

## **Countdown to close education gap**

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Mick Dodson launched a focus on the education of indigenous children in his address to the National Press Club this week.

It was a moving and most important use of the bully pulpit of his tenure as Australian of the Year. Dodson set all Australians a challenge we now have 10 months to respond to: by the start of school after January 26 next year (Australia Day), every Aboriginal child must be attending school.

This is the most ambitious yet quickly achievable goal in indigenous affairs that can be imagined. If the governments led by Kevin Rudd and his state and territory counterparts, and the leaders of indigenous Australia, cannot respond to the primary school participation gap and close it by start of the next season, then we may as well forget about closing the gap on anything.

Closing the gap between the life expectancy of indigenous people and the Australian mainstream is a generational challenge. The life expectancy gap is the aggregation of a vast range of gaps in health, education, justice and infrastructure. Some of these gaps are not going to close in short order.

However, the fact closing the gap on indigenous disadvantage requires a long-term effort – in the course of which extensive trials are necessary and setbacks are unavoidable – should not blind us to the fact some of the challenges are relatively simple. There are gaps that can be closed promptly.

School attendance is one such gap. It is not rocket science. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia can attend schools as well as anybody. Dodson is dead right to set January 26, 2010, as the date for closing the gap on school attendance. It should not take us more than the 10 months leading up to it to put in place the measures needed to make it happen.

In only a few places in the country is the problem genuinely one of the unavailability of schooling facilities. Where there are no such facilities in remote outstations, then the parents must be obliged to send their children to the nearest school or to avail themselves of distance education or other provisioning.

The fact is that the great proportion of school absences are occurring where there are schools and classrooms available. Emergency infrastructure can readily be mobilised in the time we have, where there is a need for it.

Dodson's call to this crusade – and the time frame he has set for it – is in stark contrast to the targets set by the Council of Australian Governments for closing the gap. COAG set the following goals: to halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students within a decade; to at least halve the gap in attainment at Year 12 schooling (or equivalent level) by 2020; and to provide all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-olds in remote communities with access to a quality preschool program within five years.

This is depressing in its lack of imagination and ambition. Fixing up literacy and numeracy are not generational problems. There are proven and effective programs available throughout the world (but not at present in public school classrooms in indigenous communities) that could do better than halve the gap in literacy and numeracy: it could close it in 10 years.

The proper teaching of these foundational skills from preschool onwards, combined with catch-up strategies for older primary school children who have not had the benefit of effective teaching, means that the gap could and should be closed – not halved – within seven years; 10 years at the outside.

So the COAG aim should instead be: Close the gap of primary school literacy and numeracy within 10 years.

This is possible if those who have the power to make the relevant decisions understand that there are two things that are within their power to effect.

First, they can get children into the classrooms and solve the attendance problem. Second, they can specifically mandate the implementation of effective approaches to the teaching of reading that meet the requirements of the reading inquiry chaired by the late Ken Rowe. And equivalent programs aimed at the effective teaching of numeracy should also be mandated.

To hold public education bureaucrats and politicians to account for their role in ensuring parental compliance with their obligations concerning school attendance, I have the following proposal.

All states and territories have laws that provide for prosecutions in the event of chronic school absences. The problem is that usually the head of the relevant education department has a discretion as to whether prosecutions are launched.

As a result the law is rarely enforced. In Queensland, in any year, the numbers of chronic absences are counted in the thousands, yet the number of prosecutions can be counted on one hand.

Of course education bureaucrats argue that prosecution is a last resort and their departments and principals in the schools have a host of other, less drastic, options to tackle attendance. But the numbers just don't stack up; chronic absences of indigenous children in particular remain outrageously high.

I propose that these laws be amended to require in every case where a child has missed more than a minimum number of school days in a term – and there has not been a prosecution – that principals be required to provide a report to their chief executive on every case of chronic absence and the action taken to resolve it, and if the absence is not resolved the relevant minister should table a report to the parliament every quarter on the reasons any case of chronic non-attendance was not prosecuted. It's great if principals and other parties can take alternative actions to resolve chronic absence, but those in charge of education systems should not abandon their responsibilities to uphold the law by hiding behind an alibi.

And don't tell me privacy considerations would prevent this kind of public reporting. Take the names off and stop making excuses as to why we can't account for not being able to stop an ongoing tragedy.

In four communities in Cape York Peninsula the Queensland and federal governments have instituted a mechanism for obliging parents to send their children to school, through welfare reform legislation.

The Queensland Family Responsibilities Commission process is in fact a much less drastic strategy aimed at fixing school attendance than enforcement of the education act because it does not involve prosecution of parents. Rather, attachment of obligations to the receipt of welfare payments by adults enables a panel of commissioners – comprised of a majority of elders from the community – to make appropriate decisions to support parents to fulfil their obligations and to send the message that school attendance is critical for all children.

In Aurukun, the meetings of the FRC have been taken over by the strong women sitting on the commission, and their counselling of their community members is conducted in the local Wik Mungkan language.

Those who have better ideas on how to get indigenous kids sitting in classrooms ready to learn should forthwith go and bang on the doors of their relevant education department and urge the adoption of their preferred approaches. I especially invite the academic critics of our welfare reform approach in Cape York to step forward with their strategies, and not just carp but help put them into practice.

We've got 10 months before the next January 26.

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