A new school, a restored dream

Dhupuma Barker's new campus on Yolŋu Country realises a decades-long vision, strengthening two-way education, cultural continuity and community pride while keeping children learning and connected.

In December 2025, more than 200 community members gathered on Yolŋu Country overlooking Melville Bay to witness a moment decades in the making: the soft opening of the new Dhupuma Barker school. For families from Gunyangara and Nhulunbuy, the day marked far more than the unveiling of new buildings. It represented the renewal of a long-held vision for two-way, bicultural education that allows Yolŋu children to remain on Country while confidently walking in two worlds.

The new campus stands as a tangible expression of hope, partnership and cultural continuity. Designed with Yolŋu voices at its centre, Dhupuma Barker reflects a model of education shaped by community, grounded in language and culture, and oriented towards future generations.

Dhupuma Barker first opened its classrooms in 2021, operating from temporary structures that were never intended to support a growing school community. Despite the limitations, student attendance and engagement dramatically increased, affirming the community's desire for an on-Country schooling option that honoured Yolŋu identity and knowledge systems.

The soft opening of the new campus on 10 December 2025 marked a turning point. Yolŋu ceremonial leaders led a procession from the old school site to the new, symbolically carrying the school's spirit forward.

Families, elders, students, staff and supporters gathered to celebrate the realisation of a promise first made years earlier: that Dhupuma Barker would one day have a permanent home designed for learning, community gathering and cultural expression.

The first stage of the new Dhupuma Barker campus includes three purpose-built classrooms, a Families as First Teachers learning space, a Community Hall for adult education and gatherings, amenities blocks, a covered outdoor court and a dedicated buŋgul ground for ceremony and dance. Space has also been set aside to support anticipated future growth, acknowledging the strong demand for the school within the region.

For staff, the impact of the new school is deeply personal. Ms Valerie Ganambarr describes Dhupuma Barker as, "a safe place for all children and community to learn and grow," adding with pride, "This is the best school for the children of Gunyangara." Her words reflect a shared sense that the campus is not only fit for purpose, but a place where children feel protected, supported and valued.

Images: Barker College

Students, families and elders celebrated the opening of Dhupuma Barker's new campus in December 2025.

Every element of the campus reflects Yolŋu values and storytelling. Learning areas are distinguished by colour and meaning, symbolising growth, renewal, excellence and leadership across different stages of learning. Children's artwork features prominently throughout the school, visually reinforcing the idea that students are not only learners, but contributors and creators within their own educational environment.

The Djeŋarra Community Hall holds particular significance. Named in honour of Dr G Yunupingu, community elder, educator and founding figure of the school, the space is designed to support shared learning between children and adults, reinforcing the collective responsibility the community holds for education. As noted by his daughter Binmila Yunupiŋu following his passing, "Dje ŋarra means precision, clarity, forward thinking with a laser-sharp beam." The djamarrkuli of Dhupuma Barker are encouraged to look out to the broad horizons in their futures.

During the opening ceremony, Yolŋu leader Djawa Yunupiŋu reflected on the far-sighted vision of his father and brothers, who were instrumental in the founding of the original Dhupuma College in 1972. That early college, which closed in 1980, had been created to ensure Yolŋu children could receive a strong education without leaving Country, a yearning that elders have carried ever since.

The reopening of Dhupuma as a school once again represents the restoration of that dream. While the contemporary Dhupuma Barker is shaped by modern educational practice, its heart remains the same: two-way learning that values both Yolŋu knowledge and Western education as complementary, not competing, systems.

Mr Phillip Heath AM, Head of Barker College, acknowledged this legacy during the opening, speaking of the original families connected to Dhupuma and the importance of faith, joy and celebration in the school's story. For Barker's leadership, staff and Council members present, the ceremony was both humbling and affirming, a reminder of the responsibility that comes with partnership and trust.

At its core, Dhupuma Barker exists to prepare young people to move confidently between cultural contexts, grounded in identity and equipped for opportunity. This philosophy is lived daily through bilingual teaching, strong community involvement and experiences that extend learning beyond the classroom.

The school supports students to imagine futures that honour both community and individual potential.

For students, the move into the new school has brought a renewed sense of pride and belonging. Year 7 student Mya Gurruwiwi explains what the new campus means to her: "This school is important to me because it is important to learn. I like that it is all brand new because that makes me feel special." Her words capture the quiet power of a learning environment that communicates worth and expectation through its very design.

Younger students share that sense of safety and possibility. Year 1 student Kitana Yunupiŋu says, "I feel happy to be in the new school and I feel safe. I like to be here because I can learn lots and have fun." Already, the new setting is helping children imagine their futures, with Kitana adding confidently, "I want to be a hospital worker when I grow up!"

> "The community now feel seen and proud. In the future the students will graduate and work here, they now have the opportunity to stay with family and community."
>
> *Tanya Yunupiŋu, Dhupuma Barker staff member*

Such moments reflect the school's emphasis on aspiration that feels tangible rather than abstract. By combining learning on Country with exposure to wider educational pathways, Dhupuma Barker supports students to imagine futures that honour both community and individual potential.

Dhupuma Barker's success is built on partnership, between Yolŋu and Balanda staff, between community and school leadership, and between Dhupuma Barker and the broader Barker College community. This shared vision is often expressed through the Yolŋu phrase Bukmak mitji, everyone together, a principle that underpins decision-making, teaching practice and long-term planning.

For the wider community, the opening of the new school carries deep significance. Staff member Ms Tanya Yunupiŋu reflects on the message it has sent: "Community feels excited to see it open finally. This is the first time we have gotten a new school and for a long time there was no school, now we have a great school!" She adds that the impact goes beyond the present moment. "The community now feel seen and proud. In the future the students will graduate and work here, they now have the opportunity to stay with family and community."

Staff speak of the privilege of teaching in a setting where culture, history and learning are inseparable. With the completion of the new campus, opportunities for sharing knowledge with visitors, partners and the wider education sector will only grow stronger, strengthening understanding across cultures and contexts.

The opening of the new Dhupuma Barker school marks the beginning of a new chapter, not an endpoint. As students are settling into their classrooms and community life continues to shape the rhythm of the campus, the school remains focused on growth, sustainability and ongoing collaboration.

For the families of Gunyangara, the new school stands as a visible commitment to children's futures. For educators, it offers a powerful model of what is possible when learning is co-designed with community at its heart. And for djamarrkuḻi, Dhupuma Barker is more than a school building, it is a place where identity is affirmed, voices are valued, and dreams that began generations ago are carried forward with confidence. **EM**