



**Closing the Gap Refresh –
Submission to the
Department of the Prime
Minister and Cabinet**

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of New South Wales

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Introduction

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for this opportunity to contribute feedback into the Closing the Gap Refresh. P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents¹ and families.

The core belief of P&C Federation is that the education of our children and youth are the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource.

P&C Federation's response to this inquiry is guided by the belief that education is critical to closing gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and we therefore commend the Closing the Gaps program for centring four of its seven targets around education. However, it is both disappointing and concerning that after ten years, only one of these seven targets is on track to being achieved. Below we provide feedback on those targets relating to education.

There are several factors that are critical to achieving all of the targets relating to education:

- **Community engagement.** For historical reasons, there is often antipathy in Indigenous communities to government bureaucracy, especially when it comes to entrusting their children to government facilities like schools and early childhood services. Specialists in this field agree virtually unanimously that involving parents and other extended community members in all aspects of a child's education is critical to boosting Indigenous engagement in education.
- **Relevance to Indigenous culture.** Related to the above, a school culture and curriculum that incorporates Indigenous culture and perspectives is known to improve Indigenous engagement in schools. This may include incorporating Indigenous language comprehension, utilising oral and literary legacies or employing Indigenous staff or staff who are trained in working with Indigenous students. Consultation needs to occur at grassroot levels for changes to occur, and these initiatives should be largely in the hands of the Indigenous people.
- **Identifying successful cases.** A useful means of meeting these targets would be to find specific cases where the targets are being met, identify the reasons for this success, and evaluate ways to apply it elsewhere.² For whatever reason, however, there is a barrier to achieving this among Government agencies, which seem more prone to imposing generic 'one size fits all' approaches to these matters with limited evaluation of what demonstrably works elsewhere.

¹ "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

² Productivity Commission. 2016. *Indigenous Primary School Achievement*. June.

Targets:

95 per cent of all Indigenous four year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025

We note that this target is a revised version of the original target, which was to ensure “all Indigenous four years-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years” (i.e. by 2013). There are two issues of concern with this revised target:

1. *Why was the original target not met?*

It is unclear how much evaluation was conducted by the Federal Government into the reasons why the original target expired unmet. This is imperative in ensuring the revised target is achieved.

2. *Why is there no longer differentiation based on geographic location?*

P&C Federation agrees that the original target’s prioritisation of remote areas deserved revision, as the best available figures suggest Indigenous children in remoter areas are considerably more likely to be enrolled in early childhood education than non-remote Indigenous children.³ These large discrepancies in Indigenous enrolment rates between locations (85% enrolment in remote communities, 74% in regional areas, and 67% in major cities) suggest the challenges facing Indigenous enrolment in early childhood education vary greatly between geographic locations and that solutions should be tailored for each location. One plausible reason for these geographic differences is that preschool staff and children in remote areas are more likely to be majority Aboriginal, which encourages Indigenous participation, whereas in more populated areas Indigenous people are likelier to be a minority in preschools.⁴ However, by eliminating any distinction between geographic locations, this revised target imposes a ‘one size fits all’ approach which risks obfuscating these different challenges.

With that in mind, the target should instead be to ensure that 95% of Indigenous four year-olds in urban, regional and remote areas each are enrolled in early childhood education by 2025. Applying this 95% target to all three geographic regions separately, rather than to Australia as a whole, will help ensure the differing challenges in each of these regions are not overlooked.

In addition to the above, P&C Federation previously submitted our thoughts on these matters to the New South Wales Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, where we noted that while there are subsidies available for preschool attendance, there is widespread lack of knowledge of these subsidies in Indigenous communities.⁵ This is further supported by qualitative case studies presented to the Department of Education and Training in 2016, which noted that “*funding initiatives needed to be communicated to Indigenous parents and carers more effectively, especially to those who did not*

³ Hewitt and Walter. 2014. Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia. *Family Matters*, 95, pp.41-50; Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. 2016. *Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2016*. Commonwealth of Australia.

⁴ Hewitt and Walter. 2014. Op.cit.

⁵ P&C Federation. 2016. *Submission in Relation to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students*. November.

access any early childhood education services.”⁶ A review of the how the Government disseminates information to Indigenous communities may therefore be in order.

Close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance by 2018

There are various reasons behind Indigenous absenteeism from school, including family stress, poor health, poverty and (especially in remote communities) geographic isolation. It is also worth noting the distinction between truancy and school drop-out, the latter being more linked to disengagement with the education system in later years.⁷ While acknowledging the complexity of these issues, a starting point would be funding for permanent officers to monitor attendance for students. In New South Wales, this takes the form of Home School Liaison Officers (HSLO) and Aboriginal School Liaison Officers (ASLO).

One constant factor in schools with high Indigenous attendance is a high level of community engagement. For example, attending funerals is a major reason for frequent Indigenous absenteeism from schools,⁸ and an award-winning Northern Territory school improved Indigenous attendance in part by organising a vehicle service to transport students between the ceremonies and school, and allowed children to attend funeral ceremonies for no more than three days.⁹ Many specialists, agencies and surveys of Indigenous students have further noted that Indigenous attendance improves when Indigenous perspectives (such as Indigenous language comprehension, music, art, etc.) are incorporated in the school community and curriculum.¹⁰ However, it is unclear how much effect such case studies have had on curriculum or larger policy.

Another critical element in improving Indigenous engagement (and therefore attendance) in education is involvement of an Indigenous student’s family and community. Although family and community involvement is important for all students, it could be especially so for Indigenous students for whom extended family and kinship ties may be stronger than for many non-Indigenous students. As we also noted in our 2016 submission to the New South Wales Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, schools which establish authentic two-way partnerships with Indigenous communities consistently show the best outcomes for Indigenous students. This may take the form of formal school-community partnership agreements giving local Indigenous bodies some say in school policies and ensuring that elders and family members are part of the fabric of the school.¹¹ On a larger scale Indigenous organisations should be partners in national education policies, particularly in schools on Indigenous lands.

⁶ Social Research Centre. 2016. *Indigenous Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care - Qualitative Case Studies*. September. P.33

⁷ Zubrick. 2014. *School attendance: equities and inequities in growth trajectories of academic performance*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research

⁸ Driese et al. 2016. Indigenous School Attendance: Creating Expectations that are ‘Really High’ and ‘Highly Real’. *Policy Insights*. Issue 4. March.

⁹ *Koori Mail*. 515. 2011. Warrawui is one smart school. p.55

¹⁰ E.g. Godfrey et al. 2013. Perceptions of their teachers by aboriginal students.

¹¹ What Works. The Work Program 2012. *Success in remote schools: a research study of eleven improving remote schools*. Melbourne. National Curriculum Services.

Ultimately, however, it is important that local Indigenous communities feel they have a large degree of control over their schools. This will help ensure that any initiatives are consistent with community expectations.

In remote areas, a further challenge are the sheer distances students must travel for school and the frequent lack of transport services for them. This may be especially problematic for low-income Indigenous households which may not have reliable transport of their own. Unfortunately, State/Territory departments of transport are often reluctant to establish bus routes for remote areas, as the low number of students that would benefit is deemed poor value for money. An alternative for such students is distance education, however the unreliable Internet and communications infrastructure in remote areas is an obstacle to this. Two strategies may mitigate this: (1) when considering establishing school bus routes, the portion of students of a given school who would benefit should be considered, rather than the raw number of students; and (2) space could also be offered to smaller providers who may provide services not met by the National Broadband Network (NBN), which is frequently less reliable in remoter areas.

Halve the gap for Indigenous children in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018

It is important that efforts to improve Indigenous literacy and numeracy involves a focus on attaining proficient literacy and numeracy at a primary level, as proficiency in primary years improves the likelihood of proficiency in later years. Moreover, attaining poor literacy and numeracy results in early primary years risks discouraging Indigenous from striving for improvement, and for this reason focus needs to be placed children from K – Year 3 to ensure they learn the basics of education before they start any NAPLAN testing.

Another important factor is to boost the number of teachers who are either Indigenous or have training in working with Indigenous students and communities. A viable possibility is to require all current and aspiring teachers to undergo training in working with Indigenous students, of the type that exists in New South Wales through the Connecting to Country program. For example, it may also provide teachers with a better ability to tailor personalised learning plans specifically for Indigenous students, in consultation with the student's parents and possibly larger community. Although previous surveys of teaching students identified Indigenous education as the area where they most needed professional skills development,¹² it is unclear how much impact those findings have had on curriculum or policy. A greater emphasis on these areas would therefore be beneficial.

Halve the gap for Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 in Year 12 or equivalent attainment by 2020

P&C Federation is encouraged that this Closing the Gap target is currently on track to being met. With that said, greater emphasis on vocational skills could provide additional opportunities for students who do not intend to continue into secondary education. A 2016 study by the Department of Education and Training noted that there is often a strong distinction in schools between ATAR/tertiary preparation and vocational training, with the latter sometimes seen as for the 'less able', and that the degree to which schools encourage vocational education varies greatly.¹³ P&C Federation also previously recommended to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training that

¹² Koori Mail 460. 2009. Indigenous education teachers' top priority. P.13.

¹³ Department of Education and Training. 2016. *Everybody's Core Business - Research into the non-technical capabilities needed for successful participation in work or further study: Final Report*. August.

non-technical skills (such as problem solving skills and digital literacy) is important when transitioning from school and should be embedded in education in a consistent and systematic way.¹⁴ This would benefit the future prospects of students who often have a lower degree of formal training in specialised fields, as may be the case with Indigenous students.



¹⁴ P&C Federation. 2017. Inquiry into school to work transition – Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training. July