

Charter for a brighter future

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There are two things everyone agrees on when it comes to the plight of indigenous Australians. First, that along with everything else that needs to be done, education is central: the children will be the better future. Second, that indigenous education is a shameful failure.

Let me qualify these two points. Developments in health, housing and employment are also critical, and they affect educational progress. Education will not succeed alone, but it is ultimately the ticket to social justice.

Also, Maria Lane, the Aboriginal researcher from South Australia, points to the important progress being made by the lower and not-so-lower Aboriginal middle classes. Year 12 completions have risen and university participation by children from those Aboriginal families comprising what Lane calls the open society population is a real success story. The failure is occurring in what Lane calls the embedded population, that is families living in the passive welfare world.

This latter population includes all discrete Aboriginal communities in regional and rural Australia. It includes all of the Aboriginal communities in Cape York Peninsula and those remote communities where traditional languages and cultures are still strong. In these places education is an utter and recurring failure.

And no, I won't qualify the last statement. To those who say that there are green shoots and glimmers of success and examples of hope, I'm sorry I can't take my focus off the glass 90 per cent empty, rather than being thankful for the glass 10 per cent full.

Because I know what that 90 per cent empty translates into when those beautiful children who miss out on the social justice ticket become adults. Jail. Ill-health. Early death.

Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard has made education for disadvantaged children a particular focus of the government's educational reform agenda. She has allocated significant funds under the national partnerships for indigenous education, which is being offered to state and territory education departments on the condition they institute real reforms.

For two decades I have witnessed the cycle of public revelations of failure, followed by the announcement of new policy frameworks and budgetary allocations. More experienced Aboriginal leaders have witnessed this Groundhog Day for three or four decades now. But these cyclical policy commitments have never led to sustained solutions.

The truth is that the public education system has failed Aboriginal children. It is failing children in remote communities in particular.

There are two approaches to public education reform for the benefit of disadvantaged children. The first is for public education systems to be reformed so reform principles are embedded in the way these systems deliver education. In my view the key reform that enables (or if it is not done right, disables) all the other necessary reform elements is devolution of the governance of schools. There is no way that reforms will be implemented by a centralised system. That is why measures taken in Victoria to devolve school governance and, in Western Australia, the Barnett government's proposal to establish independent state schools are promising. The second approach is to pursue school reform outside of the public system. The charter school movement in North America is 20 years old. Starting in Minnesota in 1991, more than 40 states have legislated to enable charter schools to be established. Charter schools receive public education funds, but their governance and management are independent of the system.

A proportion of charter schools has proven that the achievement gap between African American students and white students can be closed. Children from the ghettos are being given a chance of social and economic parity through effective education.

Charter schools will be resisted in Australia by teacher unions. But as long as the situation with public education of disadvantaged people continues without solution, the case for charter schools will grow.

My view is that the first approach – reforming the public system from within, by devolving and decentralising governance – is possible. However, as long as those who preside over public education systems resist devolution and continue to insist on their right to operate failing schools, faith in public education reform will diminish.

It is already seriously eroded in the eyes of Aboriginal parents and community leaders, who are asking why their children continue to lag so far behind their mainstream peers.

In September, I put a proposal to Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin, to establish an independently governed Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy within the public school system that would provide a kindergarten to year 7 education covering mainstream and indigenous cultural and language education. The academy plan is the culmination of my thinking about education reform over a long period, and has been universally acknowledged as innovative and based on best-practice reforms. It reflects the high ambitions I have for the children of remote communities.

In the Cape York communities of Coen and Aurukun we have the opportunity to match the progress made by the parents and the children in areas such as school attendance (the attendance for Coen at times reaches 96 per cent, higher than the Queensland average; and Aurukun is going from strength to strength with 70 per cent in the past term), with the kind of education the children deserve.

The development of the academy plan has consumed my work over the past year. I am now awaiting the decision of the Queensland cabinet so that the academy can start in January 2010. Much work has been completed and all of the elements needed to make this reform are ready to be mobilised. All we now need is the go-ahead.

My proposition to Bligh and to Macklin was to give us the opportunity to develop an academy that fulfils the ideals of public education, particularly the ideal that public education can be the road to social justice for Aboriginal children.

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