

Closing the gap

The AEU has called for radical reform to close the gap in Indigenous educational outcomes, Krista Mogensen reports.

Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students—who are among Australia’s most disadvantaged—must be a priority for the Rudd government, says AEU president Angelo Gavrielatos.

“The Prime Minister’s goal to halve the gap in achievements for Indigenous children within a decade is worthwhile, but it will fail without the development of a comprehensive policy and solid funding commitment,” he says.

The union is in discussions with Indigenous leaders including Professor Mick Dodson (see breakout) on a National Action Plan for Indigenous education. “This 25-year program would set clear targets to be reviewed annually within five year cycles,” says Gavrielatos.

At this year’s federal conference, the AEU launched a new report on

Western Cape College project officer, Yvette Carter pictured with a child during a ‘Parents as first teachers’ workshop at Napranum, Queensland (see story on page 24).

“We’ve got to get a core of people around to sit down...and try and persuade other champions to the cause.”



Professor Mick Dodson and students at Wanniasa School, ACT, at the launch of the school's Reconciliation Action Plan in March.

the needs of Indigenous students and their communities, calling for attention to address “fundamental issues of access and equity.”

Educational structures and models must take into account the needs of Indigenous students and their particular communities, and whether they are in urban, regional or remote settings, the report says. Proposals include creating ‘education complexes’ that deliver preschool, school and post compulsory education, and broadening the role of schools to support parents and their children from birth to the age of four. The report also calls for new staffing policies—and new industrial agreements to support them—to develop local Indigenous teachers and support staff, and to attract experienced teachers to difficult-to-staff schools. “More of the same is not enough,” says Gavrielatos. ►

Improvements for the long term

Professor Mick Dodson, Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia and Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the ANU, says improving educational opportunities for all Australian children will define his appointment as Australian of the Year in 2009. “I’d like to see every Australian child ... geared up for the start of the 2010 school year,” he told the National Press Club earlier this year.

“Education is something we’ve let slide miserably in recent decades. We’ve failed a lot of children in that time. And many of those children—a disproportionate number—are Indigenous children. We’ve been failing them for a lot longer.”

With plans to visit schools in June, July and August, Professor Dodson wants to learn how some communities are succeeding and “how we might adapt those [programs] to other places where we aren’t doing so well.”

Early feedback suggests that getting communities behind schools is critical, he told *Australian Educator*. “One of the key things needs to be a better engagement with community, particularly parents of Aboriginal pupils.”

Community development is the only way forward, according to Dodson, who remains vehemently opposed to the Commonwealth Government’s intervention in the Northern Territory, which imposes strict measures controlling welfare payments, and has suspended the Racial Discrimination Act in

some communities. “My view has always been that Australia should comply with its international human rights obligations; the intervention doesn’t.”

“The fundamental aspect of community development is to involve the community; these [intervention] measures are imposed. As long as people feel that things are imposed and they’re not of their initiative, eventually they’re going to fail.”

Dodson welcomes the AEU’s proposal for a National Action Plan on Indigenous education. “We’ve got to think in those sorts of long-term ways. We can’t deal with education and its problems, particularly for disadvantaged Australian kids including Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal kids, if we’re thinking from electoral cycle to electoral cycle.”

“We’ve got to get a core of people around to sit down and start talking about this and try and persuade other champions to the cause. Let’s try and put a framework around this; let’s try and get some other voices to the call and develop a national plan. Our plan at the moment is trying to get a few prominent people in education together to discuss this as an idea and see if we can’t take it from there.”

“Now all governments and key stake holders have signed a compact in relation to Aboriginal health. I don’t see any impediment to us doing the same for Aboriginal education.”

“If we want to close the gap in life-expectancy, the attack has to be on all fronts.”

Respect plus support equals success

Western Cape College, where almost two-thirds of the school's population are Indigenous students, has been highly successful with its 'cradle to employment' approach to education.

The college has faced some special challenges since it was established on Queensland's Cape York Peninsula in 2002. It has three campuses spanning 300km from north to south. In the north is the Mapoon campus with about 40 students up to grade 7. In the centre is the main school at Weipa with about 1000 students up to grade 12. In the south is Aurukun with about 240 students up to grade 10.

The college attempts to provide students from these communities with a range of pathways into secondary school, including a residential hostel in Weipa.

"The Weipa hostel has only 20 beds at present, but federal government funding has been approved to add another 100," says college director Ian Mackie.

The college also has preschool preparation services for three-year-olds in Mapoon and Aurukun, and a post Year 12 support service—its 'service guarantee'—which case manages the young adults into employment.

"We've had a 100 per cent outcome for our Year 12s three years running," says Mackie. "They have all been placed in employment, and we track them for two years to make sure they stay in it. Each teacher owns an accountability around those children. For example, if they are placed in an apprenticeship and things aren't going well, they can come back to talk about a solution."

The college, where Indigenous people make up about 13 per cent of the teachers and 23 per cent of the total staff, has been recognised

with a string of awards including a Queensland Premier's Award last year for excellence in public sector management.

"We're proud of our academic program," says Mackie. "We're offering absolutely triple-A first class education, and Indigenous children are thinking 'We can get a bit of that action for ourselves.'"

Attendance is a problem in



all schools, but it's particularly pronounced in remote Indigenous locations, he says. "We think the key to getting quality outcomes is to provide children with legitimate pathways. We're saying, 'Look, there's a future for you and you can enjoy a better life as a result of completing grade 12 and getting employment.' The early work was the hardest, when there weren't examples of young adults who had completed Year 12 and found jobs. But now that we have a considerable number of success stories—our exemplars, our champions—it's much easier to sell the dream."

The college's approach is closely linked to Chris Sarra's 'stronger smarter' philosophy, focusing on issues of Indigenous identity. "When the kids look at themselves in the mirror in the morning, they're happy with what they see," says Mackie. "They're comfortable in their own skin. It's something the teachers are very respectful of as they push students

to high expectations around academic outcomes. And that gets the kids to school. If they think the teachers are fair dinkum and they believe they can succeed, it has a big impact on attendance. That's not to say we've absolutely solved the problem, but we're certainly heading in the right direction."

In 2007 the college developed a 'Parents as First Teachers' program to extend awareness of the value of education and the positive impact of school completion on economic independence, health and life outcomes. It partners an Indigenous teacher and non-Indigenous health worker to empower parents to work with their children. The program includes homework centres and homework workshops with visiting professionals, learning kits about the school, and promotion of themes

Our success stories [make it] much easier to sell the dream.



Ian Mackie
Western Cape College Director

including health and nutrition.

While the economic downturn has hit job availability, Mackie believes the college can continue to honour its commitment to 100 per cent employment for its Year 12 students. "There has been significant demand for high-quality Indigenous Year 12 graduates and I don't see that waning. It's partly philanthropic in that employers feel they have a debt to Indigenous Australians they want to repay. But there's also the self-interest of companies wanting bright young Indigenous faces front and centre in their organisations, and that's in all kinds of businesses, from mining through to tourism. There are heaps of opportunities for talented Indigenous children." ●

Steve Packer is a freelance journalist.