

CAPE YORK
**LEADERS
PROGRAM**

20 Years of Educational Impact and Leadership Development

Prepared by

GARGUN



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Acknowledgement

Why this matters and why we engaged Gargun

The Cape York Leaders Program acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters of Cape York and we pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Our program exists because of the vision, courage and determination of Cape York families who, for two decades, have chosen to walk alongside us in pursuit of a better future for their children. We honour the young people who have stepped away from home to embrace opportunity and the families and communities whose commitment has made their journeys possible.

This report matters to us because it tells the story of what has been achieved together over twenty years. It captures the voices and experiences of our students, families, schools and partners and shows how responsibility and opportunity, shared over time, can build capability and leadership for our people. These stories and results are proof that change is possible even in the most challenging circumstances.

But this report is also about the future. It reminds us that our mission is far from complete. The need in Cape York remains urgent, and the demand from families continues to grow. For us, this is both a responsibility and a call to action. We must redouble our efforts to expand opportunity, strengthen partnerships and ensure that every child in Cape York has the chance to complete school, step into further study or work, and return as leaders for their communities.



Fiona Jose

Group Chief Executive Officer, Cape York Partnership



Executive Summary

For twenty years, the Cape York Leaders Program (CYLP) has stood as one of Australia's most enduring and impactful Indigenous leadership initiatives.

Established as part of the Cape York Reform Agenda, the program began as a scholarship model and has evolved into a comprehensive, long-term investment in the next generation of Cape York leaders. This independent review, conducted by Gargun, an Indigenous-owned consultancy, examines CYLP's two-decade journey, its measurable impact, and the challenges that lie ahead.

The CYLP works exclusively with students from very remote Cape York communities, places where education, housing, and health services have been inadequate for generations. The CYLP orbits Cape York secondary students so they can access the good high school education routinely available in more advantaged parts of the state. Without support through the CYLP, the opportunity of a high-quality secondary education would be out of reach for these Cape York families and students.

The very poor school attendance and gap in literacy and numeracy in Cape York primary schools has been well known for a long period, and only very few of these schools appear to be on a trajectory of improvement. This means CYLP students must make a big leap when they orbit to far more advantaged and higher performing school environments.

In this context, the program's achievements are exceptional.

Year 12 completion rates have averaged 95%. This is more than double the national average for remote Indigenous students and on par with the largest and best-performing scholarship programs in the country.

CYLP's student retention from Year 7 to achieve Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE) stands at 85%, a rare outcome in regions where systemic barriers continue to erode student engagement and opportunity. This chance of achieving such Year 12 success through CYLP, is in stark contrast to those students who stay in their Cape York communities. Many Cape York youngsters disengage from school and 'drop out' early, well before Year 12. Most Cape York youngsters stay in community during their secondary school years and have almost no chance of achieving Year 12 success—it is a less than a 1% chance.

For CYLP Year 12 graduates:

- 70% go on to secure full time employment (with others going on to tertiary or other studies)
- They earn on average \$50,000 per year more than welfare recipients.

Through CYLP young people in Cape York are closing the employment and income gap through the opportunity of a good education. These young people are Closing the Gap in a remote region of extreme and entrenched disadvantage, in a single generation.

The CYLP provides tailored support needed for youngsters to bridge the opportunity gap that exists in Cape York. This includes helping CYLP students to prepare, support for parents and families throughout, tutoring and other support.

Beyond supporting individual students, the CYLP has strengthened its partner schools, helping to build cultural capability, introduce dedicated Indigenous support roles, and increase accountability for student outcomes. These school partnerships are not transactional; they are long-term, trust-based relationships that have reshaped how institutions engage with Indigenous students and communities.

The CYLP's impact is amplified by its integration within a broader regional strategy under the Cape York Reform Agenda. By connecting students to high-quality education and linking them with programs focused on leadership, economic participation, and development, the CYLP ensures its influence extends well beyond the classroom. Its model is unique, a place-based, generational approach grounded in culture, responsibility, and leadership.

Yet, the program is now at a critical juncture. Demand from Cape York families for the CYLP continues to grow. Cape York families recognise and value the crucial opportunity to close the gap that can be obtained if their children can obtain vital access to good secondary education and Year 12 success through CYLP. Without increased investment, many young people who could benefit will continue to miss out. The need is urgent. More Cape York youngsters must have the opportunity of pathways out of joblessness, low income, welfare, and worse. Mainstream systems are still not delivering equitable education in Cape York. CYLP provides a rare example of a successful strategy that can close the gap over the course of a child's life to early adulthood, and it is increasingly called upon to fill gaps far beyond its original scope.

Key Insights

- **Exceptional student outcomes:**
Year 12 completion rates averaging 94% more than double the national average for remote Indigenous students.
- **Student Retention:** CYLP's student retention from Year 7 to achieve Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE) stands at 85%. This chance of achieving Year 12 success varies enormously with those students who stay in their Cape York communities, where almost no Year 12 success can be achieved.
- **For CYLP Year 12 graduates:**
 - > 70% go on to secure full time employment (with others going on to tertiary or other studies)
 - > Students who enter the workforce earn on average \$50k greater than their unemployed counterparts.
- **Targeted opportunity:** Focused on students and families in the most remote and disadvantaged communities, where systemic service gaps persist.
- **Partner school capability:** Measurable increases in cultural responsiveness, Indigenous support roles, and accountability for student outcomes.
- **Strategic integration:** Operates as part of a regional ecosystem under the Cape York Reform Agenda, amplifying outcomes through coordinated programs.
- **Place Based and Community Led:**
A long-term, place-based investment in future leaders that goes beyond scholarships, walking alongside students and families for decades. As an empowered community region, the program remains accountable to community and families for the program's performance and continued funding

Key Outcomes

- Strong Year 12 completion and retention rates, and evidence of strong outcomes in terms of employment and further study.
- Growing alumni leadership presence in communities and professions.
- Family co-payments and education trust accounts fostering shared responsibility.
- Longstanding partnerships with leading schools across Queensland.

Challenges Identified

- Investment levels have not kept pace with demand and increasing complexity of student needs.
- Persistent, intergenerational disadvantage in Cape York communities continues to compound, with escalating student support requirements. Reforms are needed to lift the performance of Cape York primary schools to create a bigger pipeline of students who can achieve Year 12 success, and to 'normalise' such success in the region.
- Current data systems are focused on operations rather than long-term impact measurement and learning for continuous, iterative improvement.
- Partnership frameworks require clearer roles, accountability, and coordination mechanisms.
- The evidence is clear: the CYLP works. It has proven its ability to break cycles of disadvantage and create pathways to leadership for young people from Cape York. The challenge now is ensuring that this work not only continues, but expands, so that student by student, the gap can be closed in a generation for Cape York youngsters through educational opportunity.

Call to Action

The CYLP was born out of a hard truth: the standard of education in Cape York was unacceptably very low. Two decades on, that truth remains.

While some reforms have shown it is possible to close the primary school gap in literacy and numeracy, the reality is that too many students from Cape York still arrive at boarding school already behind. Gaps in literacy and numeracy remain significant, and by the time students begin high school, they are often competing from a position of disadvantage, against peers who have had far greater educational preparation.

The CYLP has grown into a program with deep roots and a wide reach across Cape York. It is trusted by families, respected by schools, and proven in its ability to deliver opportunities to the children who need them most. It does more than provide academic support, it provides access to a fundamental opportunity that is otherwise lacking in Cape York—a good education for kids in their teenage years. Through orbiting to places of more advantage during this critical period of adolescent development, CYLP students are exposed to a whole new world of potential and possibility. CYLP connects with families, strengthens cultural identity, and builds pathways that extend well beyond graduation.

To Close the Gap in education outcomes, investment in strategies that support Year 12 success for the children and families of Cape York cannot be optional. It must be our key priority. The evidence is clear: the CYLP works. It changes trajectories, lifts aspirations, and delivers results in some of the most challenging, disadvantaged environments (where state education systems are failing) in the country. What it needs now is not more pilots or short-term trials, but long-term commitment and resourcing that matches the scale of both the scale of the challenge and the importance and urgency of the opportunity.

This is a call for governments, funders, and partners to act decisively. To recognise that programs like the CYLP are not supplementary, they are essential. And to understand that the cost of inaction will not just be measured in statistics, but in the lost potential of (yet another) generation.



“...programs like the CYLP are not supplementary, they are essential”

Introduction

It is an honour and a privilege to present the 20-Year Impact Report for the Cape York Leaders Program which is one of Australia's longest-running and most enduring Indigenous leadership and education initiatives.

Over the past two decades, the CYLP has been a flagship of the Cape York Reform Agenda and has demonstrated that high expectations, when paired with robust support structures, can shift systemic outcomes. Since its inception, 94 percent of the CYLP's students have completed Year 12, which is more than double the regional average.

The CYLP is far more than a scholarship or an academic support program. It is a long-term, place-based investment in the future leadership of Cape York and it offers academic opportunity alongside a supported journey of responsibility not only for students but also for their families. The need to support orbiting people out of our country's most disadvantaged place, especially in their teenage years, is often overlooked. CYLP provides access to key educational opportunities that are not available in Cape York. This orbiting gives CYLP students access to advantage available to families and students elsewhere. This is vital so youngsters from Cape York can build capabilities which will be brought home with them when they do return.

CYLP is designed to maintain cultural foundations, strengthen community connections, and foster leadership development.

The program has helped over 600 students (on secondary and tertiary scholarships) navigate critical transitions through high school and beyond while also strengthening environments around them including their families, schools, and communities. The CYLP is grounded in a shared commitment and a shared responsibility, where students, families, and communities choose to walk alongside the program rather than simply benefit from it. This shared investment, whether through financial contributions or day-to-day support, remains a cornerstone of the CYLP's enduring success.

Beyond graduation rates, the CYLP builds capability in both parents and children over generations. For students, it is a journey of personal and academic growth that leads to clear pathways into further study or work. For families, it provides the practical knowledge to navigate enrolments, scholarships, boarding logistics, and parenting from afar while their children grow into young men and women. This progress is only possible through responsibility, as families invest their time, trust, and resources, and students commit to attendance and effort, and the program delivers substantial financial support alongside sustained wrap-around care. This balance of responsibility and opportunity is captured in the Cape York Partnership's theory of change: **Responsibility + Opportunity = Capability**. By holding both sides of this equation in focus, we affirm the shared commitment that underpins the CYLP's impact.

At Gargun, we were honoured to be invited to lead this review and, as an Indigenous-led consultancy, we approached the work with a deep sense of responsibility to reflect the integrity of the program and to capture what we see as a pioneering vision for the future leaders of Cape York. Above all, we sought to listen to the voices of those closest to the work. Our aim was to ensure that the findings speak not only to what has been achieved but also to what is needed in the years ahead.

This review looks beyond traditional impact metrics. While we reference key indicators such as Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE), our focus is on the deeper strategic intent of the CYLP, including the relationships it forges, the environments it shapes, and the quiet shifts in confidence, identity, and aspiration that signal lasting change for students. We adopted a strengths-based, ecosystem approach that considers the CYLP's role within a wider network of supports and we recognise that its most profound impacts often occur in the spaces that are hardest to measure.

We also acknowledge the limitations of this review. Longitudinal data tracking remains a challenge and attribution is complex in a landscape where many students are supported by multiple systems and services. However, through a combination of stakeholder insights, program data, and thematic analysis, a clear picture has emerged that reflects both the value and the necessity of this program and the trust it has built over time.

Twenty years on, the CYLP continues to meet young people where they are and walk with them through their schooling journey while helping to shape the next generation of leaders for Cape York. This report is not only a reflection of past achievements but also a call to strengthen and sustain what has been built, because the work of leadership does not end at graduation and neither should the support.



Methodology and Limitations

Methodology

The CYLP is not just about numbers or graduation rates. It is about what happens in between; the slow, steady, and often unseen work of walking alongside young people through change. The kind of support that rarely shows up in data but often determines whether a young person drifts or finds their way.

A strengths-based approach was taken to understand how the CYLP is shaping the environments around young people in schools, families, and communities. Not just at the surface, but at the structural and relational level.

We listened to those who know the program best, they shared what is working, where the impact is strongest, and where there is room to grow.

We also reviewed historic key documents, reports and data sets that relate to CYLP operations over the years. We met with schools, their leadership and key personnel and a number of current students in small group settings for discussions on the partnership and scholarship model.

Limitations and Considerations

As with any review spanning different methods, time frames, and locations, this evaluation of the CYLP has some limitations. Data tracking across the full student journey is challenging, and students are often supported by multiple systems, making attribution difficult.

While quantitative measures such as Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE) provide valuable evidence, they cannot fully capture all the capabilities built including at the cultural, personal, and community-level.

Qualitative insights bring depth and context but can be influenced by timing, engagement, and individual perspectives. These factors do not diminish the validity of the findings but are important to recognise when interpreting results and identifying areas for further focus.

A related limitation is the gap in consistent longitudinal tracking of alumni once they leave the program. While the CYLP maintains strong administrative records for enrolment, completion rates, and placements, most post-program outcomes are known only through anecdotal evidence. Graduates often move into meaningful roles within the broader community as well as into the Cape York Partnership network, but not all these achievements are systematically captured.

This reflects the program's early priority of direct student support over extended tracking, which has been a necessary focus given limited resources.

However, given the crucial importance of supporting more Year 12 success to close the gap in a single generation for Cape York youngsters, developing a structured approach to record and share alumni journeys is a significant opportunity to provide a more complete picture of the CYLP's long-term impact. This data would be an asset in understanding transition journeys from school, higher education and training into the workforce to better inform future pathways.



Sample Representation and Community Coverage

The engagement process and data review included the participation of key stakeholder groups to build a strong and diverse evidence base. Overall, participation was robust and provided valuable insights into the CYLP. Factors such as school calendars, stakeholder availability, and organisational capacity influenced who was able to contribute to the process. This meant that certain perspectives, particularly strong views whether positive or critical, may be more prominent in the feedback. As a result, the findings presented in this report reflect recurring patterns and shared experiences across the stakeholder groups rather than capturing every individual viewpoint from the CYLP's 20-year history.

Attribution in a Complex Environment

The CYLP operates within a complex network of support that includes schools, community organisations, health services, family households, and various scholarship and financial assistance systems. Many students are supported by multiple programs and interventions at the same time, which makes it challenging to isolate the specific impact of the CYLP. For the purposes of this evaluation, outcomes have been attributed to the CYLP only when stakeholders clearly identified it as a key influence on a student's journey or success.

In doing so, we acknowledge the important role that family circumstances, school environments, and other forms of support play in shaping outcomes. The CYLP's impact is therefore presented as part of this broader, interdependent system. Where appropriate and where participants made specific reference to the program, direct quotes have been included to illustrate these connections.

Temporal Scope and Program Evolution

This report reflects the CYLP 20-year journey, during which the program has grown, adapted, and evolved in response to the needs of students and communities. Earlier cohorts experienced a different model to the one delivered today, as wraparound supports, leadership components, and staffing structures have been strengthened and refined over time. Changes in community contexts, shifts in education policy, and variations in resourcing have also shaped the program's development. While these changes have been considered in this evaluation, there remains a degree of risk that distinct experiences from different phases of the program may be merged together. Continued adaptive evaluation will be important in order to capture these nuances and ensure that future reporting reflects the evolution of the program and the unique circumstances of each cohort.



The Cape York Context

The CYLP works with children and families from one of the most disadvantaged regions in Australia. Communities across Cape York face deep-seated social and economic inequities, with indicators in education, health, and housing consistently falling well below national averages.

Access to quality services is further restricted by the realities of remoteness, workforce shortages, and infrastructure limitations, meaning that many children grow up without the level of educational opportunity available to their peers elsewhere in the country.

The education system in Cape York has long struggled to deliver consistent, high-quality learning outcomes. Many schools operate with inexperienced teachers on short term placements, limited specialist staff, curriculum delivery can be inconsistent, and access to resources such as libraries, science laboratories, and enrichment programs is often minimal or entirely absent. Standardised testing results show persistent gaps in literacy and numeracy, with many students falling years behind national benchmarks before reaching secondary school. These educational challenges are compounded by broader social issues, including poor health outcomes, overcrowded housing, welfare dependency, substance abuse, and experiences of violence, all of which have a direct impact on children's early development and learning readiness.

For many applicants to the CYLP, these systemic issues have already shaped their educational journey before they even enter the program.

Students often present with significant learning gaps and complex needs, having had limited exposure to diverse or advanced curriculum content in their formative years. Some may have progressed through school without mastering core skills, while others have had little access to enrichment opportunities that support broader cognitive, social, and cultural development. These challenges are not a reflection of a lack of capability or potential. Rather, they are the result of systems that have not delivered the sustained, high-quality education every child is entitled to. It is important to acknowledge this reality in order to understand the starting point for many CYLP students, and to appreciate the magnitude of the progress they achieve once given the right environment and support.

The CYLP responds to these challenges with an approach that goes far beyond the provision of a scholarship. It delivers wrap-around support that addresses academic readiness, builds personal capability, and connects students with opportunities that extend well beyond the school environment. By doing so, it helps young people from Cape York bridge the gap between where they are and where they aspire to be, creating pathways that are both realistic and transformative. In doing this, the CYLP plays a vital role in breaking cycles of intergenerational disadvantage and fostering the next generation of leaders for Cape York.



The CYLP Journey: Origins and Evolution

The CYLP Story

To meaningfully assess the impact of the CYLP, it is important to first understand its origins and the environment in which it was created.

The program emerged during a period of strong community-led determination to disrupt entrenched patterns of systemic failure in Cape York. It arose from a backdrop of inequality, low expectations, and chronic underinvestment in education and leadership pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Over the years, the CYLP has grown far beyond its original scope. It has become a living testament to the power of vision, the strength of on-the-ground Indigenous reform leadership, and the unwavering belief that young people from Cape York deserve the same quality of opportunity to succeed as any other young Australian.

At the heart of the CYLP is the Cape York Partnership's theory of change:
Responsibility + Opportunity = Capability.

This principle is both simple and transformative. It asserts that when young people are provided with structured opportunities and are held to high expectations of personal responsibility, their capability develops. That capability enables them to lead themselves, contribute within their families, and strengthen their communities. Vision, leadership, and legacy underpin this journey.

The origins of the CYLP cannot be separated from the broader education and policy reform work led by Noel Pearson and the Cape York Institute (CYI) for Policy and Leadership. Since the late 1990s, Pearson's advocacy has provided the intellectual and philosophical foundation for the program. The CYLP was conceived not simply as an educational initiative, but as a vehicle to reclaim the original promise of education and a pathway to freedom, opportunity, and self-determination. In Cape York, that promise had long been diminished, with many schools unable to deliver the quality of education needed to prepare students for meaningful futures. The program was built to directly confront this generational failure, reject decades of low expectations, and cultivate a new generation of leaders grounded in place, culture, and capability.



2025 CYLP Gargun Report



2000 Our Right to Take Responsibility

In 2000, Noel Pearson published the seminal essay *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, which became a turning point in Indigenous policy discourse in Cape York. In the essay, Pearson examined the meaning of self-determination in the context of his home region and confronted the dysfunction that had taken hold in many communities. He argued that decades of passive welfare and excessive state control had eroded both individual and collective agency, and that institutions, including schools, had reinforced a passive dependency on services that normalised dysfunction and poor outcomes.

Pearson proposed that the solution lay not in further dependency but in reclaiming responsibility, particularly through education. These ideas became, and remain, the cornerstones of the CYLP's theory of change: Responsibility + Opportunity = Capability, signifying that self-determination and real empowerment require individuals and communities to take control of their own lives and futures. The essay laid the foundation not only for educational reform but also for a broader policy platform covering welfare and economic reform. The unifying idea was that the people of Cape York must be given the opportunity to take responsibility, and that achieving this would require structural reform to move away from passive service delivery, building accountability by creating opportunities for those ready to step forward.

2001 Light on the Hill: The “Radical Centre” and the Role of Education

Building on these ideas, Pearson delivered his *Light on the Hill* speech in 2000, setting out a vision for what he described as the “radical centre.” This concept sought a middle ground in the political discourse on Indigenous affairs. On one side, the political left often reinforced narratives of victimhood and tolerated poor outcomes, attributing them entirely to systemic failings without acknowledging individual agency. On the other, the political right placed all responsibility on the individual, ignoring the impact of structural disadvantage.

Pearson argued that the truth lay between these extremes, requiring pragmatic solutions that addressed systemic inequities while also fostering personal responsibility. He pointed to the contradiction between significant achievements such as Land Rights and the continuing high rates of unemployment across the region. If reform within existing systems proved impossible, new models would have to be built capable of developing the capability of people and preparing a generation of leaders who could navigate and reshape the systems that had long excluded their communities.

Central to this vision was education, yet in many parts of Cape York the school system was failing to fulfil this role. Persistent challenges included poor attendance, high staff turnover, irrelevant curricula, and low literacy and numeracy outcomes. Pearson criticised what he called “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” where well-meaning but inexperienced teachers accepted the abysmal state of education as an unchangeable reality rather than a challenge to be overcome.

2005 The Launch of the Higher Expectations Program: The Birth of the CYLP

In 2005, with the pioneering vision of Cape York leaders and financial backing from the Macquarie Group Foundation, the Higher Expectations Program (HEP) was launched. This initiative represented a major strategic shift in the Cape York Institute's approach to education and laid the groundwork for what would later become the CYLP.

The HEP was designed to address two core realities. First, in many Cape York communities, boarding school is the only viable option for secondary education due to the absence of local high school facilities. While several boarding school options existed in Cape York and in Cairns, the program sought to address the widespread underachievement of students by placing them in some of Queensland's most elite and high-performing schools.

The initial model focused on identifying students with strong academic potential and placing them in rigorous learning environments where high expectations were the norm. The early years of the HEP were deliberately stringent in selection, targeting students who demonstrated both the ability and the readiness to succeed. The name “Higher Expectations” was chosen as a direct counter to the “soft bigotry of low expectations” observed in Cape York schools. The program's central premise was clear when Cape York students are placed in classrooms with consistently high standards, they rise to meet them. This challenged the entrenched belief that underachievement was an inevitable result of cultural or socio-economic disadvantage and proved that, given the right environment, Cape York students could excel academically and personally.

2008 Cape York Welfare Reform Trial: Structural Reforms in Parallel

Beyond the realm of just educational reform, CYI were active in their advocacy effort to directly tackle passive welfare through ambitious and holistic reforms. The Cape York Welfare Reform Trial was developed through intensive co-design with the four communities involved.

Like the approach of the CYLP scholarship program Cape York Welfare Reform was built upon the central importance of reciprocal investment and responsibility of families. The trial sought to challenge dysfunction and negative social norms and restore local authority and Indigenous responsibility. The trial established ‘Family Responsibilities Commission’ (FRC) through unique legislative arrangements, empowering local people to intervene where their basic family responsibilities are not being met, such as where parents are not getting their kids to school. The Family Responsibility Commission's decision-makers are local people vested with real powers, who use a restorative justice model to meet with family members to discuss concerns including school attendance, child safety, criminal behaviour, and housing tenancy issues. One of the interventions that the Commissioner's may decide is income management which acts as a ‘clamp’ on someone's welfare payments, ensuring these payments cannot be withdrawn as cash to spend on alcohol or gambling, but rather must be used to buy food and pay bills.

While the reform trial worked to shift behaviour and accountability in communities, the CYLP quietly continued to grow. It has remained one of the few consistent and effective programs in the region during a time of considerable policy churn and flux.

One key highlight of the Welfare Reform Trial was the establishment of Student Education Trust accounts. This initiative provides the infrastructure needed so even poor families dependent on welfare payments and subject to all the financial pressures and crises that being very poor so often entails, can set aside money regularly so it can go toward the child's educational expenses, including those associated with leaving home for boarding school.

Over the years nearly \$5 million has been saved by essentially unemployed families to support their children's education through Student Education Trusts. Now called 'Ready Set Go accounts', this initiative is a testament to the value poor parents and families place on education in Cape York, and a reminder of the reciprocal investment that families and parents make in supporting their children's educational opportunities.

2010 From Higher Expectations to Leadership Pipeline

As the HEP program grew in numbers and initial investment by Macquarie Group Foundation was due to end, the long-term vision and viability of the program was at a crossroads. Led internally, the program grappled with the strategic intention of quality education to nurture and grow the next generation of leaders from Cape York. Numbers had grown significantly from 11 students in its first year to 38 total students by 2010.

As the program looked forward to the broader vision, it could not ignore that the program needed to grow. While the close adherence to the original academic high-performance criteria made for better outcome report writing and reading, leadership questioned whether it was only doing the easy work with high achievers and not supporting those students and families who were in greater genuine need of the supported opportunity.

As the Macquarie Group Foundation funding wound up and support of the Commonwealth government stepped in, the HEP underwent a strategic review, that moved away from strictly academic achievers, to reflect the broader vision to support the next generation of Cape York leaders. Acknowledging the importance of education, but that true leadership is beyond just academic outcomes and should focus on supporting the journey of young people. With this shift, the program rebranded from Higher Expectation Program to the Cape York Leaders Program.

This shift, expanded the scope of recruitment parameters, moving toward a less stringent academic criteria, to look at

factors like effort, attendance and family support. This expansion saw an increase in enrolments numbers up to 56 in the first year and has grown steadily to 120 students today.

2010 Primary Reform – Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy

In January 2010, the Cape York Partnership (CYP), in partnership with the Queensland Department of Education, launched a bold new educational model in the Cape York communities of Coen and Aurukun. This initiative was driven by a determination to break the persistent cycle of educational failure that had affected the region for decades.

The model was inspired by a CYP-led delegation of community leaders to the United States, where they observed schools implementing the Direct Instruction pedagogy. Developed in the 1960s by Siegfried "Zig" Engelmann, Direct Instruction had demonstrated success in urban, regional, and remote schools serving predominantly African American, Latino, and Native American students. These were contexts where other teaching approaches had repeatedly fallen short. Direct Instruction is based on explicit, highly structured, and incremental teaching of core literacy and numeracy skills. It emphasises repetition, mastery, and progression, ensuring that students do not move forward until they have fully grasped each concept. Following the study tour, CYP and community leaders proposed that the Queensland Government trial Direct Instruction in Coen and Aurukun. This led to the establishment of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA) in Term 1, 2010, marking a significant structural reform in primary education for Cape York.

The early years of the Academy showed promise, with evidence of improved community attitudes toward schooling, stronger attendance rates, and high levels of engagement in both cultural and extracurricular activities. However, in 2016, political tensions and community unrest in Aurukun including threats made against teachers resulted in the State Government abruptly withdrawing its support. The decision to reinstate the standard education model came despite an independent evaluation that confirmed the program's positive impacts.

Today, the CYAAA continues to operate in Coen and Hope Vale, maintaining its focus on strong foundations in literacy and numeracy alongside cultural learning. It stands as both a legacy of reform and a testament to the potential of community-driven education solutions when supported by evidence-based practice and strong local leadership.

2011 Radical Hope: The Concept of "Orbiting"

In 2011, Pearson published another influential essay titled Radical Hope, which introduced the concept of "orbiting." This idea would go on to deeply shape the CYLP's philosophy and design. It held two distinct premises that continue to shape the CYLP. Firstly, that the pursuit of education and employment were not at the expense of the cultural identity of Aboriginal people and that the 'radical hope' of educational

reform was well educated and capable Aboriginal people from Cape York who could walk in two worlds.

Pearson described this concept as ‘orbiting’. The ability to move between two worlds: the cultural world of one’s community and the modern, mainstream world of broader Australia. To be successful, Indigenous young people must operate fluently in both. Noel would quip in deliberation of this notion ‘From Cape York to New York’. That the intent of educational reform should be to provide such a strong educational foundation that a young person from Cape York can live and work in New York City. That a young person from Cape York could stand tall anywhere in the world and still circle back to lead at home.

It was during this time as the notion and vision for future leadership become clearer, the program in its early years was growing in numbers. It began to look deeper into the strategic intent beyond just a scholarship fund toward the broader vision for future leadership. It sharpened its functions to include academic support, mentorship, and long-term leadership development and established the Higher Expectation Program Tertiary (HEPT). A natural but necessary progression to support students graduating secondary school into university.

2014 Government Funding Cuts

In 2014, during his first term as Prime Minister, Tony Abbott introduced substantial reforms to the structure and funding of Indigenous programs. Central to these reforms was the creation of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, which was tasked with managing program funding.

These changes were accompanied by cuts of almost \$500 million to Indigenous programs and services across Australia, impacting organisations in multiple sectors. Among the programs reduced or discontinued was CYLP funding for parent and school engagement initiatives. As a direct result, the CYLP was forced to cease its biannual parents’ conference and partner schools’ conference from 2014 onwards. These gatherings had been critical, structured opportunities for families, partner schools, and program staff to come together to share strategies, address challenges, and align approaches to student support.

While the broader Cape York Partnership footprint has allowed some forms of family engagement to continue, the loss of these events has had lasting implications. The absence of regular, face-to-face collaboration has reduced opportunities for partner schools to connect, learn from one

another, and build a consistent, coordinated approach to supporting CYLP students.

2016 We’re Black – We Don’t Matter: Confronting Hidden Disability

In 2016, the Cape York Institute published *We’re Black – We Don’t Matter*, a groundbreaking report co-authored by Dr Jeff Nelson, Associate Professor Corinne Reid, and Noel Pearson. The report revealed a confronting reality: there was a significant prevalence of undiagnosed intellectual and developmental disabilities among students in Cape York. In just three schools, approximately one in four students met the criteria for intellectual impairment, and nearly half fell within the borderline range rates more than ten times the national average.

The implications of these findings were profound. It was no longer enough to focus solely on academic access or quality teaching. The education system had to address the deep, often invisible challenges many students faced, including trauma, neurodevelopmental conditions, and mental health issues. The report argued that many students were “too stressed to learn” and that effective education required a holistic approach that integrated medical, emotional, psychological, and therapeutic support.

This insight reshaped the CYP’s thinking in two fundamental ways. First, it underscored the intersection between health and learning, highlighting the need for early and appropriate assessment as well as targeted interventions. Second, it reinforced the foundational role that the early years of life play in a child’s healthy development and in their readiness to engage successfully with education.

Present A Proven Model within an Integrated Ecosystem

After 20 years, the CYLP stands as one of the oldest, most respected, and most adaptive Indigenous education models in Australia with proven success. While many mainstream education systems in Cape York continue to grapple with entrenched issues such as poor attendance, high staff turnover, and low academic performance, the CYLP has remained focused and consistent in its mission.

As part of the broader work of the Cape York Partnership and its partner organisations, the CYLP represents a critical opportunity for the people of Cape York to exercise their right to take responsibility. The program’s purpose extends well beyond supporting students to finish school. It is about raising expectations, fostering leadership, and investing in long-term Indigenous empowerment led by Indigenous voices, shaped by Indigenous experience, and accountable to Indigenous communities.

Core Strengths: What Sets CYLP Apart

This section examines what truly sets the CYLP apart from other education and leadership initiatives for Indigenous students across Australia.

This is not about benchmarking against trends or adopting the latest program fashions.

Rather, it is about recognising and articulating the distinct qualities that define the CYLP and underpin its success.

By considering the range of models, structures, and approaches that exist across the sector, it becomes clear that the CYLP stands alone in its combination of cultural integrity, community mandate, and long-term impact. These points of difference not only sharpen the program's narrative of value, but they also reinforce why it remains one of the most respected and enduring initiatives of its kind.

It is important to begin by acknowledging the significant work undertaken by the CYLP team over the life of the program. Operating with modest funding and a lean structure, the team has consistently delivered high-impact outcomes for students from some of the most remote and disadvantaged communities in Australia.

The current team is small but deeply committed, comprising a Program Manager, Team Leader, Project Officer, Administration Officer, and three Student Support Officers (SSOs) strategically based in key regional hubs: Townsville, Rockhampton, and Brisbane. Despite its compact size, this team is responsible for delivering a year-round calendar of intensive, student-centred activities that span the full journey from recruitment through to graduation and post-school transition.

Each school year begins with regional leadership camps that provide students with opportunities to build confidence, strengthen their cultural identity, and develop lasting social bonds. Throughout each term, SSOs coordinate targeted activities that sustain engagement and help students stay connected to their aspirations for further education, career development, and cultural growth. These activities include career immersion days, university visits, cultural camps, and mentoring sessions.

The role of the SSOs is particularly critical. They are the essential link between students, schools, and families, often becoming the first point of contact when students face challenges such as homesickness, academic pressures, or social difficulties. Through culturally safe and trust-based relationships, SSOs facilitate difficult conversations, provide practical guidance, and help students navigate school systems that can otherwise feel unfamiliar or overwhelming. In doing so, they ensure that students feel seen, supported, and guided throughout their journey.

What this small, dedicated team achieves is remarkable. Their work ensures the smooth and effective operation of the program, while also having a profound impact on students' confidence, leadership development, and educational progress. The CYLP's success is inseparable from the commitment and capability of the people who deliver it, a team whose focus, care, and cultural understanding form the foundation for the program's enduring impact.



Key Highlights and Outcomes

Over the years, the CYLP has built an impressive alumni network, having supported more than 459 students through secondary school. Alongside the secondary program, it has also supported 166 students through their tertiary studies, bringing the total number of individuals supported across both pathways to 625.

In terms of student outcomes, the CYLP is performing on par with the largest and best-performing Indigenous scholarship programs in Australia.

Over the past four years, the program has achieved an average Year 12 graduation rate of 95 percent and is on track to reach 100 percent completion this year for the second time in three years. This is a remarkable achievement when compared to the national average Year 12 attainment rate of only 38 percent for Aboriginal students from very remote areas.

The CYLP has also achieved an impressive retention rate, with 85 percent of students who enter the program in Year 7 continuing through to achieve Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE) over the past five years. What makes these results particularly significant is the context in which they are achieved.

While other scholarship programs offer a small percentage of scholarships to remote and very remote students, their exact figures are rarely made public. In contrast, every CYLP student comes from a very remote community, many of which are among the most disadvantaged in Queensland and the country.

These are communities where systemic barriers have created persistent educational inequities and where students often begin secondary school with substantial gaps in literacy and numeracy.

The CYLP works with the cohort most in need of investment, students who face the steepest climb to educational success.

That the program matches the performance of some of the best-resourced national scholarship initiatives while operating in this environment is a testament to its effectiveness and value.

The CYLP's place-based model orbits students in their crucial teenage years. It supports them to bridge the education opportunity gap afflicting Cape York, enabling students to not only to stay engaged in education but to complete school with levels of achievement not found anywhere in Cape York, all while starting from a position of considerable disadvantage.

An internal data analysis from 2021 for CYP strategic planning purposes provides a startling example of the impact of Year 12 completion for Cape York young people. The prior year 70% of graduates of the CYLP went directly into employment, earning on average \$50k more than their peers who did not complete their secondary education.

625

Individuals supported

459

secondary school

166

tertiary studies



Average Year 12 graduation rate past four years

95%

100%

On track for full completion this year

85% retention rate

Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE) over the past five years

Year 7 starters



Year 12 finishers



Empowered Communities: Clear Mandate

Empowered Communities is a national reform initiative led by Indigenous leaders from ten (10) regions across Australia, including Cape York.

Its central purpose is to shift decision-making power away from government and towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, enabling them to set their own priorities and design solutions for their own development.

The model is built on a genuine partnership approach in which communities and government share responsibility for outcomes. It emphasises on-the-ground planning, pooled funding across government silos, and strong accountability frameworks to ensure that services and resources are aligned with community-led agendas rather than externally imposed priorities.

Cape York has achieved tangible progress toward empowerment through Pama Futures Joint Decision-Making reforms implemented by Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, in partnership with the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). Panels of community members are convened to influence funding (and now increasingly policy) decisions ordinarily made by government alone. Across Cape York more than \$100m worth of NIAA funding has been through Joint Decision-Making processes, and more than 100 Cape York community members have informed the decision-making process on these panels.

Through Joint Decision-Making processes community members scrutinise the performance of services and can hold them to account. Panel recommendations carry a 75% weighting and work to reduce waste and duplication. Money stays in the region but panels can recommend reallocation of money, so it's better used to meet community needs, guided by the broader Development Agendas (developed through broad participation).

The CYLP itself was subject to scrutiny and feedback from a Joint Decision-Making process when the contract providing funding support was coming to an end. The community panel assessed the CYLP's performance and impact and ultimately confirmed the investment decision supporting the CYLP reflects the perspectives and aspirations of those the program serves, providing a clear, practical mandate for the CYLP's ongoing direction and delivery. One of the strongest messages from the panel's Joint Decision-Making assessment was that the CYLP should be made available to as many families as possible. Community members expressed a clear desire for increased funding to expand the program's reach, allowing more young people to benefit from the opportunities and support it provides.

Responsibility at the Core: A Shared Investment

The Opportunity + Responsibility = Capability model is more than a conceptual framework, it reflects a lived, mutual commitment between the program, its students, and their families.

Unlike conventional education support models, the CYLP is not a one-way provision of services. It is grounded in obligation, with all parties actively contributing and taking responsibility for a shared investment in the student's future.

This tripartite model of responsibility is one of the CYLP's most distinctive features and a defining point of difference from other scholarship programs. Students are expected to uphold their responsibilities by attending school regularly and applying themselves to their studies. Families are required to contribute through means-tested co-payments toward their child's education, ensuring a personal and tangible investment in the opportunity provided. The CYLP, in turn, takes responsibility for the larger financial commitment covering school fees and delivering a suite of wraparound supports including leadership camps, term events, mentoring, and ongoing student engagement activities.

A 2022 survey of CYLP parents offered a powerful insight into what the program means to families and students:

- *"Building young leaders through their programs, supporting our kids in boarding school, help with settling them in."*
- *"A better, brighter, further and best opportunity and support throughout their education."*
- *"Increasing wholistic relationship between young people living in remote regions and urban settings. Increasing employment opportunities. To create a clear career path for advancement."*

- *"It supported me to be an agent of change. I support this program 200% because I have seen the difference it made in my life, my children and my family's life. This program speaks volumes as it makes you a leader hence the name."*
- *"One of the main reasons for choosing the CYLP program was to give our daughter opportunities she wouldn't have in our hometown. The financial support has also meant we could provide this opportunity as without it, we simply wouldn't be able to afford it."*
- *"CYLP staff are local and well known in the community. This made it easy as a family to approach CYLP seeking better education opportunities for my child. CYLP supports many children who are also closely related. Other family members recommended CYLP."*

These reflections speak directly to the strength of the CYLP model.

Families are not only taking up the opportunity; they are embracing the responsibility that comes with it.

Just as importantly, they value the cultural and relational connection that the program maintains across Cape York communities. From the perspective of many parents, the CYLP is not seen as an external service provider, it is part of their community.

This commitment is further demonstrated by the financial contributions families have made over the years. Under the Cape York Welfare Reform trial, families have collectively saved close to \$5 million to support their children's education and associated costs. In addition to these savings, parents contribute means-tested co-payments directly towards their child's education, reinforcing the principle that responsibility is shared and that capability grows when everyone has a stake in the outcome.



Regional Strategy – Cape York Partnership Group Ecosystem

A key strength of the CYLP is its foundation as a place-based initiative designed to support the long-term development of future leaders from Cape York. Unlike many mainstream scholarship programs that focus exclusively on individual educational opportunity, the CYLP is deeply rooted in community and region. It brings together students from across Cape York into a shared journey, fostering a collective identity and a sense of purpose that extends well beyond individual achievement.

This collective model has significant and lasting implications. While each student comes from a distinct community with its own history, challenges, and strengths, the CYLP creates a unifying experience through leadership camps, term events, and a shared graduation pathway. These structured touchpoints reinforce cultural identity, strengthen peer relationships, and build networks of mutual support. They also serve as key drivers of retention, wellbeing, and educational success, ensuring that students remain connected not only to their own goals but to a broader vision for their communities and region.

The CYLP is embedded within the wider CYP ecosystem, which is made up of a group of organisations aligned around regional development priorities in education, health, economic participation, and social responsibility. This structure enables the CYLP to operate with greater coordination, efficiency, and reach than standalone scholarship programs. Students and families benefit from

access to an integrated network of supports delivered by familiar personnel through community-based programs. This approach reduces service fragmentation, builds trust, and increases the likelihood of sustained engagement and success.

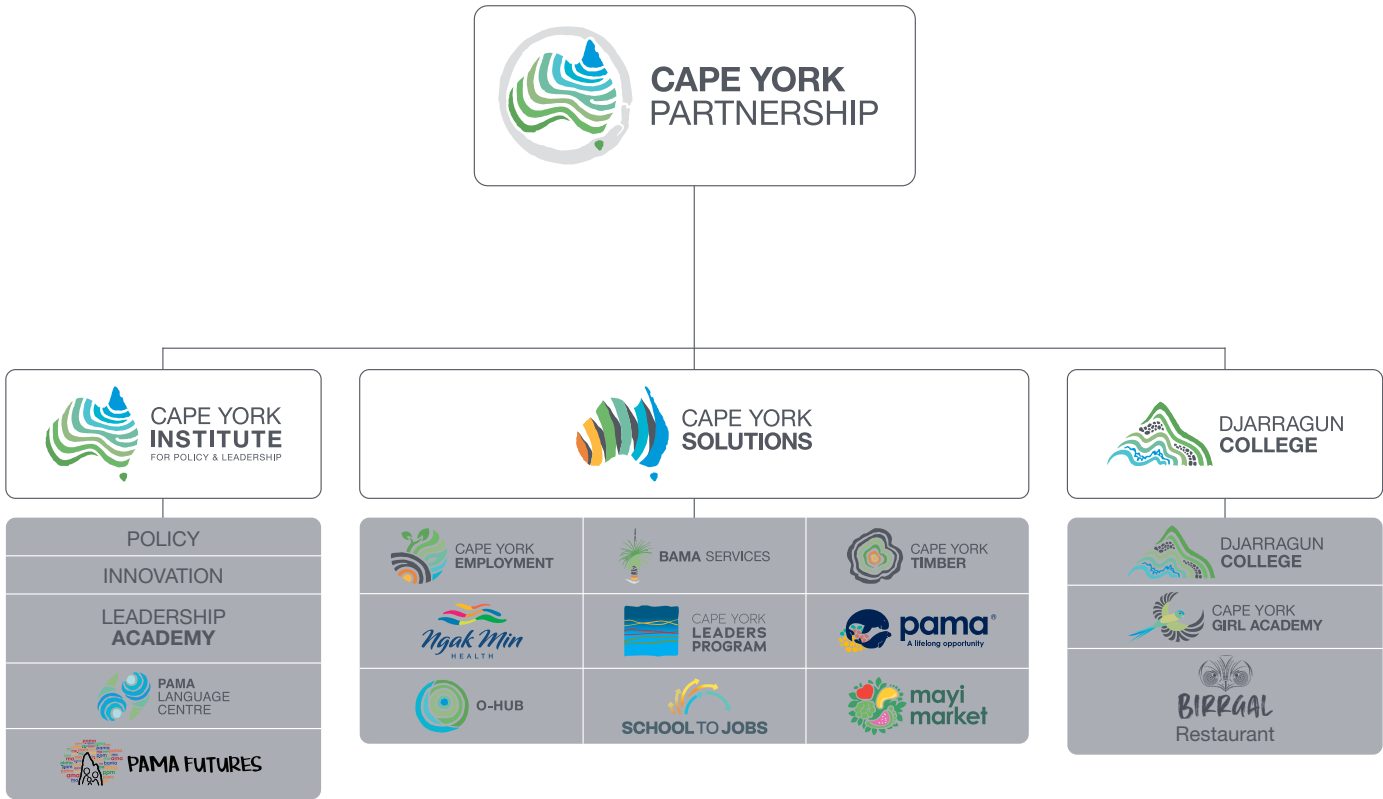
The value of this integrated model is evident in its outcomes.

Students receive consistent and culturally informed support throughout their secondary education journey and are better prepared to transition into employment, training, or further study.

The presence of CYP staff across multiple programs strengthens relationships with families and schools, enabling early intervention when challenges arise and ensuring continuity of care.

Importantly, the CYLP’s place within a broader ecosystem ensures that leadership development does not end at graduation. Alumni are supported into work placements, cadetships, and mentoring opportunities through CYP and its partner organisations, creating a clear pathway from education into meaningful economic participation.

In this way, the CYLP is far more than a student support program. It is a central element of a coordinated regional strategy to build local capability, strengthen communities, and develop the next generation of leaders for Cape York.



What's Working: Areas of Impact

The CYLP has been operating for more than two decades, and its impact is now evident across multiple layers of student, family, and community life.

The strongest and most consistent themes of change identified through this review extend well beyond academic achievement.

They include personal growth, resilience, and cultural strength; the capacity of students to adapt to new environments, lead with purpose, and inspire others; and the ways in which schools and communities shift in response to the program's presence and influence.

These areas of impact demonstrate the program's ability to respond effectively to the unique challenges of the Cape York context while creating enduring opportunities for leadership and success. For some students, the journey begins with extraordinary courage such as the decision an 11-year-old makes to leave home to pursue an education far from their community. For others, the transformation is seen in the steady confidence that develops through cultural grounding, peer connection, and consistent support. In many cases, the ripple effects extend well beyond the individual recipient, influencing siblings, inspiring peers, and reshaping expectations within schools and communities.

The themes that emerge from this review capture the ways in which students grow into leaders by navigating unfamiliar environments, sustaining their engagement with learning, and shaping their futures with clarity and intent. They highlight the critical role of connection maintained through leadership camps and term events; the inspiration provided by older students and alumni who serve as role models for the next generation; the growing confidence to step into further study or meaningful work; and the transformation within schools that comes from deep, culturally informed partnerships.

Together, these outcomes reinforce the CYLP's role as a vital mechanism for breaking cycles of disadvantage and building a strong, capable, and culturally grounded generation of Cape York leaders. The program's impact is not confined to the students it directly supports; it reaches into families, strengthens communities, and contributes to a broader movement of self-determination and opportunity across the region.



The Leadership Journey of Leaving Home

For many students in the CYLP, the leadership journey begins with a decision few others their age ever have to make by leaving home at just 11 or 12 years of age to attend boarding school. This is not a symbolic step; it is a profound transition that extends students beyond what is known and familiar in terms of family, culture, language, and environment, to access an education unavailable in their home communities.

The move is challenging on every level. Students are not only entering a new school system but also navigating an entirely different social and cultural environment. They must adapt to unfamiliar routines, food, communication styles, academic expectations, and institutional norms. For many, the early weeks and months bring feelings of disorientation and isolation, as well as the difficulty of adjusting to classroom learning models that differ significantly from those in their home schools.

Student reflections reveal that the first stages of boarding are often marked by confusion, homesickness, and vulnerability with the added pressure of being one of only a few Indigenous students in their year group. In these moments, persistence becomes a marker of leadership, not as something performed publicly, but as an act of personal discipline and quiet determination.

Over time, many students find their footing. They connect with trusted adults, build friendships, and begin to participate in school life whether through sport, cultural activities, creative pursuits, or peer support roles. In CYLP's view, leadership is not defined by formal titles but by consistent action: supporting a peer, managing their own wellbeing, or learning to advocate for themselves in both academic and residential settings.

CYLP frames leadership as the ability to sustain commitment to one's education, identity, and goals over time.

Growth is not expected to be linear. Instead, the program provides structure, culturally safe relationships, and wraparound support that give students the tools to navigate setbacks, recover, and continue progressing.

The following reflections from CYLP alumni highlight the importance of this process in shaping their own leadership journeys:

- *"It helped me to be more outgoing and gave me access to a high-level education that enabled me to seek out better work opportunities. It allowed me to leave my small town and not be fearful of opportunities beyond my comfort zone."*
- *"CYLP set my foundation, helped me believe in myself, and taught me to navigate successfully between two cultures and two worlds."*
- *"The program allowed me to develop a sense of identity, academic skills, and interpersonal skills. Developing these skills at a young age allowed me to be confident and steady in all my endeavours. With this foundation, I am able to try new things, build community with the people I meet, and define my dreams and aspirations."*

These outcomes speak to the core intent of CYLP, not simply to place students in boarding schools, but to equip them with the mindset, skills, and support to persist, adapt, and lead on their own terms, navigating confidently across both cultural and institutional contexts.



Student Engagement and the Hope for a Better Future

When speaking with students about their experiences in the CYLP, one theme consistently stood out: deep gratitude for the opportunities the program has opened for them. Many described their new schools as places where the learning environment felt markedly different from home. They spoke about having access to facilities and subjects they had never experienced before: dedicated sports programs, fully equipped music rooms, and a broader range of elective subjects. As one student put it simply, *“It’s better than the schools back home.”*

Students also highlighted the stability of their new environments. Teachers were described as committed, attentive, and long-term people who listened, cared, and stayed. There were clear routines, and systems worked the way they were supposed to. This sense of structure and reliability made it easier for students to concentrate, feel safe, and think more seriously about their future. It gave them room to try new things, test their abilities, and plan ahead with purpose.

For some, being away from community pressures was equally important. Several students expressed that the calm and structured environment of boarding school allowed them to focus on learning without the everyday challenges and conflicts they sometimes faced at home. One student explained that they wanted to be away from “the violence and the drama.” For them, boarding school wasn’t about leaving community behind, but about having space to think for themselves and avoid the distractions and demands that could pull them away from education.

That distance allowed them to imagine new possibilities and make choices based on their own aspirations.

These stories underline that the challenges students face is rarely limited to academics. Educational engagement often intersects with complex personal, social, and cultural pressures from caring responsibilities and community obligations to experiences of trauma, housing instability, grief, or exposure to violence. For CYLP, recognising and responding to these layered realities is essential to sustaining student participation over time.

True engagement, in this context, means more than attendance or grades. It means creating the conditions for students to see themselves as having options, the confidence to consider those options, and the space to imagine a future they can shape. It is about fostering a sense of belief not only in their academic potential, but in their identity, leadership, and capacity to contribute to their communities.

CYLP’s role in this is both practical and relational: providing tangible opportunities while embedding cultural understanding and sustained support.

This combination ensures that students know they are valued for more than their marks, they are valued for who they are and the futures they are working towards.



Leadership Camps: Laying the Foundations for a Year of Growth

At the start of each year, the CYLP brings students together from across the region for a regional leadership camp, a defining moment in the CYLP journey and a deliberate launchpad for the year ahead.

Held early in the school calendar, the camp provides a culturally grounded, peer-supported environment where students can grow in confidence, clarify their purpose, and build lasting connections.

It is here that many begin to see themselves not just as learners, but as emerging leaders for their communities.

Far more than a welcome event, the leadership camp acts as a catalyst for both personal and collective development. Students participate in a range of reflective and practical activities from team challenges to academic preparation workshops each designed to explore and unpack what leadership means in their own context. These experiences equip students with tools they can take into the school year: the ability to work collaboratively, the resilience to adapt to change, and the mindset to pursue their goals with clarity and determination.

The camp also serves as a powerful connector. Students meet peers from other communities who share similar aspirations and challenges, forming relationships that often last well beyond the school years. Many arrive feeling uncertain or reserved but leave with a renewed sense of belonging and motivation. The presence of CYLP

staff, alumni, and invited guests reinforces this network, showing students that they are part of something bigger than themselves. Alumni contributions are particularly impactful, as past participants share their own stories of perseverance, success, and cultural pride modelling what is possible when commitment meets opportunity.

Consultations consistently reinforced the significance of this camp. Students described it as a turning point in their journey, setting the tone for the rest of the year. As one student explained, *“The camp was awesome, I got to meet new people, make friends, and it made me feel like I’m not doing this by myself.”*

The camp’s impact extends beyond the current cohort. In recent years, CYLP graduates many on the cusp of entering further study or employment have returned to the camp as supervisors and student mentors. This is seen as “giving back,” an important responsibility to support current students in the same way previous cohorts supported them. It is both a continuation and an evolution of leadership, where graduates step into new roles as role models and guides. This tradition reinforces the program’s intergenerational ethos: leadership is not only about personal success but about helping others to succeed.

In this way, the leadership camp is more than an event, it is a foundational experience that strengthens the emotional, cultural, and practical readiness of students for the year ahead. It builds networks, deepens identity, and instills a shared vision for leadership that carries forward long after the camp concludes.



Staying Connected Through the Term: The Role of the CYLP Events

While the annual leadership camp ignites the year, it is the rhythm of regular, term-based CYLP events that sustains it. Held at locations such as Minjerribah, the Sunshine Coast, the Gold Coast, or local theme parks, these gatherings are more than just recreational outings, they are deliberate moments of reconnection that anchor students emotionally, socially, and culturally during the school term.

Students repeatedly spoke about the relief and reassurance these events bring. Boarding school, even in the best of circumstances, can be an isolating experience. The distance from home, the unfamiliar routines, and the absence of daily contact with family can weigh heavily. But when students come together with peers who share their journey, the load feels lighter. They are reminded that they are not navigating this path alone; there are others who understand the exact challenges they face, because they come from the same communities and walk the same road.

These events are more than casual catchups. They function as reset points and opportunities to take a breath, regain balance, and draw strength from the collective.

The consistency of these touchpoints is key. CYLP ensures that students reconnect not just once or twice, but at multiple points throughout the year, creating a living, breathing network of young leaders who support each other in both practical and emotional ways. This continuity benefits everyone: new students still finding their footing gain a sense of stability, while senior students preparing for the next phase of life are reminded of their own growth and the peers who have travelled alongside them.

The program's experience over the past two decades has reinforced a simple truth: leadership does not develop in isolation. These term-based events create space for peer mentoring, cultural exchange, and shared storytelling. Older students model resilience and steadiness; younger students witness possibilities they can aspire to. In these moments, leadership is not formalised through titles but emerges naturally in quiet acts of guidance, encouragement, and example.

This ongoing cycle of reconnection transforms the boarding experience from one defined by separation to one strengthened by solidarity. In a program built on relationships and high expectations, these events are not optional extras, they are essential threads that hold the journey together.



Setting the Example for the Next Generation

One of the clearest signs of CYLP's long-term impact comes not from current participants, but from those watching their younger siblings, cousins, and community members who aspire to follow in their footsteps. This aspiration is not born from brochures or recruitment campaigns, but from lived example. It is the older sister who returns home and shares her boarding school experiences, the cousin who talks about sport, music, or dorm life with excitement, or the neighbour whose confidence has grown since joining the program.

Across Cape York, students who have participated in the CYLP whether they have completed school or are still on their journey are shaping what the next generation believes is possible.

They are showing that leaving home does not mean leaving culture behind, and that the challenges of boarding can be met with strength, adaptability, and purpose.

For younger students, this is not an abstract notion. It is real, visible, and close to home.

This influence often unfolds quietly but powerfully. A younger brother sees his sister head off to school and begins to picture himself doing the same. A cousin hears about school excursions, academic opportunities, or the friends made along the way and starts to imagine that world for themselves.

Families watch the transformation, the growing self-assurance, the clearer sense of direction and they begin to see education not as an obligation, but as a genuine gateway to opportunity. When application time comes, it is often these older siblings or cousins helping to complete forms, explain what to expect, and prepare for the first days away from home.

What makes this ripple effect unique is that it cannot be manufactured. It grows from the consistency, visibility, and trust CYLP has built over time. Students do not necessarily set out to lead in this way, but their actions and the choices they make, create a path that others feel ready to walk. They become the reason someone else is willing to take the leap.

As one school leader observed, *"They hold their hand through the journey, and that's the point of difference."* CYLP has not engineered this influence; it has earned it. It has earned it by standing with students in the difficult moments, celebrating their wins, and ensuring that they return home not with a story of perfection, but of growth and perseverance.

This is what sets CYLP apart. It does not just work for one student, it changes what an entire family, and eventually a community, believes is possible. Over time, this belief gathers momentum. It builds on itself. And in doing so, it creates something far more enduring than a single success story: it creates a culture of opportunity, one student at a time.



Further Study and Orbiting Beyond Community

One of the most powerful contributions of the CYLP is the way it expands what young people believe is possible for their future.

It does not limit them to a single definition of success or prescribe a set pathway that all students must follow. Instead, it creates space for each student to imagine multiple futures, whether that means pursuing further education, learning a trade, building a career, or returning home to contribute in new ways. The program equips them with the key educational capability needed to have a good life in Australia. It builds skills, resilience and confidence to step into worlds beyond their immediate surroundings while staying grounded in their identity and culture.

Through our consultations, it became clear that the program is helping students build the readiness to leave home for further study, training or work; while knowing they have the option to return. For some, this involves moving to regional centres such as Cairns or Townsville. For others, it means taking the bigger step to Brisbane or other cities to attend university, start apprenticeships, or secure employment. These are not simply relocations for a job or a course. They are carefully considered steps into futures that once felt distant or out of reach.

This pathway is not the right choice for everyone, but it is becoming increasingly visible. Students who once thought

leaving home was impossible now know people who have done it. They have siblings, cousins and peers who have made the move, navigated unfamiliar environments, and created lives that still remain connected to their culture and community. This visibility matters. It shows younger students that it can be done, that there is a way to gain knowledge and experience in new settings without losing connection to home.

The CYLP does not push students away from community. Its role is to prepare them so that if they choose to leave, they can do so with the skills and mindset to succeed. They graduate with experience in adapting to new environments, managing change and living away from family. They leave with networks of peers, mentors and program staff who continue to provide support beyond school, ensuring they are not navigating these transitions alone. Whether they decide to return home, build a life elsewhere or move between both, they have the tools to make those choices on their own terms.

This is not just a story about education. It is about mobility, choice and the ability to move confidently between different worlds. It is about breaking down the idea that opportunity exists only inside or outside community. The CYLP helps young people understand that they can belong in both, and that their culture, identity and ambition can travel with them wherever they choose to go.





Marijke Bassani: From Cape York to the International Stage

Marijke Bassani is Lamalama, Binthi Warra and Bulgun Warra and was raised on the east coast lands of her people in the Cape York Peninsula. Her journey reflects the power of education, determination, and cultural grounding in creating leaders who make an impact well beyond their own communities.

From her early years, Marijke stood out as an exceptional student. Throughout high school and university, she excelled academically, demonstrating both a strong intellect and a commitment to using her skills for the greater good. Her potential was recognised early through the CYLP, which provided her with the support, mentoring and opportunities to pursue her studies at the highest level.

Marijke has since built an extraordinary career as a commercially trained International Human Rights Lawyer and First Nations LGBTQIA+ Scholar. Her work specialises in International Law with a focus on Discrimination and Human rights relating to Indigeneity, race, gender, sexuality and Cultural heritage; areas where she brings both professional expertise and lived experience. She has represented Indigenous LGBTQIA+ voices in national and international forums, bridging cultures and legal systems to drive change.

Her achievements are underpinned by her connection to her Cape York identity and a commitment to paving the way for the next generation of Indigenous leaders. Marijke's story is a testament to the impact of targeted educational investment, and the role programs like the CYLP play in equipping talented young people with the skills, networks and confidence to lead both locally and on the world stage.

Her journey shows the transformative effect of seeing that "going out" does not mean "leaving behind." In a powerful full-circle moment, Marijke has returned to serve as a Non-Executive Director on the Board of the Cape York Partnership Group, shaping the very organisation that once invested in her future. Her story is proof that CYLP is not only preparing young people to leave, grow and succeed elsewhere, but also to bring that success home, strengthening the next generation of Cape York Leadership.



Strengthening Schools: Building Cultural Capability Through Partnership

One of the most significant impacts of the CYLP has been its role in building the cultural capability of schools. While the program was created to support students directly, its influence has extended far beyond individual young people. Over time, the program has become a catalyst for institutional change, shaping how schools understand, support and engage with Indigenous students from Cape York. Through sustained partnerships, schools have developed deeper cultural responsiveness and a stronger commitment to equity. Many now offer dedicated scholarship pathways for First Nations students as a direct result of their relationship with the program. These opportunities increasingly extend beyond Cape York, reflecting a wider shift in how schools across Queensland and Australia recognise the potential of Indigenous students and commit to their long-term success.

The relationships built between the program and schools over the past two decades have been grounded in honesty, strategic dialogue and persistence. Program staff have had to navigate complex and sometimes confronting conversations with boarding staff, teachers and school leaders. These discussions have challenged assumptions, highlighted gaps and encouraged more culturally informed responses to the challenges that students face.

The impact of these conversations has been tangible. School leaders told us the program had prompted them to reflect more deeply on their own responsibilities towards Indigenous students. It has influenced the way they think about wellbeing, cultural identity and educational success. Staff described learning how to better support students through grief, homesickness, family obligations and the pressures that come with living away from home. Many pointed to the program as a source of clarity, guidance and backing when making decisions that affect students.

This influence has reached beyond students who are directly part of the program. Several schools shared that their involvement with the program had led them to implement broader support measures for Indigenous students. This has included employing Indigenous Liaison Officers, embedding cultural capability training, and strengthening internal processes to create culturally safe learning environments. Many schools also expressed a growing interest in visiting Cape York communities to build stronger relationships and deepen their understanding. These developments have not emerged from obligation, but from a genuine commitment to work alongside communities and create safer and more inclusive spaces for students.

The program has not achieved this change through demands or mandates. It has done so by showing up consistently, walking alongside schools and building trust over time.

This trust has created space for reflection, for growth and for change that is embedded in practice rather than just written into policy. Through this approach, schools have become more culturally capable, more accountable and more invested in the long-term success of their Indigenous students.

This shift is one that will have a lasting impact. When schools change, not only in what they say but in how they operate day to day, the benefits extend far beyond the students currently in the program. The ripple effect reaches every Indigenous student who walks through their gates, creating a stronger and more supportive educational environment for the future.

“...programs like the CYLP are not supplementary, they are essential.”

What's Emerging: Areas for Growth

The CYLP has achieved significant results over two decades, but a program of this scale and importance cannot stand still.

Ongoing reflection and refinement are essential to maintain its depth of impact and ensure it continues to meet the needs of students, families and communities in a changing environment.

The following areas for growth are not criticisms. They are signs of a mature program with the insight and readiness to strengthen its foundations, address emerging pressures, and position itself for the next phase of success.

Several key themes have emerged. There is an urgent need for meaningful investment to sustain and scale the program's impact, ensuring staffing, systems and resources can keep pace with demand while protecting the deep relational work that defines the CYLP model. There's also a need to strengthen partnerships through clearer coordination and accountability with education providers, to restore and enhance feedback loops, and to ensure there is shared ownership of student success. Together, these areas for growth represent the critical steps required to safeguard the program's role as a vital vehicle for breaking cycles of disadvantage and building the next generation of Cape York leaders.



Sustaining Impact Through Meaningful Investment

The CYLP has grown significantly over the years. More students are enrolling, more families are engaging, and more communities are relying on the program to support young people through the critical transition into and through secondary school. Its reputation is strong and its role in shaping young leaders across Cape York is widely recognised. But while demand and expectations have increased, the level of investment has not.

The Cape York Leaders Program has maintained its operations through the core funding provided by the National Indigenous Australians Agency. Their support has been foundational to provide opportunities to students and families for over 16 years. CYLP greatly value this investment and the opportunity it provides, but there remains a gap between student demand and funded placements, which have not been increased since 2019. Community feedback gathered through the Joint Decision-Making process has been clear: funding should be expanded so that as many students and families as possible can access the program. This is not a question of value. The program has proven its impact year after year. It has delivered outcomes in one of the most challenging environments in the country, earned the trust of families, supported schools to better understand and respond to the needs of Indigenous students, and maintained its integrity in the face of increasing demand and need.

ABS data shows that almost 28 per cent of all Aboriginal people in Cape York are enrolled in primary school. This figure alone highlights the urgency for greater investment to expand capacity and create more placements. While Education Queensland's Transition Support Services team plays an important role, the CYLP offers a level of wraparound support, ongoing engagement and post-school pathway guidance that is unmatched.

The program's achievements are all the more remarkable given the lean size of its team. Staff are often required to carry multiple functions and responsibilities, ensuring that no student is left without the attention they need. This is not a program in need of redesign. It is a program in need of reinforcement.

Additional investment is critical to ensure staffing levels can meet growing demand, operational systems can keep pace, events and activities can continue at a high standard, and the deep relational work at the heart of the model is protected from being stretched too thin. Funding must also strengthen the pathways that come after Year 12. Many students graduate with confidence, but their next steps into university, vocational training, employment or leadership roles can still be uncertain. Helping young people take the next step is just as important as helping them complete school.

This is more than a funding gap. It is a moment of reckoning. If the program is expected to keep delivering the outcomes it is known for, then funders and partners must match that expectation with serious commitment. The CYLP is not a concept waiting to prove itself. It is a proven program delivering results that align with national ambitions for improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In an environment where too many initiatives fail to gain traction, this is one that works. It should be supported to grow, strengthen and scale its success.

Strengthening Partnerships: Coordination and Accountability

One of the clearest themes to emerge from engagement with schools is the need for stronger and more structured coordination to guide how the CYLP works in partnership with education providers. Over the years, partnerships have been a defining feature of the program's success and while in many cases partnerships have maintained strong connections over years, success has been largely dependent on the standard of relationships between leaders and key personnel on each side of the partnership. Without clear frameworks, the strength of partnership can vary from one school to the next.

In the past, the CYLP convened bi-annual partnership forums that brought together families, school leaders and program staff to share data, solve problems and celebrate successes. These forums created a powerful space for reflection, alignment, insight and innovation. However, the government funding cuts directly resulted in their suspension. Almost every stakeholder consulted during the review, who recalled them emphasised the value of those forums. Reintroducing a leaner, hybrid version could restore a vital feedback loop and reinforce the program's commitment to shared governance.

Over the past two decades, the CYLP has evolved significantly, but that evolution has not always been visible to those currently working in schools. Staff turnover and leadership changes mean that critical knowledge about the program's origins, purpose and operating model has been lost or diluted. In some schools, this has created uncertainty about roles and responsibilities, what sits with the CYLP and what sits with the school. Without clarity, there is a risk of duplication, gaps in support, and missed opportunities to respond effectively to student needs.

Under existing partnership agreements an annual visit is scheduled and undertaken between school and CYP leadership with relevant key staff. Strengthening this partnership interface is an opportunity for greater clarity and collaboration. A strengthened partnership structure between each school and CYP would provide the opportunity for senior leadership to meet and annually review student cohort, outcomes and performance data, strategies and approaches, set shared priorities, provide clarity of functions and strengthen the leadership relationship between both CYP and partner schools.

More than anything, strengthening coordination is about honouring the partnership that sits at the heart of the CYLP. Schools must be seen not simply as sites where program delivery occurs, but as active collaborators in a shared mission to support Indigenous students. A stronger, more deliberate partnership structure would deepen trust, enhance accountability and ensure that the next 20 years of the program are marked by even greater alignment, responsiveness and collective impact.

Key Reflections

These reflections come from walking alongside those who know the CYLP best, students, families, communities, and schools that have lived the program's impact day by day.

They speak not only to what the CYLP has achieved over two decades, but also to what it has quietly shouldered: the unmet needs, the rising expectations, and the systemic gaps it has been asked to fill. They are drawn from candid conversations, hard truths, and the shared understanding that the program is operating within an education landscape in Cape York that remains deeply challenged.

The reality is that the education crisis in Cape York is ongoing. Poor school attendance, high staff turnover, and persistent gaps in literacy, numeracy, and early childhood development continue to limit opportunities for young people.

These are not abstract statistics; they are daily realities for families and communities, shaping the pathways available to the next generation. The CYLP has been one of the few constants in this environment, a trusted presence that not only supports students to succeed in school but also steps in when other systems falter. Over time, it has taken on responsibilities far beyond its original scope, bridging the gaps left by inconsistent or inadequate service delivery.

This expansion of role has not been the result of strategic drift, but of necessity. When families need help navigating boarding school transitions, when a student faces a personal crisis away from home, or when a school

struggles to respond in a culturally appropriate way, the CYLP has been there. Its deep relational work and its long-standing trust in communities have positioned it as the organisation people turn to first. This is a strength, but it also places a strain on a program that was never resourced to meet such a breadth of demand.

The message emerging from this review is clear: if the goal is sustained, place-based impact, the CYLP already provides the blueprint. It has demonstrated how to combine high expectations with strong cultural grounding, how to build partnerships that shift practice in schools, and how to walk alongside students in a way that changes not only their lives, but the systems around them. What is needed now is not redesign, but reinforcement.

That reinforcement must come through meaningful investment, stronger infrastructure, and a clear commitment to shared responsibility. Governments, funders, and education systems need to meet the program's proven commitment with their own, ensuring it has the resources, stability, and strategic backing to continue and expand its work. The CYLP has shown what is possible.

The question now is whether the will exists to match its dedication so that its impact can not only endure, but grow for the next generation of Cape York leaders.



The Ongoing Crisis in Cape York Education

The need for the CYLP has not diminished. If anything, the urgency has intensified.

Across Cape York, schools continue to grapple with deep-rooted challenges that have persisted for decades, resisting locally led advocacy for reform and reform efforts.

Education outcomes in literacy and numeracy remain well below national standards and this is reflected in NAPLAN results at every grade level for primary and secondary years. In Cape York, students start school behind due to early disadvantage and no effective pre-school literacy interventions. The state's education system does not catch them up in the crucial period before Year 3, so they fall further behind. In 2023, fewer than a quarter of Year 9 Indigenous students in remote Queensland achieved the minimum literacy and numeracy benchmarks. Despite decades of rhetoric and intermittent reforms, the system continues to fall well short of delivering an equitable education. State government interventions have been inconsistent, limited in reach, and often short-lived.

Poor primary schools, unable to ensure student learning, with many inexperienced teachers and high staff turnover, compound the challenge of early disadvantage and chronically poor attendance.

Teachers often arrive in Cape York straight from university and with limited teaching experience, and the system does not ensure effective teaching methods are in place. In Cape York it is hard to dispute there are poor schools where it is of no value for students to turn up because they don't receive the teaching that honours their attendance and results in them learning. These schools must be transformed through systems change that ensures effective teaching. Remote schools lose more than 30 percent of their teachers each year, and this pattern will continue. Cape York Partnership has long argued this revolving door makes it impossible for students to receive the education they need to thrive, unless effective teaching methods can be guaranteed to lift school performance.

Systems reform is also needed to provide effective pre-school literacy interventions, given the known gap. Early childhood development a foundational stage for future learning remains significantly underinvested in. The funding and services needed to engage children and families early, to prepare them for school and to introduce them to the idea of boarding pathways, are either piecemeal or absent altogether.

The history is familiar: government strategies are announced with energy and optimism from Brisbane or Canberra, only to result in little if any change or improvement on-the-ground.

It has been difficult to keep building on the success of Indigenous led and developed reforms suited to the local context, such as to expand the success of orbiting Cape York youngsters to areas of greater advantage to access opportunity. Governments tend to look at success or failure in the statistics at the state or national level, rather than look to what is working in places such as Cape York. Building on such success depends on the whims of political or funding decisions made in the centres of power, far removed from Cape York. This is dispiriting, and leaves students, families, and schools more fatigued, more sceptical, and more aware of the fragility of any commitments being made to them.



Backing What Already Works

In this environment of instability and unmet need, the CYLP has remained steady. It has not been driven by headlines or short-term political agendas, but by enduring relationships, cultural integrity, and a commitment to long-term, place-based impact. Its presence may not be loud, but it is deeply embedded in the lives of the students and families it serves. That consistency has built trust across communities and partners but with that trust comes increasing pressure.

As other systems step back, the CYLP is often asked to step in. More families are turning to the program for help. More schools are seeking its expertise. More students are entering with complex needs that the broader system should be addressing but isn't.

The CYLP was never designed to carry the full weight of these demands, yet it does, because without its intervention, too many young people would be left without support.

What the CYLP has achieved under these conditions is remarkable. It has taken on responsibilities far beyond its original scope in some of the most remote and marginalised regions of Queensland. This is not a

departure from its founding purpose, it is a continuation of the Cape York Reform Agenda's core intent: to move away from deficit and dysfunction, and to build capability through responsibility. Or as the program's guiding philosophy has long captured it: Responsibility + Opportunity = Capability.

**This report is not seeking applause.
It is seeking accountability.**

The CYLP does not need more praise, it needs real backing, real investment, and the infrastructure required to meet the demand that already exists. The expectation is on its shoulders, and if this work is to continue and expand, then governments, funders, and systems must step up and carry their share.

If the goal is sustained, long-term, place-based impact and not short-term optics, the CYLP already provides the blueprint. It does not need to be reinvented. It needs to be reinforced. This is a defining moment. The question is no longer whether the CYLP works. That has been proven. The question is whether others are willing to match its commitment so that its impact can endure for decades to come.



Conclusion

Over more than two decades, the CYLP has proven what is possible when sustained, culturally grounded, and high expectations support is provided to young people who deserve every opportunity to thrive.

Where Cape York families step up and take responsibility, they must be met with opportunity, including access to good schools, just as other Australians expect for their children.

The evidence is clear: CYLP changes trajectories. It equips students with the key educational capability needed—Year 12 success (graduating with a QCE)—to close the gap in a single generation.

The CYLP provides a pathway to opportunity that ensures Cape York youngsters can develop the skills, confidence, and networks to succeed in worlds otherwise beyond their reach, while staying anchored to culture, community, and identity. It builds leaders who inspire their peers, shift family aspirations, and create ripples of change that travel far beyond the individual.

This independent review has found that CYLP is delivering outcomes that have eluded policy for decades. In one of the most complex and challenging contexts in the country, the program is achieving higher educational engagement and outcomes, stronger leadership capability, and a

growing culture of aspiration across Cape York. These results are not hypothetical; they are grounded in the lived experience of students, families, schools, and communities.

But the scale of the challenge remains. More students need access to pathways to opportunities that are not available to them in Cape York. More families are asking for support. Schools are calling for deeper partnerships. The foundations are strong, the model is proven, and the demand is growing. What is missing is the investment to meet it.

The opportunity now is to expand what works. With meaningful, long-term investment, CYLP can extend its reach, strengthen transitions into further study and employment, and deepen the network of Cape York leaders who are already shaping the future of their communities.

The choice for governments, funders, and partners is simple: invest in a program that has already demonstrated impact and potential or allow unmet demand to grow in the very communities where opportunity is needed most.

