the 'wrong' people.

### **A skilled coordinator**

*For the team to flourish a skilled coordinator is crucial*

An effective and stable team needs the leadership and support of a skilled coordinator. With the right set of skills and attitude the coordinator can train, empower and support the team to identify the most appropriate local school attendance strategies that can influence individual families and the community as a whole.

The coordinator role is decidedly multi-faceted. The most successful projects had a coordinator with very strong communication, organisation and mentoring skills. The coordinator in remote communities also needs to understand community attitudes and ways of learning so that effective training can be undertaken.

## **Creating relationships**

*Successful RSAS teams concentrate on being positive to build relationships with the community*

The attitude of successful RSAS teams is that they are supporters, not enforcers. They have a strong understanding of the obstacles many families face and use positive messaging and support to keep families engaged. They believe that keeping the communication lines open through patience and persistence will ultimately result in the best school attendance outcomes.

The RSAS approach is most often one of ‘How can we help you get your children to school?’ and about the value of education to the children and the entire community. School principals in particular were very aware and appreciative of the fundamental difference between the punitive tools that they had at their disposal and the more supportive attitude of the RSAS teams.

## **RSAS team and school working together**

*RSAS and the school working together increases the opportunities for improving school attendance*

There was a strong and consistent view in the case studies that RSAS worked best when the school and the RSAS team worked together. Stakeholders felt that this relationship was an essential underpinning of the successes they had achieved to date. The sharing of information is helping to reduce the number of unexplained absences and leads to better-targeted efforts towards improving school attendance.

When RSAS and the school work together each can bring particular information, knowledge and skills which, when combined, provides for a more fulsome understanding of the reasons for poor school attendance in the community. This in turn improves the ability to find appropriate solutions.

*A supportive school principal makes a significant difference*

The ability for the RSAS team and school to work together depends first and foremost on a supportive and engaged school principal. The principal’s level of support and engagement with RSAS lays the foundation for a good working relationship between the school and the RSAS team.

The case studies have demonstrated that a supportive school principal can set the tone for the school staff – teachers, Aboriginal Education Officers (or equivalents), administration workers – to embrace the concept of RSAS and work constructively with the RSAS team. Without this support the RSAS team will be much more constrained in their efforts to work with students and families to improve school attendance.

*RSAS team members working in the classrooms can help keep students engaged*

RSAS team members working in the classroom can assist in keeping students engaged, provide a reassuring presence for students who are struggling and they can be role models for all students. An understanding of students’ language and culture means team members are more able to anticipate problems.

In most of the case study sites RSAS team members were working in the classrooms. For many RSAS team members working in the classroom will be a new experience and most will not have undertaken any formal training in a classroom setting. This makes it imperative that team members are given a clear understanding of their role, appropriate guidance about the behaviour that is

expected of them in the classroom, and ongoing mentoring to assist them through the challenges of working in a classroom setting.

### *Prime Minister and Cabinet network staff can facilitate good relationships*

PM&C network staff can help to facilitate good relationships between the school and RSAS provider through regular communication and by assisting principals to understand the benefits RSAS can provide to the school.

In many of the case study sites PM&C network staff have played an important role in introducing RSAS to communities, facilitating good relationships among key stakeholders and bringing school and provider together.

### **Local solutions**

#### *Increasing school attendance requires ongoing efforts*

Respondents were impressed with and complimentary about the opportunity under RSAS to shape their project to their community's needs and aspirations. Working to improve school attendance is highly challenging and successful outcomes as measured by overall school attendance rates take time to emerge.

Stakeholders stressed the importance of setting interim goals: seeking success in areas that should ultimately lead to increased attendance rates. For example, case study participants pointed to an increase in community awareness about the importance of education, and believed that RSAS had played an important role in shifting community perceptions. Other stakeholders were able to identify significant improvements in attendance by particular children, though for various reasons this had not yet impacted on the overall school attendance rate.

**‘There’s a big mob of people going out and talking about school attendance. The conversations are happening.’**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

This report is a synthesis of the findings from a series of six case studies undertaken for the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS). The case studies were undertaken on behalf of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) between June and November 2015.

## 1.1 Background to the Remote School Attendance Strategy

RSAS is an Australian Government initiative implemented by PM&C.

RSAS is designed to lift school attendance levels in selected remote communities through employment of local School Attendance Supervisors (SAS) and School Attendance Officers (SAO) who work with schools, families, and children to ensure they go to school every possible day.

RSAS was rolled out in two stages. Stage 1 commenced in Term 1 of 2014 and involved students attending 44 schools in five jurisdictions – Northern Territory (NT), Queensland (QLD), Western Australia, (WA), New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA). Stage 2 commenced in Term 2 of 2014 including students from a further 33 schools.

These remote communities were targeted because their schools have had low school attendance rates over recent years, in most instances below 70 – 80 per cent. In some cases the average attendance rate over six years has been as low as 38 per cent (Angurugu, NT).

Total funding for the strategy is \$46.5 million (\$28.4 million plus \$18.1 million) over two calendar years, until 31 December 2015, to fund the employment of SASs and SAOs in each community.

SASs and SAOs are recruited and employed locally on the premise that as members of the local Aboriginal community they will be more involved in finding and agreeing on solutions to poor attendance, and involved in rewarding and acknowledging improved and regular attendance. Remote Jobs and Communities Programme<sup>1</sup> providers and other providers selected to deliver the strategy have a key role in employing and resourcing the SASs and SAOs.

The strategy is operated independently of the schools, and state government education systems are simultaneously operating their own school attendance programs and strategies that RSAS aims to complement.

## 1.2 Project objectives

The overall objective of the case studies was to identify and document the key drivers of success in the selected sites, including contextual and general reasons explaining:

- how the RSAS model is working in each site
  - in what ways
  - who it is working for
  - in what circumstances.

It is important to understand the function of this research: it is not examining RSAS outcomes per se, instead it concentrates on identifying the strategies that those closely involved in implementing RSAS on the ground believe have the potential to achieve RSAS outcomes over time. The program is young and the changes required through RSAS are not simple.

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<sup>1</sup> Now known as the Community Development Program.

## **1.3 Methodology**

The methodology was broadly based on the Success Case Method (SCM) approach (Brinkerhoff, 2002) and adopted a realist evaluation theoretical stance.

The SCM takes as a starting point the assumption that for any initiative there will be both success and failure. The aim of the method is to identify and leverage the areas of success in order to provide a better understanding of why things worked (or why they did not). Success can then be built on and extended.

Realist evaluation supports explanation of how a program appears to be working in a range of local circumstances, exploring what works for whom, in what context and why. This research is intended to provide some explanatory theory of change concepts that take into account the circumstances or context in each case study site. The end result contributes to the continuous improvement of RSAS and provides suggestions that can be tested through further exploration and analysis.

Using the SCM method as a guide this research involved the following steps:

1. Defining what success should look like
2. Identifying the best cases
3. Interviewing and documenting success cases
4. Communicating findings

The case study sites were selected by PM&C, in consultation with the state based departments of education, using the following factors as the basis for selection:

- An increase of school attendance of 5 percentage points or more from Semester 1 in 2013 to Semester 2 in 2014
- The RSAS model is perceived to be working well on the ground.

These dual criteria ensured that 'success' was not defined by the data alone. Three out of the six case studies met the 5 percentage point increase criteria and were also supported by perceived success of the implementation of the RSAS model. The PM&C Regional Network and the jurisdictional education departments nominated the remaining three sites because local intelligence indicated that these sites were operating well and were demonstrating innovation and evolution in their operationalisation of the RSAS model.

Following identification of the best case study sites an application to undertake research was submitted to each of the relevant jurisdictional departments of education.

### **1.3.1 The case study sites**

The case studies were conducted in the NT, QLD, WA and SA. Four were in remote Indigenous towns with a predominantly non-English speaking Indigenous population. The remaining two case study sites were in remote small towns that had a predominantly non-Indigenous population.

Three of the providers were large Indigenous organisations. One was a private sector jobs provider and two were the schools themselves, both within Indigenous communities.

### **1.3.2 Fieldwork**

Fieldwork consisted of site visits to each of the six selected communities. Each visit involved a team of two researchers conducting face-to-face interviews with RSAS coordinators, team members (SASs



and SAOs), school principals, PM&C network staff, and RSAS providers. Three telephone interviews were conducted with stakeholders who were not in the community at the time of the case study visit.

In total some 92 people participated in the case studies.

The interviews were semi-structured, using an interview schedule to guide discussion (Attachment 1) and ensure the collection of consistent information across the case study sites. The interviews were intended to unpack how interviewees think the program is working, in order to share their observations and document assumptions about what generates outcomes.

Observational methods were also used where appropriate; for example the researchers participated in the RSAS team early morning rounds and school bus runs wherever possible.

### **1.4 Caveats**

The six case studies provide a good understanding of the ways in which RSAS is working on the ground, as well as highlighting key drivers of success. However, remote communities in Australia differ in many respects; they have different community makeups, cultures, family groupings and aspirations. This research has endeavoured to identify the strategies or mechanisms being used in the case study sites and the contexts in which they appear to positively affect the success of RSAS. Different mechanisms can be expected to be more or less successful for each remote community depending on its individual context. There is no particular evidence that suggests that *all* of the identified success factors are necessary to create the change that RSAS is aiming to achieve. In each RSAS community there will be different combinations of factors that may lead to success.

### **1.5 Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the time and expertise that was freely given by staff of PM&C, in particular the department's regional and community based staff, school principals and all the RSAS staff who participated in the case study research.

## 2. KEY DRIVERS OF SUCCESS

This report synthesises the findings of the six case studies and identifies those factors that have contributed to the successful operation of RSAS in those sites. The analysis highlights a number of high-level factors that appear to strongly impact on success and could plausibly be considered to have widespread application to other RSAS sites.

### 2.1 Program adaptability enables local problem solving

Active consideration should be given to the implications of context and culture that affect how RSAS works. Rather than preferring identical implementation in all communities, policies need to provide support for local adaptations of the strategy.

This message resonates with evidence about similar social problems in a range of difficult circumstances. Analysis of how programs work to bring about social change in recent years have indicated that although descriptions of interventions often focus on a relatively simple program theory, in practice *'effective interventions work through a combination of mechanisms and require a combination of strategies... (and must) be tailored to local contexts if they are to be effective'*<sup>2</sup>. The analysis of these six case studies strongly echoes this finding: that the key factor for RSAS to reach its full potential is the ability of the on-the-ground implementers to adapt the strategy to the particular local context and needs of each RSAS community.

Overall, case study participants felt there was sufficient scope for local adaptation in RSAS to enable them to operate in a way that suited their local conditions. They thought that the ability to test approaches to working with families and students, and build on those that proved successful, was the greatest strength of RSAS.

### 2.2 Key success factors

The ability to adapt RSAS to local conditions is the crucial success factor.

In the case studies there were four additional high level factors that were most significant in the successes achieved:

- The creation of an effective and relatively stable RSAS team (chapter 3)
- A skilled coordinator (chapter 4)
- Creating relationships with the community (chapter 5)
- The RSAS team and the school working together (chapter 6)

The following chapters describe each of the key success factors, and explain how they work, for whom and in which circumstances. Examples of the different case studies are used to illustrate how different RSAS teams have adapted their methodology to suit their local circumstances.

The report concludes with some challenges that the six case study sites were experiencing in implementing RSAS.

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<sup>2</sup> Enhancing community accountability, empowerment and education outcomes in low and middle-income countries: A realist review. Westhorp, G., Walker, D.W., Rogers, P., Overbeeke, N., Ball, D., and Brice, G. (2014). EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

### 3. THE CREATION OF AN EFFECTIVE AND STABLE RSAS TEAM

For RSAS to be successful a fundamental requirement is an effective RSAS team. This requires two key elements: getting the right people for the job and as much as possible, keeping them. The creation of a relatively stable team that has credibility in the local community can most effectively communicate the message about the importance of school attendance.

#### **3.1 The RSAS team needs the right local representation for the community to take notice**

The RSAS team needs to have credibility in the local community in order to convey a message that regular school attendance is important.

In the case studies a credible team was considered to be one that was broadly representative of key family groupings, included people who were generally respected or held positions of authority in the community, and had a mix of males and females.

Broad family representation is important for cultural reasons because a team that is seen as being strongly aligned with certain family groups is likely to alienate other sections of the community. Those groups who feel alienated are unlikely to listen to a message about positive schooling if it is coming from the 'wrong' people.

The inclusion on the RSAS team of people who are respected in the community - either through maturity or because they hold positions of authority in the community - is also important. This is because these people are more likely to be able to convey the message that regular school attendance is a matter to be taken seriously. It should be noted however that this is not always the case. In one case study, a Traditional Owner and community elder made the observation that the old community structures were breaking down, and that people no longer listened to him. Nevertheless, the inclusion of people that have a level of community respect was considered to be a necessary requirement for an effective RSAS team.

*'We tried to select people who were significant in the community but were not overly stretched with other responsibilities. You need to pick someone who is respected in the community, that's a major thing, it's no use picking somebody who won't be listened to in the community.'*  
(Coordinator)

A gender balance was also considered important, because in many situations it is most appropriate for females to engage with women in the family and male team members to engage with men. In culturally strong communities it is important to include men in the team, as they are crucial to engaging older boys and young men with poor attendance.

Getting the right mix of people for the RSAS team is challenging, particularly in the smaller communities where there are a limited number of people for the roles. In the two larger towns there was a focus on recruiting team members who had previous employment experience or a commitment to employment, a basic level of education, and effective communication skills. Good community representation was still considered paramount in these settings.

The value of broad family representation is more important to the overall credibility of the team than it is about the need for family-to-family engagement in all situations. While numerous examples were provided in the case studies of team members effectively engaging with members of their own family, there were other situations where someone *who was not a family member* had been most effective in persuading the family to get their child to school. It may be that the situation required someone with authority in the community, or it may be that the family member had been trying unsuccessfully and a new approach was called for. Essentially, only those with close connections to and an understanding

of community dynamics can best determine who in the team is best placed to engage with which family. Having broad representation of the community on the RSAS team provides the best foundation for community engagement.

*'Local language groups are also important, as well as the local politics. We know who can work with what group and who can't for cultural reasons. So, we needed to cover off that too.'*  
(Coordinator)

*'We have broad tentacles out into the community.'* (Coordinator)

An additional and important reason for having broad community representation is that this enables the provision of more comprehensive intelligence about reasons for non-attendance – if a particular child is absent from school, usually someone on the team will know what is going on with that family. This has been especially important for the school in helping to reducing the number of unexplained absences, an issue that is discussed in more detail in section 6.1 below.

### **3.2 Creating a stable RSAS team through flexible employment conditions**

A relatively stable team means that more time can be devoted to keeping the lines of communication open with families and devising locally relevant strategies to increase school attendance. The key to a stable team is offering employment conditions that are appropriate to the local conditions.

A relatively stable RSAS team is important for many reasons. At present some RSAS projects are experiencing a high turnover of staff and are having difficulty in recruiting new members. A high turnover of staff results in RSAS work not being done properly, team member frustration and disillusionment, and a need for constant training of new recruits. Team members create relationships with families who are struggling to get their children to school. The relationships take time to build and losing team members can lead to a destabilising of these relationships. The benefits of training are lost, and more of a coordinator's time must be spent with new recruits, leaving less time for working with families. Losing team members can also have a negative effect on a team's morale and sense of purpose.

Putting efforts into maintaining a stable team ensures that relationships can be maintained, the benefits of training are fully utilised and the team morale does not suffer. While some team member loss may be inevitable, giving careful thought to the needs of team members can do much to create a stable team. A clear understanding of the local labour market environment and a willingness to 'meet team members halfway' by offering a range of employment opportunities can go a long way towards ensuring team stability.

For example, in some case studies the potential local recruits had little or no employment experience; the idea of working for eight hours per day for a full five days a week was known to be a difficult concept in the community. Being aware of this issue, some RSAS coordinators have offered multiple part-time positions. They reasoned that with a large team working part time hours that best suited them there was a much stronger possibility that each day would yield a sufficiently large contingent of workers to successfully complete the day's work. When team members are happy and enjoying their working lives there is a greater possibility of a stable team.

*'We have 25 (team members) and there's around 15 that turn up out of those on any day. We definitely need at least 20 in the team to make sure that it all gets done each day.'*  
(Coordinator)

One coordinator in a larger town was aware through local knowledge that potential RSAS team members were most likely to be looking for a decent wage, so took the decision to concentrate on compiling a small, stable, committed RSAS team by offering the option of longer hours and / or full time employment.

*'I argued for a smaller number of SASs and SAOs than they originally wanted. I thought it was important to be able to offer a decent number of hours in this town. Otherwise they'll be tempted by other jobs and I didn't want that!'* (Coordinator)

*'I was keen to work with (the coordinator) but it needed to be full time. I have a family to look after and I couldn't afford anything less.'* (RSAS team member)

Many RSAS team members are parents with child care responsibilities and coordinators have recognised that flexibility around a requirement to work during the school holidays was another important employment issue.

## 4. A SKILLED COORDINATOR

The coordinator creates the conditions for the team to flourish. With the right set of skills and attitude the coordinator can train, empower and support the team to identify the most appropriate local school attendance strategies that can influence individual families and the community as a whole.

Successful coordinators:

- Have excellent communication and organisational skills
- Build a sense of ownership within the team
- Are capable of exerting authority when required.

Case study respondents, from school principals to RSAS staff and PM&C network staff, strongly affirmed the absolute importance of the coordinator position.

*'The coordinator position is critical – the team needs supporting.'* (Government Engagement Coordinator)

### **4.1 Excellent communication and organisation skills are needed for team building**

A coordinator needs a very clear understanding of the goals of RSAS together with the ability to communicate effectively, organise and mentor RSAS team members.

The coordinator's role is decidedly multi-faceted. The coordinator fundamentally shapes the attitude and work of the team. Most particularly, the coordinator is the conduit between the school and the RSAS team, laying the groundwork for a supportive and open relationship.

The most successful projects had a coordinator with very strong communication, organisation, mentoring and leadership skills. Excellent communication skills are needed to maintain close communication with the school as well as being able to train and inspire the team members. A very clear understanding of the goals of RSAS is crucial as well as the ability to translate those goals into everyday activities for the team members.

In one case study the provider deliberately recruited a highly trained (non-Indigenous) professional to the position of RSAS coordinator. This individual has high level organisational and leadership skills, a focus on business development strategies, and an understanding of the need for capacity building to foster sustainability in the model. This coordinator has developed a very strong relationship with the school and the team is fully integrated into the school's daily activities. Respondents in this case study cited the choice of coordinator as undoubtedly being a significant factor in the achievements of RSAS at this location.

In another case study the provider, with a long history in the region, was aware that the person filling the position of coordinator would need to have excellent communication skills to be able to bring the team and the community with them. They chose a person who was well known and respected through previous employment with Indigenous peoples in the region, had a strong background in social work and was known to have very strong people and organisational skills. The success of the RSAS team was attributed by case study respondents to the coordinator's skill in team organisation and mentoring as well as the relationship created by the coordinator with the school personnel.

The coordinator in remote communities also needs to understand community and cultural attitudes. In one case study site the coordinator observed that team members were often absent due to cultural obligations. The coordinator understood that if these members did not attend to their cultural obligations they would soon lose the respect of the community and that this in turn would jeopardise the credibility and effectiveness of the team. Following discussions with the team the decision was

taken to significantly increase the size of the team and allow flexible hours of work so that members could deal with their obligations while still having sufficient team members available.

#### **4.1.1 Successful coordinators inspire, train, and support their team members**

Successful coordinators regularly reinforced with team members the value and importance of education and the fact that regular attendance is the key to children's learning. The coordinators believed stressing the fundamental importance of the RSAS work helped team members to stay on track over the longer term, as there was potential for discouragement when some families were unmoved by their continuing efforts.

*'It has given me a very different view on how important school is for our children's future.'*  
(RSAS team member)

The successful coordinators understood that in remote communities many of their RSAS team had not worked before and needed training in developing basic work skills such as attending every day and coming to work on time, as well as the specific skills needed to undertake the RSAS work. They accepted that these skills would take time to develop, but at the same time believed that they should set high standards for their team to strive towards.

In the larger towns there is greater opportunity to employ staff with work experience. Nevertheless, even in these sites the strong view was that coordinator support and leadership was essential to the team's ongoing success.

#### **4.2 A sense of ownership encourages team members to develop their own solutions**

The ultimate goal for some successful coordinators has been for the team to fundamentally own the project. These coordinators believe that the team has the best understanding of their own community and that they are therefore best placed to determine and implement the methods that are most likely to be successful in getting the children to school. A strong sense of ownership means that RSAS team members search for new methods of operating, test these methods, discard the less successful and implement the most successful.

*'This is run by the local people and all ideas come from the staff. I'm just the facilitator; to make sure those ideas are put into practice.'* (Coordinator)

*'Each team has the same classes to look after. They get to know the kids and the team are very comfortable with that. They will always have those classes. They have ownership of it; they know the lists really well. That's what works, it really does.'* (Coordinator)

In one case study site the RSAS team suggested to the coordinator that they felt uncomfortable engaging with families on an individual basis. They felt that using a large group of team members might have better results. The coordinator encouraged the team to test the approach and now it is being used to successfully engage with many of their families.

*'The plan was to employ people from different parts of the community and they would bring in their part of the community. However after a while we worked out that wasn't really working efficiently and that everybody felt more comfortable working en mass, bringing everybody together.'* (Coordinator)

The group method of engagement was also trialled by a team at another case study site with significant success. Both coordinators were definite that without the team feeling empowered to make suggestions the method would not have been considered.

*'The original idea was that someone who knows the family can go and talk to them and convince them, but we have realised that it is better if there's a group rather than the individual from that family. And that is because of the sheer number and that is embarrassing them into responding. Other team members will be quite happy to get out of the bus and back up staff members even though they are not related to that family.'* (Coordinator)

The 'large group' model has many benefits; each team member gains personal confidence through having the team with them when they make contact with families. Together the team is able to maintain and project a positive approach, often making jokes or singing together as they approach difficult families. New and less capable team members can learn from more mature team members acting as role models. The large team is also better able to protect themselves where families are abusive. In some cases the whole team approach has been able to help RSAS team members who have themselves struggled to get their own children to attend school regularly.

*'When we are all working as a team we get the job done.'* (RSAS team member)

#### **4.2.1 An ethos of continuous improvement keeps teams engaged**

Many coordinators placed importance on the team continuously working towards better methods of doing their work. They encouraged the view within the team that over time *'doing the same old thing results in getting the same old response'*. These team coordinators believed that trialling new methods and emphasising continuous improvements has kept their teams involved and engaged.

*'We know we can't sit still; we need to keep doing things a bit differently and thinking of new things to do to keep people's attention.'* (Coordinator)

#### **4.3 The coordinator needs to be able to exert authority at times**

A coordinator needs to be able to exert authority with the RSAS team in a culturally sensitive manner. There are good arguments for recruiting a coordinator from outside the community. A culturally strong and respected local person could also be in a position to exert this authority.

Of the six coordinators in the case studies five were recruited from outside the local Indigenous community. Two were Indigenous, with one of these having recently returned to the local community following a long history of working in other areas.

Respondents in several of the remote community case study sites were of the opinion that the coordinator needed to be external to the Indigenous community because of the need to exert authority in particular situations. For example, in some sites protocols had been developed around the need for SASs and SAOs to demonstrate role model behaviour by attending for work on a regular basis. If this was not happening then the agreed consequence for the individual was to lose their position. Respondent experience was that a person external to the community was needed to exert this authority.

*'In the beginning the team decided that the coordinator doesn't do the firing, the supervisors (SASs) do. And the supervisors were having the conversation, "Oh this person has done this; are they fired?" But it wasn't happening. So now we have changed the rules and they are clear. I discuss it with the supervisors and with the team members and I will fire them.'* (Coordinator from a remote community)

*'The coordinator needs teeth. We can't say and do some of the things that the coordinator does. It'd mean big trouble.'* (RSAS team member)



In another case study the coordinator was specifically recruited from outside the community in recognition of the fact that local cultural frictions meant that the community was most unlikely to accept a coordinator from inside the community.

*'I don't really think it's possible for a local person to operate outside the complexities and obligations of cultural relatedness. It needs to be an outsider. The coordinator has to be able to acknowledge family and community pressures and yet not be bound by them.'* (GEC)

## 5. THE COORDINATOR AND THE RSAS TEAM CREATE RELATIONSHIPS, SUPPORT AND EDUCATE FAMILIES

The attitude of successful RSAS teams is that they are supporters, not enforcers. They work hard to create positive relationships and support individual families to overcome the barriers to school attendance for their children. They educate through positive messages about the value of education and importance of children going to school regularly. Where possible they also build relationships with students and families outside of the school.

### 5.1 The RSAS teams portray themselves as supporters not enforcers

Successful RSAS teams concentrate on being positive. They have a strong understanding of the obstacles many families face and use positive messaging and support to keep families engaged. They believe that keeping the communication lines open through patience and persistence will allow them to operate with families at a deeper level and this will ultimately result in the best school attendance outcomes.

There are multiple reasons why Indigenous parents do not prioritise sending their children to school regularly. For example, some parents have entrenched beliefs that education is of minimal value to their children. Some have difficulty controlling the behaviour of their children and others struggle with social and behavioural factors such as alcohol, drug and gambling addictions. In all of these cases successful RSAS teams placed a strong emphasis on creating positive relationships. They strive to support and assist families to do the best for their children.

*'We try to make it a good conversation, which means it's two ways, not just us talking, we need to do the listening as well. We are using a soft approach.'* (RSAS team member)

The RSAS approach is most often one of 'How can we help you get your children to school?' and about the value of education to the children and the entire community. The teams were very clear that their role with families was not that of a truancy officer nor were they about to take any punitive measures with families of non-attending children. Instead they took the attitude that patience and persistence were their most effective tools in the longer term.

*'The team is very much about being the good guys. The truancy team that comes in – they are the bad guys. So we talk about getting the good news stories out.'* (Principal)

Using this patient and persistent approach has created successful relationships with families and children in the case study sites. It has also increased the confidence of team members.

*I reckon things have changed a fair bit. The kids used to see the team and run into the house and the team didn't really have the confidence to go in after them. But now they do. Now the kids see the team and many of them will come out and go to school with them.'* (RSAS SAS)

School principals in particular were very aware and appreciative of the fundamental difference between the punitive tools that they had at their disposal and the more supportive attitude of the RSAS teams. The approach successful RSAS team members use emphasises that although they work with the school they are not part of the school. The fact that they are separate from the school helps the teams develop and maintain positive relationships with the families.

*'This gives us an avenue for RSAS to be seen as different. When the Orange Shirts (RSAS team members) visit, the families can see them in a different capacity. That's been useful - RSAS can at times get in at a deeper level. If we've done a suspension, we're the bad guys etc. There's often a greater willingness to share info with RSAS.'* (Principal)

*'Overall that's what makes it different: local people involved in local families and it is positive, not a big stick.'* (Principal)

## **5.2 Building relationships outside of the school builds trust**

Creating relationships with children outside of school means that the children become comfortable with the RSAS team. As a result children may feel able to open up about their school experiences and/or family issues and barriers to school attendance, enabling the RSAS team to devise appropriate solutions.

During the case studies many RSAS team members talked about the importance of making connections and building relationships with children through out-of-school activities. Youth programs, sporting activities and school holiday programs were cited as excellent opportunities to spend time with the school children in a happy, non-threatening environment.

RSAS team members involved in out-of school activities felt that this was creating positive relationships by building trust between students and RSAS team members. This trust has led to children becoming more willing to talk with the team members about their school experiences, including why they were having trouble coming to school. The more the RSAS team connected with and understood the problems and motivations of the children, and the more the children trusted them, the more they felt able to offer support and develop appropriate strategies to improve their school attendance.

*'We have a team that helps out with some support with students at the school and other youth programs in the community. This really helps to build trust with students so they feel comfortable talking with you about why they are having trouble coming to school.'* (RSAS team member)

In particular, it is a very effective method of creating relationships with the more 'hardened' non-attenders. In one case study the coordinator noticed that many of the non-school attending children took part in out of school sporting activities. A sport loving RSAS team member was designated to attend these sporting sessions in order to create positive relationships with the children. As the children became comfortable with the RSAS team member he was able to point out that just as regular attendance and practice is important in enhancing sporting skills so it is with regular school attendance. Sport sessions were organised during school lunch times and proved to be relatively successful in luring the non-attenders into the school.

Building positive relationships with children through out-of-school activities has also been very useful for those RSAS team members working in the classroom. This is discussed in section 6.5 below.

One RSAS team has placed a particular emphasis on creating positive relationships with young parents at play sessions at the local pre-school. An RSAS team member, herself a young mother, attends the play sessions to support and encourage the parents. The RSAS team believes that getting parents into a routine of attending pre-school and talking to them at this early stage about the importance of education and the benefits of regular attendance will result in strong carryover into the early school years.

*'We've had a small effect through sheer persistence with some of the younger mums especially, about how to play with your children in playgroups. Working with these young mums in the pre-school, they see how the children come alive a little bit when playing with other children and with toys. This is all setting them up to see education is important.'* (Coordinator)

Case study respondents pointed out that not all team members were able or sufficiently skilled to undertake out-of-school activities: many of the RSAS team were parents needing to care for their own children after school and during school holidays.

## 6. RSAS AND THE SCHOOL WORKING COOPERATIVELY

When RSAS and the school work cooperatively it increases the opportunities for improving school attendance. Both the school and the RSAS team bring particular information, knowledge and skills which, when combined, provides for a more fulsome understanding of the reasons for poor school attendance in the community. The sharing of this information helps to reduce unexplained absences and leads to better-targeted efforts towards improving school attendance. A supportive school principal is key to creating this cooperative relationship.

There was a strong and consistent view in the case studies that RSAS worked best when the school and the RSAS team worked cooperatively. Stakeholders felt that this relationship was an essential underpinning of the successes they had achieved to date.

*‘Most significant from my point of view is that it is a joint operation.’ (Principal)*

Other factors that have contributed to success include RSAS team members working in classrooms, and support from PM&C network staff in fostering good relationships among key stakeholders.

### 6.1 Information sharing reduces unexplained absences

RSAS team members, through their regular contact with students and families together with their broader community connections and cultural knowledge, bring valuable information to the school about what is happening in the community in general and for particular families that may be impacting on school attendance. For example, they can let the school know which families are in and out of the community and which families are struggling. School principals said that they have better information about non-attendance as a result of RSAS. When a particular child is away an RSAS team member will most likely know something about that family’s situation – either through a home visit or because of their own local connections – thus reducing the number of unexplained absences.

*‘The RSAS team fill in an information sheet – saying they have contacted the family, what they learned, etc., so the school is put in the picture of what’s going on. We have reduced the unexplained absences. We have formal sharing of information, plus ongoing through the week. That’s very valuable – it completes the picture.’ (Principal)*

### 6.2 Information sharing leads to better-targeted efforts

Sharing information about non-attending students and reasons for absences leads to better-targeted efforts to improve school attendance.

By sharing information the school and RSAS team can gain a more comprehensive understanding of attendance patterns and reasons for non-attendance in the community, which in turn is helping to drive the development of appropriate strategies for engaging with families, and better-targeted efforts towards improving school attendance.

*‘Information sharing is key. The information from the school (attendance data) gives us the opportunity to go out and engage with families.’ (Coordinator)*

With access to the daily attendance roll RSAS team members can directly target those families whose children have not turned up to school by visiting the home and attempting to bring the child to school. In one case study the RSAS team and school had developed a highly efficient and effective method for targeting students who had not turned up for school. After teachers at school take the roll, the coordinator is immediately notified of absences. The coordinator then text messages the RSAS team (who have been equipped with mobile phones) on the bus run, and they can then rapidly and directly target those missing children, without having to return to the school.

In a different case study, where the attendance roll was not shared, the RSAS team members during assembly were doing a 'visible head count' from just inside the school grounds. This was undoubtedly a much less effective method for determining who was not at school that morning.

Another level of information sharing involves the analysis and review of attendance data over time, to identify patterns of attendance that may be open to RSAS action. For example, it is possible to identify children who regularly attend only on certain days, say only on sport or art lesson days. The RSAS team are often best placed to work out why this is happening and the school and the team can then jointly determine the most appropriate strategies to assist the children to attend more regularly.

*'We go through the data and talk about what we can do. Sometimes we work out who is best to talk with a family and what's the best lever to use. Sometimes it's the school's job and sometimes it's RSAS. We sort it out.'* (Principal)

RSAS team members in one case study were making very effective use of the attendance data by presenting it to parents as evidence of the amount of school their child was missing. They said that using the data was an effective tool because families could not deny the 'facts' of the data. Being able to show the family that one or two days per week of missed school amounted to a number of years over time was helping to get the message through about the importance of attending school every day.

*'I think they were interested when the ladies explained how much learning the kids were missing out on if they only came 50%, 40%, 30%, I don't think they had thought about that. I think they were quite shocked that someone who had graduated Year 12 might only have the brain of a Grade 4 if they had missed a lot of school. I think that really got across.'* (RSAS team member)

### **6.3 A supportive school principal makes a significant difference**

The ability for the RSAS team and school to work cooperatively depends first and foremost on a supportive and engaged school principal. The principal's support for and engagement with RSAS lays the foundation for a good working relationship between the school and the RSAS team.

The case studies have highlighted the importance of a supportive school principal to the effective operation of RSAS. A supportive school principal can set the tone for the school staff – teachers, Aboriginal Education Officers (or equivalents), administration workers – to embrace the concept of RSAS and work constructively with the RSAS team. Without this support the RSAS team will be much more constrained in their efforts to work with students and families to improve school attendance.

A supportive school principal facilitates the sharing of attendance information with the RSAS team so that their efforts can be directed towards those families. A supportive school principal also invites RSAS team members onto the school grounds so they can work to support those children who are disengaged, to help them to stay at school.

The principals in the case study sites generally displayed a very high level of commitment to improving school attendance, and they saw RSAS as providing opportunities for assisting the school to lift attendance rates.

*'RSAS is critical. We couldn't do what we do without them.'* (Principal)

*'RSAS has expanded the base of our family connections. The school already had good connections with some families, but RSAS has really strengthened this. We are reaching more families now.'* (Principal)

In one case study it was not until a change to a more supportive principal that the RSAS team was able to work directly with the school. The change resulted in RSAS operations being much more effective, as the team were given access to the school's attendance roll, welcomed into the school grounds and encouraged to work in the classroom alongside the children.

Case study participants pointed out that RSAS requires significant time and effort on the part of the school, and in particular the school principal. School principals are more likely to be supportive where they can appreciate the benefits that RSAS can deliver. Assisting principals to understand the benefits could enhance the effectiveness of RSAS in other communities.

*'They (the RSAS team) deal with so many of the families so effectively and quickly that I need only focus on a few families, or I can choose where I put my attention with the other families; the most difficult ones.'* (Principal)

#### **6.4 The importance of communication and a shared vision**

A good working relationship between RSAS and the school is founded on regular communication and a shared vision and philosophy between the principal and the RSAS Coordinator.

The need to constantly review what is working and what is not means that regular communication between the school and RSAS is very important. A shared vision between the school principal and coordinator also helps to create the conditions for joint problem solving.

In the case studies, communication was maintained through a combination of regular scheduled meetings between the principal and the RSAS team together with informal daily contact between the principal and coordinator. Regular communication helps to build the school / RSAS relationship; and a good relationship encourages open communication.

*'Meeting regularly is important, sharing information about what works, what doesn't work. And it builds the relationship.'* (Coordinator)

*'Formally we talk through the attendance data each Monday afternoon. An RSAS contingent attends that, plus our Aboriginal Education Officers. There is a complete share of information - we talk about individual kids and families. We work out who is best to follow up, taking into consideration family connections.'* (Principal)

The relationship between the school principal and the coordinator appears to be of particular importance as it sets the tone for the overall relationship between the school community (teachers and administrative staff) and the RSAS team. In most of the case study sites a strong professional relationship between the school principal and the RSAS coordinator was evident.

A shared vision and philosophy between the principal and the coordinator seems to help in maintaining focus and motivation – this is important because working to improve school attendance is highly challenging and efforts may not always lead to successful outcomes in the short term. Some stakeholders stressed the importance of setting interim goals, seeking success in areas that should ultimately lead to increased attendance rates. For example, many of the case study participants have noticed an increase in community awareness about the importance of education, and believed that RSAS had played an important role in shifting community perceptions. Other stakeholders were able to identify significant improvements in attendance by particular children, though for various reasons this had not yet impacted on the overall school attendance rate.

*'We meet on a very regular basis, generally semi-formally. We cross paths first thing in the morning, again in the afternoon. We see each other at least 10 to 12 times a week, where we exchange information, ideas, what to pursue or leave alone, who should be the ones to follow*

*up... We share the same vision, so one of the strengths is that communication, connection, testing stuff out, being strategic.'* (Principal)

### **6.5 RSAS team members working in the classrooms can help keep students engaged**

RSAS team members working in the classroom can assist in keeping students engaged, provide a reassuring presence, and can act as role models. It is important that team members have a clear understanding of their role and that they are given appropriate support and guidance.

In most of the case study sites RSAS team members were working in the classrooms. When this worked well the school principals saw it as a major benefit that RSAS provided to the school. RSAS staff can provide a reassuring presence for students who are struggling and they can be role models for all students. An understanding of language and culture means they are more able to anticipate problems. When behavioural problems threaten to disrupt classroom activities an RSAS staff member can be a calming influence. Sometimes a simple gesture, such as sitting alongside or placing a reassuring hand on a shoulder, can help the child to settle. If a behavioural problem escalates the RSAS team member can leave the classroom with a student, meaning the teacher can continue with the lesson.

*'One of the big winners is having RSAS people in the classrooms. There is a familiar face; someone helping to regulate what goes on. Many of our kids have poor social and conflict management skills. So an extra adult helps where we see someone building up to explosion. An RSAS person can take them out, talk, find ways to solve the problem before it escalates to exclusion or formal suspension. They are accepted in the classroom.'* (Principal)

Interviewees stressed the importance of having the right people in the classrooms – taking into account the skills and personal attributes of the individual as well as their family background and cultural connections. Crucially, those working in the classrooms need to have a clear understanding of their role and model appropriate behaviour.

Sometimes communication from one language to another can get in the way of a full understanding of RSAS team members' role in the classroom. In one case study when the coordinator canvassed the idea of classroom work not one team member was interested. Indeed most were very negative about the idea. Careful questioning revealed that the team thought they would be required to actually stand in front of the class and teach. Once these fears were allayed a few team members decided to give it a try and now the RSAS team is considered to be a valuable resource in the classroom.

*'At the beginning everyone was really nervous thinking that the teachers would make them teach, but we didn't know that was the problem. When I realised that the Principal explained it really carefully and that seemed to have worked. Coming from the Principal; that made the difference. It's changed the confidence of the staff and the attitude of the kids.'* (Coordinator)

### **6.6 RSAS staff in the classroom need support and mentoring to be effective**

For many RSAS team members working in the classroom will be a new experience and most will not have undertaken any formal training in a classroom setting. This makes it imperative that team members are given a clear understanding of their role, appropriate guidance about the behaviour that is expected of them in the classroom, and ongoing mentoring to assist them through the challenges of working in a classroom setting.

While the coordinator has primary responsibility for mentoring RSAS team members in their classroom roles, the principal also has a part to play in actively encouraging the RSAS staff in their efforts. Encouragement from the principal and classroom teachers helps to build the confidence of team members.



*'They (RSAS workers) make the choice themselves to work in the classroom. Some decide they don't want to. It is a bit scary going in there. And I've talked about that with them. Even if you just go into the classroom and tap a child on the shoulder and say, "You need to finish this work", it's great for the children.'* (Principal)

In one case study site where the RSAS workers were feeling shy and threatened by the idea of working in classrooms, the principal specifically recognised that the positive messages given by the RSAS team to families and their community could be successfully echoed in the classroom. Teachers were asked to give positive feedback to the RSAS workers and in doing this the workers became much more comfortable with being there.

*'The Principal asked the teachers to say at least one positive thing to the team member in the classroom each day so that their confidence can improve. Some teachers have started to do this and those team members are turning up every day. It's all well and good for them to say, "Oh, no one is turning up", but it is hard for the team members and every little bit of encouragement makes a difference. Positive encouragement works for the team as well as the families.'* (Coordinator)

This aspect of RSAS – team members working alongside children in the classroom – can be beneficial to school teachers and students provided the school is in favour of the concept and the RSAS staff are given appropriate support. When RSAS team members do not fully understand the requirements of the role, or are not given adequate support there is a risk that they may behave inappropriately. This not only sets a bad example for the children but may also create additional problems for the teacher. If the RSAS team member is seen to be more of a problem than a support the school may decide that it is not worth the effort.

In the case studies, principals and coordinators ensured that potential problems were swiftly resolved through careful monitoring and regular communication. Having the flexibility to enable RSAS team members to swap roles at relatively short notice – placing a different person in the classroom if one wasn't working out – was important.

*'We closely monitor how things are going with the school-based staff – we care about who we put in there. If the school thinks there might be a problem with someone in particular, they just get on the phone to us and we work it out.'* (Coordinator)

### **6.6.1 Feedback from the RSAS team to parents can be a powerful persuader for school attendance**

When parents see what their children are doing in the classroom they can become much more enthusiastic about getting their children to school. RSAS teams who are working in the classrooms can show parents the successes and progress that their children are making. For example in one case study the RSAS team are equipped with iPads so that they can video the children in the class and show it to the families. The team finds that it is an excellent icebreaker – few parents (and grandparents) can resist watching a video of their child and the team can talk enthusiastically about the positive outcomes from school in a friendly atmosphere.

*'So when the team has completed their first morning runs they take the iPads into the classrooms and video the children reading by themselves or in a group or whatever they are doing and they go out and give that feedback to families. The good stories go to the home to show the family. The kids loved showing off to their families, and the families really liked it.'* (Principal)

The team has also found that during the iPad visits the parents are much more likely to give them feedback about any problems they have with the school, for example fear that their child is being bullied or is not keeping up with the class. The team can take this feedback to the school and teachers

as part of their weekly meetings and then let the parents know their comments have been appreciated and passed on.

*'As the team's confidence increases I think they will really be a bridge between parents who may feel misunderstood by the teachers and the teacher themselves. That can only lead to good things.'* (Coordinator)

### **6.7 Prime Minister and Cabinet network staff can facilitate good relationships**

PM&C network staff can help to facilitate good relationships between the school and RSAS provider through regular communication and by assisting school principals to understand the benefits RSAS can provide to the school.

In many of the case study sites PM&C network staff have played an important role in introducing RSAS to communities, facilitating good relationships among key stakeholders and bringing school and provider together. A good knowledge of their community enables the network staff to work with the provider in the early implementation stages and in particular, to assist with developing good RSAS/school relationships. Many of the RSAS coordinators worked closely with local PM&C network staff, sharing information about the day-to-day happenings in the community. In one case study local PM&C staff chaired weekly meetings with the school and provider, ensuring that communication channels remained open and information was shared regularly.

There is potential for PM&C network staff to encourage school principals to see the benefits that RSAS can offer the school, particularly in situations where principals may be reluctant to welcome RSAS into their schools. It may be useful for PM&C to consider employing a professional, independent mediator where RSAS/school/PM&C relationships have deteriorated. There *are* benefits to the school and a professional mediator may be able to defuse the situation and highlight these benefits to all.

## 7. SOME CHALLENGES

This chapter highlights some of the challenges experienced by the six case study sites in implementing RSAS. Potentially, less successful RSAS projects may also be experiencing these challenges.

### 7.1 Chronic non-attenders and disengaged families

RSAS teams and schools are having very limited success in making progress with students who are chronic non-attenders. These students tend to be from the most disengaged families whose problems are significant, often involving violence, substance or alcohol abuse or a combination of these. With these families there is little the RSAS team can do to directly address the issue of school non-attendance.

*'The issues stopping kids coming to school are so much bigger than the RSAS team can deal with. It's not just a school issue – the problems are so much bigger.'* (Aboriginal Education Officer)

In some of the sites the RSAS teams have been working within a case management framework, where RSAS team members are linking families with appropriate support services in an effort to ameliorate some of the barriers to school attendance. However, the SASs and SAOs are not trained professionals, and while many are highly effective communicators with significant life experiences, the most difficult families will require more support than can be expected in the RSAS role. One of the RSAS coordinators, herself a highly experienced social worker, said that for a certain percentage of the community RSAS could have no effect. This view was widely shared by case study participants.

*'Sometimes it is pointless with some families. These families are ensuring that their children will continue in poverty.'* (Principal)

*'There are six houses that we have a lot of issues with. The last couple of weeks I have consulted with the supervisors to see if there's anything else that we can do with these hard families. The supervisors have made the decision that there's little point in trying to hound the hard families anymore because the team shy away from doing it, so the supervisors suggested that the team go into the classrooms instead.'* (Coordinator)

### 7.2 An increased workload for schools

RSAS requires significant time and effort on the part of the school. This has been the experience of those schools participating in the case studies, and is likely to be so for other schools if they are actively working with the RSAS team to improve school attendance. Regular communication, relationship building, and information sharing requires ongoing time and effort, and there is some concern that resources are being diverted from the core business of teaching.

The school principals in the case studies, while supportive and engaged with RSAS, expressed concern about the longer-term viability of the approach. In the early implementation phase RSAS can take a good deal of the principal's time, creating significant pressure when they already have a full time workload running the school.

*'The approach is very labour intensive for the school. It takes up a huge amount of time in administration, collating and analysing attendance data and passing this on (to the RSAS team).'* (Principal)

*'The school's key focus is educating kids. The School Leadership Team can't be too diverted from their core business of education.'* (Principal)

It is possible that the time intensive nature of the collaboration will reduce over time, as systems and protocols become entrenched. With school principals being subject to rotation and no guarantees that coordinators will stay in remote locations for any length of time it seems important to have strong succession systems in place.

### **7.3 Disengaged children can cause difficulties in the classroom**

As RSAS brings back into the classroom students who have been disengaged and have missed a lot of school, there are challenges for teachers in managing the significant needs of these students. Many are developmentally years below their age peers, and have behavioural difficulties that cause disruption in the classroom.

*'The school assesses kids on re-entry, and then develops literacy and numeracy programs to address their development needs. That is time consuming and very labour intensive.'*

(Principal)

*'If I had an extra teacher they could work with the disengaged kids, perhaps offer lessons so that they could catch up a bit and not feel so out of touch if they want to return to school.'*

(Principal)

For the students themselves it is also very difficult as they struggle to cope with the demands of school. Having RSAS team members in the classrooms for support is a significant help, but does not fully ameliorate the additional load on schools.

### **7.4 Potential for discouragement in the RSAS team**

RSAS team members face considerable pressure in their role. At times they experience frustration that their efforts do not always result in positive outcomes; they can also incur the disapproval and at times abuse of parents who resist RSAS engagement.

Coordinators and principals can both play a part in providing continual encouragement and support to the team. Specific training for coordinators to deal with team discouragement would be very useful.

*'It's the relationship, it's your personality and a bit of a joke and a bit of a laugh. And also to reassure them that it is not just a community problem, that it is happening in the city too so that they don't become too concerned about the futility of some of the families. I say, "Oh just ignore them, leave them alone for a while".'* (Principal)

### **7.5 Longevity of coordinator employment at risk in remote communities**

No accommodation comes with the RSAS coordinator job in remote communities, so the coordinator is often the partner of another employee in the community, often teachers on three-year contracts. This means that the longevity of employment cannot be guaranteed, as when the partner's contract expires there is no ongoing accommodation available to the RSAS coordinator.

The effective operation of the RSAS team hinges on a supportive coordinator so short term employment / high turnover in this role is likely to set back progress considerably and potentially undermine gains that have been made. Succession plans could include time for the new coordinator to work alongside the departing coordinator to assist in the handover and to get to know the particular strengths of the RSAS team members.

### **7.6 Training needs to involve practical application**

Respondents in some remote Indigenous communities were keen to point out that training sessions in English for the non-English speaking RSAS team members were a significant challenge. Team

members were being asked to understand relatively complex concepts in another language. This made for long, stressful and difficult days for some team members.

*'We did some more training about the messaging. It was round about then that we should have said, "Let's go and do the work", but we didn't. And the team were having difficulty in concentrating with all the English. We should have gone out of the classroom then – talk then action to reinforce, then more talk, more doing the work.'* (Principal)

Respondents suggested that training be kept short and include many periods of practical application of the concepts outside the classroom as this was an important learning tool as well as a welcome relief from the intensive concentration required in the classroom.

## RSAS Semi-structured Qualitative Research Discussion Guide

Note: these interviews are semi-structured; hence the interview will not necessarily be linear in nature. Use probes as necessary to obtain the required detail.

### Preamble:

The reason we are talking to you is because we believe that RSAS is working well in this community and we are keen to understand what strategies are being taken to make it work so well. We are talking to the RSAS team, RSAS provider and the School Principal in this community. We are interested in finding out what you think has worked particularly well, what has not been so useful and how you think things have changed in the community and the children since the beginning of RSAS.

### Questions:

**Firstly, can you tell me what RSAS strategies you have used that you think have been successful?** Probe as necessary for **each strategy** described:

*Probe: Can you explain the detail of how this operates, please? (Fulsome description: what is done, by whom, how it specifically operates, who is the target, e.g. children, parents, general community? What time, e.g. morning, during school day, after school?)*

**Can you tell me why you think each strategy works?** Probe as necessary for **each strategy** described:

*Probe: Can you say how you think it motivates people, or influences their choices? Could you finish the sentence "I think it works here because...."? Are there circumstances which you think make it work here?*

**Has this strategy changed or been refined over time?**

*Probe: Can you explain in detail how it has changed? What you did before changing/refining it? How do you think this change has helped? Are there specific people that it has helped most? What prompted you (or others) to make this change?*

**How did that change help you? What did it achieve? Can you give me some specific examples?**

*Probe: How has the community/attitude changed? What changes in student and parent attitudes, student behaviour, learning ability, school/community relationships have you observed?*

**Were there any negative consequences for this strategy that you needed to deal with?**

*Probe: What did you do to alleviate them? How long did it take to affect the change? With the benefit of hindsight, what might you do differently?*

**Are there particular conditions when this strategy works best or is less successful?**

*Probe: For example, features of the community itself, the provider attitude, the background of the RSAS staff, the recruiting method, the training, the school support, other external and internal conditions, other issues particular to this community?*

**Did you provide any particular training or coaching to the RSAS team to help this strategy work? For example, provide background information? Ground rules for the RSAS team to operate within? Can you describe this training to me in some detail please?**

*Probe: How and when did you provide the training, ground rules, etc? Do you think the training was successful the first time around or did you need to undertake further training? With the benefit of hindsight, would you modify or add to the training, etc. that you did? Why is that?*

**Have there been any unexpected or unintended consequences of RSAS operations that you've noticed...**

**In the school?**

**In the community?**

*Probe: When did you first notice them? Was it just one cause or multiple reasons? What has been done about it/them? Who by? What else do you think could be done?*

**Overall, what do you think are the key RSAS strategies that have most facilitated change in this community? Why is that?**

*Probe: Are there particular reasons that mean these strategies work in this community? Do you think these strategies would work equally well in other communities? Why is that?*

***Do you have any suggestions for further improvements / increased success in RSAS?***

*Probe: Different/better resources, training, tools, support?*

**Overall, what do you think makes RSAS different from other efforts to improve school attendance? (Theory of change)**

*Probe: Local decision making, local staff, the flexibility of the program, working together/communication between RSAS and school, the ability to respond quickly to any situation, reward mechanisms?*

**THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME AND EXPERTISE. I'M SURE THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE GIVEN ME WILL BE EXTREMELY VALUABLE TO THE RSAS PROGRAM. IF YOU THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY, PLEASE DON'T HESITATE TO CONTACT ME, I'D BE VERY HAPPY TO HEAR FROM YOU.**

**CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR SUCCESSES AND ONCE AGAIN, THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME.**