

**Calling for Improvements in Indigenous Education**

**SUMMARY:** *Despite having the potential to improve employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Education faces significant challenges. Currently, Indigenous students are more likely to drop-out, miss more school days and achieve lower basic numeracy and literacy results than their non-Indigenous counterparts. This is partly due to lack of community engagement in the development of curriculum and poor staff recruitment practices particularly in the selection of staff for schools in remote areas. This month, we will be asking our Members of Parliament to focus on these key areas to address Indigenous disadvantage in education.*

**INDIGENOUS EDUCATION – THE STATE OF PLAY**

Education has been identified by various commentators as the single most important factor in improving employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians, reducing incarceration rates and improving a number of other social problems. However, outcomes in Indigenous Education lag behind those of non-Indigenous Australians by a significant distance.

In 2008, 21% Indigenous people aged 15–64 years had completed Year 12 while 40% of those aged 25–64 years held a post-school qualification. However, at this time 54% of non-Indigenous people had completed Year 12 and 61% had post-school qualifications. Whilst this demonstrates a degree of improvement, educational attainment rates remain at around half those for non-Indigenous people.

A further issue facing Indigenous Education is the level of school attendance. Indigenous children attend school far more sporadically than those in the non-Indigenous community. For example, in Alice Springs' Yipirinya School, catering for some of the most disadvantaged students in the country from the town camps, average attendance is just 60%.

Furthermore, Indigenous students score lower on numeracy and literacy testing compared to non-Indigenous students. Schools in remote areas are particularly vulnerable with 79% of year 5 Indigenous students in remote areas not reaching national numeracy levels.

**STAFF RECRUITMENT**

To overcome many of the issues that have been raised, we have identified two areas that require significant improvement, the first of which is staff recruitment. Currently staff numbers in many remote schools are based on attendance rather than enrolments. This means that there is little incentive for schools to play a role in improving poor attendance levels as they often don't have the capacity to absorb higher class numbers.

Furthermore, staff who are recruited into remote schools from urban or rural areas aren't offered any additional training to prepare for the particular cultural contexts and unique challenges of remote areas. This creates obstacles to Indigenous learning and high staff turnover in remote schools.

Finally, there are a dearth of opportunities for local Aboriginals to train and work in remote schools. Not only would this create employment, but would mitigate the problems faced by staff arriving from outside remote communities.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

The second area for improvement is engagement with community in the formulation of curriculum. Research has shown that many of the issues endemic in Indigenous schooling stem from low parental support for education as a result of a lack of relevance. To overcome this, a two-way approach is necessary that combines the key elements of mainstream education whilst working with the community to build on the cultural norms present to develop a curriculum that will have relevance and garner the support of parents. For example, this may include bi-lingual schools; an idea that was recently banned by the Northern Territory government despite bi-lingual schools performing at a comparable level to solely English speaking schools. To overturn many of the problems in Indigenous education, particularly in the remote areas, greater engagement with the local communities is necessary.

### **ACTION:**

Contact your local member, The Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin, The Minister for Indigenous Employment and Economic Development Mark Arbib or The Minister for Indigenous Health Warren Snowden and ask them to make a commitment to Indigenous Education with a focus on staff recruitment and community engagement. The contact details for your local Members of Parliament or the Ministers listed above can be found at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/index.htm> or <http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/index.htm>. When contacting your politician, please note:

1. Point out how important Education is for employment opportunities and other benefits later in life.
2. Show that Indigenous education in Australia lags behind education for non-indigenous Australians.
3. Explain the key issues of staff recruitment and community engagement in the development of curriculum as crucial in overcoming the current problems facing Indigenous education.
4. Ask Federal Ministers (or ask your local member to ask Federal Ministers) to negotiate funding agreements with State and Territory governments which include commitments to increased local recruitment of teachers and community involvement in the curriculum.

**See also** <http://www.abs.gov.au/>

<http://www.acer.edu.au/indigenous/general/research-reports-conference-papers-and-resources1/>