

Starting up

Australia's Indigenous leaders and educators have called for a national commitment to Indigenous education.

Krista Mogensen reports.

Key stakeholders in Indigenous education will drive a long-term, 'intergenerational' plan to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous children. At an AEU meeting in August, Indigenous leaders and educators proposed developing and implementing a strategic plan with clear indicators and targets to be evaluated each year.

"If we're going to be part of the 'education revolution', we're looking at a fundamental shift in the way in which business is conducted in education," said Professor Mick Dodson, co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the ANU, and Australian of the Year. Dodson nominated four areas that he believes need addressing: innovation, engagement with Indigenous students, literacy and numeracy programs with measurable outcomes, and cultural awareness in teaching.

Tom Calma, the Australian Human Rights Commission's

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, acknowledged the 'tonnes' of positive programs that are delivering for Indigenous students and cautioned against succumbing to a mood of 'doom and gloom'. "We're seeing higher attainments at year 12, greater participation at university level, and we shouldn't lose sight of all of that."

Addressing inequality in Indigenous education—as with health—depended on 'grass roots' community engagement and a long-term national plan of action to address inequality that goes beyond the electoral cycle, he said.

"With the Close the Gap [campaign] on health, we've got a 'statement of intent' that's signed by the Prime Minister, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and the Opposition Leader. We've now got four states and territories signed up for this same bi-partisan approach [to close the gap in Indigenous life expectancy], irrespective of what government is in power at any one time." ►



Mick Dodson

Co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the ANU, and Australian of the Year

“It is systemic inadequacies, not cultural origin, that cause failure”



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An 'intergenerational plan' (pictured from left): Professor Mick Dodson, Angelo Gavrielatos, Darcel Russell, Dr Chris Sarra, Professor Peter Buckskin, Wayne Costelloe, Tom Calma, Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney. Below: participants at the forum.

Closing the gap

The Council of Australian Governments has agreed to specific targets to improve outcomes for Indigenous children, including:

- Halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- Ensuring all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years
- Offering every child access to a preschool program in the 12 months prior to full-time schooling by 2013
- Halving the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.



First steps

The federal government's rollout of \$970m extra funding to ensure all Australian children get access to at least 15 hours of preschool education by 2013 is welcomed by the AEU.

"Our union policy is that early childhood education should be free, universal, secular and government provided. This is a huge step in that direction," says AEU deputy federal secretary, Darcel Russell. "It will facilitate a positive transition between ECE and school to give kids the best start possible."

At an AEU seminar on early childhood education for Indigenous children, held in May, teachers were positive but cautious about the rollout, says AEU federal Aboriginal



Preschool education strengthens children's transition to school (Grade 1 class, Zillmere State School, Brisbane).

Getting early childhood education right is 'crucial'

education officer Wayne Costelloe. "For members, key issues include making ECE more culturally appropriate, improved teacher training, as well as increased support around community cooperation, cultural assimilation and language," he reports.

Getting early childhood education right is "crucial", according to seminar keynote speaker Dr Karen Martin, associate professor of ECE, Southern Cross University, Lismore. "It's the point at which students can be turned off—or on—in their lifelong learning journey."

Rosy Mobbs is a freelance writer.

► Importantly, the Close the Gap health model brought together peak bodies involved in Indigenous health, he said. "That's the sort of approach we need to take."

Innovation

Representatives and key stakeholders also shared a range of innovations and ideas around Indigenous education.

Lester-Irabinna Rigney, director of the Yunggoorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research, Flinders University, says past Indigenous education policy has often been "incoherent". While progress has been made—witness the significant number of Indigenous research centres and professorial chairs in academia, for example—Rigney is pushing for more innovation in learning. "We need to not only close the gap, but we need to chart a new direction for our children. We need digital

literacy and health literacy," he said. "There are new ways in which we need to look at learning."

Peter Bucksin, chair of the South Australian Aboriginal Education & Training Consultative Body, called for genuine systemic engagement with Indigenous education across the different school jurisdictions. "There is a lot of great practice happening, but it is not systemic," he said. "We continually depend on the goodwill of individual people. We've got to work out how to sustain that level of positive activity. We need to replicate good practice systemically. And it's got to be benchmarked."

Chris Sarra, director of the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, says it is important to be clear that it is systemic inadequacies, not cultural origin, that cause failure in education. "We need to be clear that being

Aboriginal is not the true cause of failure in schools," he said. The Institute's 'Strong and Smart' philosophy aims for Indigenous children to be able to contribute and mix in modern society, but not at the expense of their cultural identity. "We've got to explicitly reinforce, nurture, and in some cases, retrieve, that cultural identity."

AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos urged teachers and the wider community to get behind the campaign to improve Indigenous education outcomes. "This is a very special day, to have significant Indigenous leaders from across the country, aiming for a genuine systemic effort at all levels, which is sustainable at all levels," he said. "It's for us to seize this moment to go forward." ●

Krista Mogensen is a freelance writer.