

# Chapter 9

## EDUCATION, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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## Chapter 9

### EDUCATION, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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*In contemplating the nature of human development and its requirements, four essential capabilities have been cited:*

- ◆ *to be able to survive*
- ◆ *to be knowledgeable*
- ◆ *to have access to resources for a necessary standard of living*
- ◆ *to participate in the life of a community.*<sup>1</sup>

*These capabilities are so ingrained in the mainstream of Australian experience, they are largely unseen. However, in citing them here, the contribution of education to the Australian Aboriginal circumstance is brought into focus. The level of relative disparity in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people represents a principal barrier to their onward survival, access to resources, and participation in the most fundamental activities of social and civic life. Education systems are uniquely positioned among all other human service agencies to initiate changes as well as lead other sectors to undertake actions that would break the cycle of disadvantage that Aboriginal people experience.*

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#### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Based on the findings reported in this volume and the learnings of the previous two volumes, the following recommendations have been formulated to offer a basis for moving forward to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. There are two key principles that emerge from the survey findings that underpin the recommendations. These are:

- ◆ the need for schools to engage carers and communities to break the cycle of the transfer of educational disadvantage between generations
- ◆ the need to improve early childhood and early school learning for Aboriginal children to prevent children falling behind in the crucial early years of life.

With these principles in mind, the following recommendations are offered as a basis of forming strategies to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

#### Early childhood and early school learning

**Action 1** Education systems should implement educational programmes and curricula based on developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices that support Aboriginal children in the early primary school years.

**Action 2** Education systems should work with other relevant family and human services agencies to provide educational day care and child development experiences for young Aboriginal children to better prepare them for learning. This should take the form of:



## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS *(continued)*

- ◆ early childhood education and developmentally appropriate readiness to learn programmes for toddlers in home care, day care, play groups and other settings
- ◆ language and cognitive enrichment programmes at kindergarten and pre-school.

### Engaging carers and communities

**Action 3** Education systems should set strategic directions to address the disengagement and alienation from schools of carers of Aboriginal children in order to improve their involvement in their child's educational progress and their capacity to support their child's schooling. Schools must reach out to carers and communities proactively to:

- ◆ establish a relationship of trust with the community based on shared values, shared decision-making and expectations
- ◆ address issues surrounding carers' own poor experiences at school
- ◆ demonstrate the value and positive culture of schools
- ◆ actively promote the benefits education can provide to children
- ◆ provide opportunities for carers to obtain positive educational experiences
- ◆ demonstrate respect for Aboriginal people and culture
- ◆ eliminate racism in schools.

**Action 4** Programmes should be developed to set school, community and carer expectations for improving attendance at school and monitor their success.

### Improving educational outcomes

**Action 5** Education systems and health systems should work together to provide appropriate support and assistance to Aboriginal students with emotional or behavioural difficulties.

**Action 6** Substantial direction within the education system is now needed to target:

- ◆ explicit teaching of standard Australian English language features throughout all years at school
- ◆ strategies to identify and manage Aboriginal children who have speech and language impairments that interfere with learning
- ◆ development of appropriate educational risk-management strategies for Aboriginal students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, their implementation and reporting on their uptake and impact
- ◆ encouragement and support of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in offering parent and family development curricula for Aboriginal students enrolled in VET
- ◆ mandatory participation in Aboriginal studies as part of pre-service training.



**SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS** *(continued)*

## Improving culturally inclusive schooling

- Action 7** Practical steps that would represent meaningful progress in improving culturally inclusive schooling require:
- ◆ further development and implementation of a meaningful Aboriginal studies curriculum to increase the knowledge of all Australians about Aboriginal culture and history
  - ◆ setting the educational agenda for the development of a tolerant and inclusive society that is knowledgeable about, and respectful of, cultural difference
  - ◆ actively addressing racism in educational settings and institutions.

## Changes to programmes and funding arrangements

- Action 8** Addressing the findings of the WAACHS will require a re-engineering of education system programmes and direction of funds to ensure that greater proportions of young Aboriginal children enter kindergarten and pre-school with better levels of readiness to learn at school. In doing this, it would be prudent to re-direct some Australian and State government education funding towards early Aboriginal readiness-to-learn at school programmes and initiatives.
- Action 9** Based on the limited evidence from the strategic intervention projects that have been run over the last several years to address the educational needs of Aboriginal students, general programme resources should be developed and systematically trialled and refined in a coordinated strategy to develop clear programmes that can be implemented in all, or certainly the majority, of schools. These programmes can still contain the flexibility to be adapted to local circumstances.
- Action 10** A substantial proportion of programme funding should now be directed towards interventions in the primary school years and earlier. Under present funding arrangements, this will require a balancing of the proportion of funds directed towards secondary aspirational programmes against the need to significantly fund kindergarten, pre-primary and early school years efforts. Both strategies are needed. However, aspirational programmes alone cannot address the more fundamental need for substantial improvement in Aboriginal educational outcomes and educational capacity building within the Aboriginal population.
- Action 11** The AIEO strategy should be evaluated to identify barriers that prevent AIEOs from fulfilling their roles. AIEO efforts should be redirected towards supporting early primary school needs of Aboriginal children, and AIEOs should be provided with appropriate training and skills development opportunities to enable them to fulfil this role.
- Action 12** The cost, use and effect of homework classes should be evaluated with a view to establishing their educational efficacy and/or other benefits or unintended consequences.



## **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS** *(continued)*

- Action 13** The education system should undertake to estimate the level of financial and human resources over and above those available to all children that are specifically devoted to addressing and improving outcomes for Aboriginal students.

### Accountability of the education system

- Action 14** Given the magnitude of the potential benefits and savings likely to flow to governments, Aboriginal communities and society from improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people, consideration should be given to the Auditor General conducting regular performance audits of the level of implementation and impact of programmes and strategies in Aboriginal education.

### Establishing an Aboriginal educational research agenda

- Action 15** A national research agenda into Aboriginal education outcomes should be developed that establishes a systematic, rigorous and sustained programme aimed at both charting progress in achieving improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and at developing and evaluating programmes and strategies that produce measurable improvements.



## INTRODUCTION

The findings reported in this volume are confronting evidence that the benefits of education remain poorly realised by most Western Australian Aboriginal children. While incremental improvement in Aboriginal school retention has occurred over the last decade, this belies the fundamental failure over the past 30 years to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal school children. The incremental improvements in Aboriginal participation in school fall well short of what is needed to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational outcomes. Without fundamental and radical educational reform, these disparities will continue and worsen. The move to extend compulsory education to include young people aged 16 years and 17 years, along with the need to equip students to participate in the emerging national and global knowledge-based economies, are forces that can be expected to further widen this disparity. The best that can be said at present is that there are now methods of annually measuring the extent of the educational disparity affecting Aboriginal children. However, what will prevent future readers from returning to this report to find this situation unchanged?

The survey is in a unique position to both more fully describe the prevalence and distribution of educational disadvantage among Aboriginal students, and to identify the reasons underlying the current poor performance of Aboriginal students. Some of the findings of the survey run counter to conventional wisdom and provide new learnings. As a result, there is an impetus to use the survey findings to create systemic change. The WAACHS represents a significant milestone in the delivery of data to meet information needs for and about Aboriginal students. With this evidence come expectations of actions and initiatives to address the difficulties that they describe.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT IN WHICH EDUCATION OCCURS

Many of the problems associated with the disadvantages that Aboriginal people experience are now understood to have their origins quite early in life. Children born into disadvantage are far more likely to grow under-developed in both body and mind, and fail to acquire the skills and competencies needed for full social and economic participation. Recent insights from the neurosciences regarding the nature of early brain development show that the early years of life play a much more important role in shaping the subsequent course of children's lives than previously realised – particularly in how they affect adult health status and the development of cognitive, emotional and social abilities.<sup>2</sup> The experiences of children at home and in day care from birth to age of entry into kindergarten play a substantial role in their development, particularly in early cognitive and language development and in emotional and behavioural regulation. Young children who are well nurtured do better in school and develop the skills needed to take their place as productive and responsible adults.

These relationships are important for the actions that governments and communities take to ensure a fair start for all children. **Nurturing children in their early years is vital for attacking the worst effects of disadvantage.** Governments around the world are now seeking better ways to re-invest in their human service infrastructure to better meet the needs of children in order to bring about population-level improvements in health and human capability. The emerging consensus is that the greatest gains in overcoming disadvantage are likely to be achieved through universal preventions which give all children a better start in life. This is the preferred policy approach to reducing poverty being advocated by international agencies such as UNICEF and the World Bank and has been termed human development through early child development.<sup>3</sup>



## PROMPTS, FACILITATORS AND CONSTRAINTS OF DEVELOPMENT

Optimal developmental outcomes occur when children are able to regulate their emotions, engage in exploratory behaviour, communicate effectively, are self-directed, have intellectual flexibility, possess some degree of introspection, and possess self-efficacy in meeting life's challenges. The process of developmental change leading to social, civic and economic participation relies upon exchanges between the child's own talents and skills and those of parents, family, peers and teachers. There are important drivers that prompt, facilitate and constrain child development. These include:

### Developmental prompts

- ◆ Biology (e.g. birth weight and nutrition)
- ◆ Expectations
- ◆ Opportunities.

### Developmental facilitators

- ◆ Temperament and intellectual flexibility
- ◆ Good language development
- ◆ Emotional support, particularly in the face of challenge.

### Developmental constraints

- ◆ Stress that accumulates and overwhelms
- ◆ Chaos (frenetic activity, lack of structure, unpredictability)
- ◆ Social inequality
- ◆ Social exclusion.

These prompts, facilitators and constraints are discussed in detail in *Volume Two — The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People*.<sup>4</sup>

This human development model needs to be interpreted in the light of the specific circumstances of Aboriginal people. For instance, the historic exclusion of Aboriginal children from education in Australia is a constraint on development when the educational disadvantage resulting from exclusion is handed down from one generation to the next.

Children spend a significant proportion of their time in educational settings. Education systems have a significant opportunity to ensure that all of these drivers are addressed in delivering educational experiences to children and young people. Developmental resources for children within schools include the resources of teachers and other students. These resources define the variety and sophistication of expectations and opportunities for children. Principal's and teacher's leadership and expectations of achievement and orderliness create stability, transmit social norms and expectations, and produce better levels of achievement.<sup>5</sup>



Findings on the physical health and the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and young people have been reported in the previous two volumes.<sup>4,6</sup> Selected findings from these volumes that are relevant to the context of education need to be reiterated:

- ◆ Compared with the general population, carers of Aboriginal children have lower levels of education. About one-third of carers of Aboriginal children left school prior to the completion of Year 10.
- ◆ Amid a significantly higher rate of unemployment for Aboriginal people, employment that is available and undertaken is generally at a lower level of occupational skill and qualification.
- ◆ Nearly one in four Aboriginal children (24 per cent) are at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. These difficulties are associated with a substantial educational burden.

This combination of circumstances not only creates impoverishment of the wherewithal to raise children, but also compromises the very basis of human, psychological and social capital that forms the wider pool of resources essential for child growth and development. These circumstances are limiting the capabilities of Aboriginal children both on entry to kindergarten and onward through their formal education. Improving the educational prospects for Aboriginal children is contingent on how systems, including the education system, respond by developing programmes, interventions and policies that effectively redress this.

## DIRECTIONS IN POLICY AND REPORTING FRAMEWORKS AFFECTING ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

A broad range of child, parent, family and school factors have been shown to be independently associated with educational outcomes. While there is much that schools can and should be doing to better meet the needs of Aboriginal students and their families, the survey findings make it clear that schools cannot be expected to do this alone. Meaningful improvement in Aboriginal educational outcomes requires policy, service delivery and community action informed by an understanding of some of the key processes of human development.

Successive Australian and State Governments have sought to implement more co-ordinated, whole-of-government approaches to support children's early development. The Australian Government is developing a *National Agenda for Early Childhood*.<sup>7</sup> The Western Australian Government has released its *Children First Strategy* (2004) which has involved the Department of the Premier and Cabinet leading the development of a policy agenda to raise community awareness of the importance of early child development and to bring about more integrated focus of policy and programmes across the human service departments of government.<sup>8</sup> The first phase of the Strategy's implementation has focused on working with local families and communities to support them to identify their priorities and develop a plan to improve the wellbeing of children. The next phase of the strategy will focus on coordinating policies and programmes across department and community organisations so that they can work in harmony.

This strategy has gone some way towards articulating a more coherent focus for existing programmes for children and families. However, to date the priority given to implementing the Strategy, as reflected in levels of new investment and redirection of



existing funding, is significantly short of what is required to address the up-stream drivers of disadvantage for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

An important recent Australian whole-of-government initiative informed by the perspective of human development through child development is the *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* reporting framework.<sup>9</sup> This reporting framework represents an important advance in which both the form and content of policy are directed at improving Aboriginal circumstances. Its endorsement by the Council of Australian Governments marked the commitment of Australian governments to tackle the root causes of the disadvantages that Aboriginal people experience and monitor the outcomes in a systematic way that crosses jurisdictional and portfolio boundaries.

*Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* is a framework to drive change. Its reporting criteria include three inter-related priority outcome areas required to sustain human and community development:

- ◆ Safe, healthy and supportive family environments with strong communities and cultural identity
- ◆ Positive child development and prevention of violence, crime and self-harm
- ◆ Improved wealth creation and economic sustainability for individuals, families and communities.

The priority outcomes are underpinned by two further tiers of indicators:

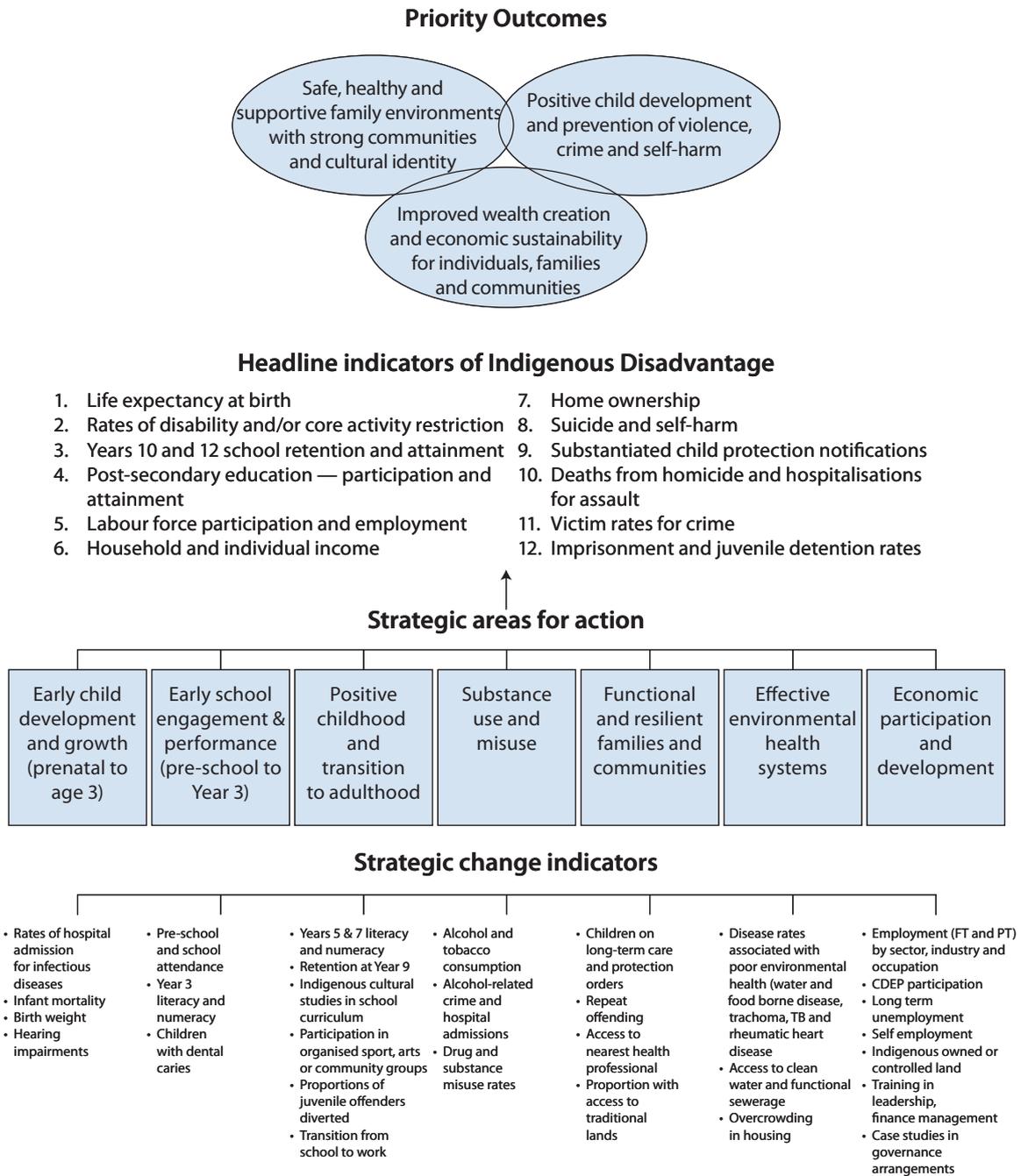
- ◆ a first tier comprising twelve longer term 'headline' indicator measures of major social and economic factors that need to improve if the vision is to be achieved.
- ◆ a second tier comprising a set of seven key areas for action and their associated strategic change indicators (Figure 9.1).

These indicators were selected to be of relevance to all governments and Aboriginal stakeholders and because of their capacity to demonstrate the impact of programmes and policy interventions in the short (18 months) to medium term (5 years).

The *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* reporting framework is based on a model of human development that emphasises the pivotal role of education in reducing long term disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples. At the same time, improvements in headline indicators of educational disadvantage also depend on strategic action in other areas such as early childhood and health services, housing, family and parenting support. In addressing the headline indicators, the content of policies and programmes should be focused upon the prompts, facilitators and constraints of human development. These are the major factors for which there is a robust evidence-base to guide the selection of interventions that offer the greatest leverage for change.



**FIGURE 9.1: FRAMEWORK FOR OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**



Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision.<sup>9</sup>



## KEY FINDINGS FOR EDUCATION

The key findings of this volume may be summarised as follows:

- ◆ Aboriginal children are performing far worse at school than non-Aboriginal children. Some 57 per cent of Aboriginal children had low academic performance compared with 19 per cent of all children. Aboriginal children missed a median of 26 days of school per year compared with 8 days for all children.
- ◆ Educational disparities in school performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children are larger than health and mental health disparities.<sup>4,6</sup> For example, about 13 per cent of non-Aboriginal children are born with sub-optimal fetal growth compared with 21 per cent of Aboriginal children, a disparity of 8 percentage points. About 15 per cent of non-Aboriginal children have a clinically significant emotional or behavioural problem compared with 24 per cent of Aboriginal children, a disparity of 9 percentage points. Disparities in education measures are on the order of 30 to 40 percentage points regardless of the measure used for the estimate.
- ◆ Educational disparity is evident from the earliest years of school and it affects Aboriginal children living across all levels of relative isolation.
- ◆ While the proportion of all children who fail to meet the minimum academic benchmarks increases with year of enrolment, among Aboriginal children the proportion is much higher, and the longer they are at school, the wider the disparity grows.
- ◆ No obvious progress has been made over the past 30 years to effectively close these disparities.
- ◆ The three main independent factors contributing to poor academic performance among Aboriginal students are the lower levels of academic achievement of carers of Aboriginal students, the higher rates of absence from school, and the higher proportions of Aboriginal students at moderate and high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties.
- ◆ Poor school performances are being passed down generationally. In population terms, so few Aboriginal children are succeeding at school that little or no effect is likely to be readily observed for several generations.
- ◆ Carers of Aboriginal students reported being happy with the job schools were doing, and almost all carers reported that schools were approachable. However, carers of almost half the students reported that their children were doing OK at school when the child's teacher rated them as having low academic performance.
- ◆ What education systems are presently doing to improve educational outcomes of Aboriginal children is not working because the drivers of educational disparity are not being addressed.



## ACTIONS NOW NEEDED TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

### ACTIONS TO IMPROVE READINESS TO LEARN AT SCHOOL

A very large percentage of Aboriginal children enrol in both kindergarten and pre-school in the years they become eligible.<sup>8</sup> Year 1 teachers inherit the graduates of kindergarten and pre-school and the survey findings show that too many Aboriginal children have excessively low levels of readiness to learn at school on arrival into Year 1.

All children enter school with a range of knowledge and skills acquired at home and through their experiences in other settings. However, they differ from one another in their readiness to access what the formal school environment can offer their onward learning. For some Aboriginal children, the transition into school education presents a number of special challenges including English as a second (or even a third) language to the one usually spoken in the home. For others, the knowledge and skills they have acquired through 'bush' learning or storytelling within the family may not be recognised or adequately valued in the classroom setting. This is as much a matter of the school's readiness for Aboriginal children as it is a matter of children's readiness for learning at school.

Children's chances of favourable educational progress are greatly enhanced when their early life experiences enable them to enter primary school equipped with good physical health, the ability to concentrate and follow directions with age-appropriate language development and basic pre-literacy skills such as showing an interest in books and stories, being able to count, identify and/or attach sounds to some letters or write their name. The available evidence shows that significant improvements in long term education outcomes can be achieved through community supports and programmes and services for young children and their families which are designed to facilitate these aspects of early child development.<sup>10</sup>

Neither the size of the educational disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children on entry to school, nor the fact of its widening with advancing education, is being matched with educational curricula or programmes that are of sufficient developmental focus, intensity and duration and aimed at the appropriate developmental skill levels of most Aboriginal children who are commencing formal education.

#### Action 1

Education systems should implement educational programmes and curricula based on developmentally appropriate, evidence-based practices that support Aboriginal children in the early primary school years.

Educational disparity is measurable on entry into compulsory schooling. In assessing the actions needed to improve the likelihood that more Aboriginal children will be better able to learn at school, education systems have a responsibility to adopt a leadership position in pressing for greater focus on the prompts, facilitators and constraints of development in the delivery of programmes from other human service sectors such as health and family and community services. A continued debate about jurisdictional authority, particularly for child care on the one hand and education on the other, simply avoids the need for education systems to adopt a leadership role and to call for and direct change in securing a developmentally appropriate focus



in programmes offered to very young children, pre-schoolers, and children in their primary school years. Education systems also must develop, promote and implement developmentally appropriate practices that will enhance readiness for learning at school in Aboriginal children who are in early child care settings – whether these be at home, playgroup, day care or kindergarten settings.

## Action 2

Education systems should work with other relevant family and human services agencies to provide educational day care and child development experiences for young Aboriginal children to better prepare them for learning. This should take the form of:

- ◆ early childhood education and developmentally appropriate readiness to learn programmes for toddlers in home care, day care, play groups and other settings
- ◆ language and cognitive enrichment programmes at kindergarten and pre-school.

## BENEFITS OF MORE THAN ONE YEAR OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Maximising children's exposure to high quality early childhood education (kindergarten and pre-school) facilitates their readiness for school learning and later academic success.<sup>11,12</sup> This is demonstrated in the findings from 43 OECD countries participating in the *2003 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, which showed that, after taking into account socioeconomic factors, children who attend pre-school for more than a year showed a significant performance advantage in later school achievement than those with less pre-school attendance.<sup>13</sup> Provision for the universal availability of more than one year of early childhood education is now being recognised by governments around the world as an investment and not a cost. Good quality early childhood education programmes explicitly address the prompts, facilitators and constraints of development and have appropriately skilled and qualified staff and staff-child ratios. These programmes not only enhance the lives of children and their families, they also deliver significant long term benefits to schools, society and the economy.

A recent study of the medium-term benefits of children's participation in well-resourced, good quality early childhood education programmes for two years showed that they are associated with substantial savings in other areas of education spending resulting from the reduced need for special education; prevention of grade repetition; improvement in educational productivity; and enhancement of children's emotional and behavioural wellbeing.<sup>14</sup> Over and above the long term economic and social benefits, between 41 per cent and 62 per cent of the initial investments in early childhood education would be recovered by medium-term savings elsewhere in the education system.



## ACTIONS TO ENGAGE CARERS AND COMMUNITIES

The survey findings reveal substantial disengagement and alienation of carers from schools. This is measured by carers' low levels of knowledge about the academic progress of their children in school despite their high degree of happiness with what the schools are doing. Addressing this will require setting strategic directions to address Aboriginal carer disengagement and alienation from schools and to improve carer awareness of their child's educational progress and their capacity to support their child's schooling.

This will also require more than creating a welcoming environment in schools and having parent committees. Schools must proactively reach out to carers and communities to build strong relationships. Responsibility for community engagement should not merely be delegated to Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), but should be a shared responsibility of all school staff, and driven by the most senior staff within schools.

### Action 3

Education systems should set strategic directions to address the disengagement and alienation from schools of carers of Aboriginal children in order to improve their involvement in their child's educational progress and their capacity to support their child's schooling. Schools must reach out to carers and communities proactively to:

- ◆ establish a relationship of trust with the community based on shared values, shared decision-making and expectations
- ◆ address issues surrounding carers' own poor experiences at school
- ◆ demonstrate the value and positive culture of schools
- ◆ actively promote the benefits education can provide to children
- ◆ provide opportunities for carers to obtain positive educational experiences
- ◆ demonstrate respect for Aboriginal people and culture
- ◆ eliminate racism in schools.

There is no evidence that there has been any change over the past 10 years in the attendance rates of Aboriginal children. Neither is there evidence that small-scale local solutions to poor attendance are sustainable in the long run or transferable to other settings. Patterns of, and associations with, poor attendance are documented in this volume. While complex, they are addressable. Attendance rates of Aboriginal children should be used as one of a range of indices of progress in establishing educational equity for Aboriginal children.

### Action 4

Programmes should be developed to set school, community and carer expectations for improving attendance at school and monitor their success.



## ACTIONS TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

The high proportion of Aboriginal students at moderate and high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties and the strong link between these difficulties and poor attendance and academic performance makes it very important for education systems, health systems and family services systems to work together to provide appropriate support and assistance to students with emotional or behavioural difficulties. As documented in Volume Two, almost one quarter of Aboriginal children were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, and very few of these children have been in contact with Mental Health Services in Western Australia.<sup>4</sup>

**Action 5** Education systems and health systems should work together to provide appropriate support and assistance to Aboriginal students with emotional or behavioural difficulties.

However, the education system cannot be complacent in assuming that its call to other sectors for improved treatment and management services for children and young people with emotional or behavioural difficulties will result in meaningful levels of resources being devoted to this by other sectors. The education system must develop appropriate supports for Aboriginal students with emotional or behavioural difficulties, implement them, and report on their uptake and impact.

The teaching of curricula that support good speech and language development generally and the teaching of standard Australian English specifically should produce substantial educational progress for Aboriginal children. Children who speak English as a second language (ESL) and children who speak English as a second dialect (ESD) (i.e. children whose first language is Aboriginal English) perform similarly poorly when compared with Aboriginal students for whom English is their first language. While there may be pedagogic differences in the teaching and learning requirements for ESL and ESD students, both of these groups will require the direction of considerable funding and resources to meet their needs.

While the WAACHS data do not directly inform the issue of teacher training in Aboriginal Studies, it is the case that not all teachers are taught about Aboriginal Australia or about how to teach Aboriginal students. Many of the improvements the survey data suggest are reliant upon teachers being trained and confident to work with Aboriginal students and to be knowledgeable about Aboriginal Australia. Australian research shows that teachers who had undertaken Aboriginal Studies subjects are more likely to perceive themselves as knowing more about the subject matter in relation to Aboriginal history, current issues, pedagogy for teaching Aboriginal Studies, and about teaching Aboriginal students. They also have higher self-concepts in regard to their self-perceptions of their: knowledge of Aboriginal Studies subject matter; knowledge of how to teach Aboriginal Studies; and overall perceived ability to teach Aboriginal Studies and to teach Aboriginal students effectively. These studies also enhance their enjoyment of the teaching experience.<sup>15</sup>



**Action 6**

Substantial direction within the education system is now needed to target:

- ◆ explicit teaching of Standard Australian English language features throughout all years at school
- ◆ strategies to identify and manage Aboriginal children who have speech and language impairments that interfere with learning
- ◆ development of appropriate educational risk-management strategies for Aboriginal students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, their implementation and reporting on their uptake and impact
- ◆ encouragement and support of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector in offering parent and family development curricula for Aboriginal students enrolled in VET.
- ◆ mandatory participation in Aboriginal studies as part of pre-service training.

The survey findings highlight several factors that do not show strong relationships with educational outcomes for Aboriginal children despite common wisdom that they are important factors with associated programmes implemented through schools. These include:

- ◆ The lack of direct association between hearing problems and educational outcomes. Conductive hearing loss impacts upon both social and emotional wellbeing and speech and language development.<sup>4,6</sup> While all children deserve to have any hearing difficulties treated, hearing management programmes alone offer little prospect for improving overall educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Nevertheless, schools may be best placed to identify hearing problems, and hearing management programmes may be best run through schools.
- ◆ The lack of direct association between diet and nutrition and educational outcomes. Proper diet and adequate nutrition are important for healthy development and good health in adult life. School breakfast and lunch programmes may offer important health and mental health benefits to Aboriginal children and young people. However, survey findings do not support the notion that school nutrition programmes are likely to achieve gains in academic performance or attendance at school.

**ACTIONS FOR IMPROVING CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE SCHOOLING**

In their preface to this volume, Milroy and Milroy state that '[Aboriginal education] is not just about Aboriginal people but what everyone learns about Aboriginal people from Australian education systems (at all levels)'. This volume has as its focus the education of Aboriginal children and young people. This focus on the individual circumstances of children and their families runs the risk of creating a general view of a 'deficit model' in which educational outcomes are seen to merely reflect deficits in the children and their families. In this model, accountability (or blame) for progress is sheeted back to individual children and their families. It would be difficult to reconcile the survey findings against the claim that these have as their basis or origin, deficits in Aboriginal children and their families. Education systems have failed Aboriginal people. Neither the fact of colonisation nor onward policies that promulgated forced separation of children from families, assimilation, or self-determination have seen



education systems in a neutral role. Through the policies and practices of each of these administrative epochs, education played a role that has historically resulted in greater exclusion, rather than inclusion, of Aboriginal people in education.

In addition to the many disadvantages that Aboriginal people face, cultural influences play an important role in shaping the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students. While this is clearly evident in the more isolated areas of the State, it is also relevant to Aboriginal students attending schools in metropolitan or regional areas. In response to this perceived need, the development of practical strategies for culturally inclusive schooling has been a major focus of Aboriginal education policy over the past two decades. This culminated in the MCEETYA *National Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21st Century*<sup>16</sup> and its endorsement by state, territory and Australian Government ministers in 2000.

This statement of principles and standards has provided a framework to initiate policies for creating more culturally secure teaching and learning environments and has highlighted the importance of policy and strategies to address discriminatory practices (such as lower expectations) antithetical to the learning and participation of Aboriginal students.

#### Action 7

Practical steps that would represent meaningful progress in improving culturally inclusive schooling require:

- ◆ further development and implementation of a meaningful Aboriginal studies curriculum to increase the knowledge of all Australians about Aboriginal culture and history
- ◆ setting the educational agenda for the development of a tolerant and inclusive society that is knowledgeable about, and respectful of, cultural difference
- ◆ actively addressing racism in educational settings and institutions.

### CHANGES TO PROGRAMMES AND FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

#### Action 8

Addressing the findings of the WAACHS will require a re-engineering of education system programmes and direction of funds to ensure that greater proportions of young Aboriginal children enter kindergarten and pre-school with better levels of readiness to learn at school. In doing this it would be prudent to re-direct some Australian and State government education funding towards early Aboriginal readiness-to-learn at school programmes and initiatives.

The current Australian Government approach of bypassing jurisdictions and working directly with individual schools is laudable in its flexibility to adapt solutions to the specific circumstances of each location. However, this strategy is flawed in that:

- ◆ programmes that are developed are often too specific to be transferred to other schools
- ◆ trials are too small to demonstrate outcomes



- ◆ individuals with motivation and special skills are too heavily relied upon in the absence of effective mechanisms for programme sustainability
- ◆ there is an unrealistic expectation of people at the local level to find solutions to problems for which no-one currently knows the answer
- ◆ programmes often only address part of a problem and consequently fail to be successful because they are defeated by other issues not covered by the programme
- ◆ it offers no coordinated or systematic approach to developing solutions.

Many of the projects funded under Indigenous Education Agreements (IEA) and other initiatives are reported to show great promise, but there is no evidence that any have migrated from the trial schools to wider settings. For example, the efforts involved in producing the *What Works* reports and web site have been undermined by the lack of a coordinated approach to designing the projects in the first place. The result is a set of resources that fail to make clear what does work and how to apply it in a school.

### Action 9

Based on the limited evidence from the strategic intervention projects that have been run over the last several years to address the educational needs of Aboriginal students, general programme resources should be developed and systematically trialled and refined in a coordinated strategy to develop clear programmes that can be implemented in all, or certainly the majority, of schools. These programmes can still contain the flexibility to be adapted to local circumstances.

The survey did not collect sufficient data to enable a thorough evaluation of all educational programmes currently targeted at improving outcomes for Aboriginal students. However, the survey findings do identify several specific issues of relevance to current programmes.

### Secondary school aspirational programmes

Aspirational programmes, such as *Follow The Dream*, represent major current initiatives that consume a large proportion of the specific programme resources aimed at Aboriginal students. The survey findings highlight how few Aboriginal students are currently eligible for these programmes, given the high numbers of Aboriginal students that fall behind academically prior to Year 7. Moreover, the high proportion of Aboriginal students who fall behind in their school during the primary school years highlights the low level of success that interventions left to the secondary school years are likely to have. The overwhelming bulk of the education literature in the area of remedial teaching emphasises the need to intervene early as soon as problems occur, while showing the low rate of success of remedial programmes once students fall more than a year behind in their school work.



**Action 10** A substantial proportion of programme funding should now be directed towards interventions in the primary school years and earlier. Under present funding arrangements, this will require a balancing of the proportion of funds directed towards secondary aspirational programmes against the need to significantly fund kindergarten, pre-primary and early school years efforts. Both strategies are needed. However, aspirational programmes alone cannot address the more fundamental need for substantial improvement in Aboriginal educational outcomes and educational capacity building within the Aboriginal population.

### The role of the AIEO

The presence of AIEOs (and Aboriginal Teaching Assistants) in schools has no positive benefit on the academic performance of Aboriginal students, and has a negative effect on attendance patterns. These findings suggest that:

- ◆ the presence of an AIEO in a school must be accompanied by substantial system and school changes in addressing the needs of Aboriginal students – the presence of an AIEO is not a substitute for this
- ◆ the role and duties of AIEOs and their professional development generally should be reviewed
- ◆ training and support of AIEOs to give this position a properly defined educational focus is essential
- ◆ direction of the AIEO workforce may be best positioned to support key learning, including literacy, in the early primary school years.

**Action 11** The AIEO strategy should be evaluated to identify barriers that prevent AIEOs from fulfilling their roles. AIEO efforts should be redirected towards supporting early primary school needs of Aboriginal children, and AIEOs should be provided with appropriate training and skills development opportunities to enable them to fulfil this role.

### Homework classes

As reported in Chapter 6, the survey data show that homework classes are associated with poor outcomes in school performance.

**Action 12** The cost, use and effect of homework classes should be evaluated with a view to establishing their educational efficacy and/or other benefits or unintended consequences.



### Resources devoted to Aboriginal education

In 1998, the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health produced a report detailing health service use and expenditures on health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.<sup>17</sup> The analysis was subsequently repeated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2001.<sup>18</sup> The report was useful in dispelling myths surrounding the extent of health services expenditure for Aboriginal people, and provided a basis for comparing service use and expenditure for Aboriginal people with service use and expenditure for all Australians.

In producing this volume, it became clear that not only was no equivalent information available concerning use of expenditure on educational services for Aboriginal people, there was no ready way of approximating relative expenditure from financial information provided by governments. Were such information available, it would be useful in not only quantifying relativities in use of, and expenditure on, educational services, it would serve as a useful benchmark of funding for educational services compared with need.

**Action 13** The education system should undertake to estimate the level of financial and human resources over and above those available to all children that are specifically devoted to addressing and improving outcomes for Aboriginal students.

## ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

**Action 14** Given the magnitude of the potential benefits and savings likely to flow to governments, Aboriginal communities and society from improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people, consideration should be given to the Auditor General conducting regular performance audits of the level of implementation and impact of programmes and strategies in Aboriginal education.

## FUTURE RESEARCH INTO EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

There is an immense body of educational research informing the practice of education. Yet, amid this abundance, there is a dearth of adequately designed, implemented and interpreted educational research specifically addressing the Australian Aboriginal circumstance. Moreover, what little there is would appear to have resulted in negligible benefit to the Aboriginal population. It is small wonder that Aboriginal people direct scepticism if not hostility toward the money spent on Aboriginal research and instead focus upon tangible funds and services for Aboriginal children.

Many of the very educational benefits enjoyed by all Australian children have been built upon the foundations of educational research applied over time in real world settings. These are benefits that are accepted as part of the basis of education and that underpin educational practices and the outcomes they deliver. Few question the efficacy or importance of high quality educational research for the benefits it delivers to children, families, communities and nations. While individual studies and selected



research findings will always be disputed or scrutinised, the prevailing overall benefit of rigorous educational research is undeniable.

At present there is a plethora of untested 'good ideas' projects failing to deliver any evidence of effectiveness or sustainability in the absence of a research effort aimed at producing findings more broadly generalisable across educational settings and able to capitalise upon flexible delivery. What this highlights is the near total absence of any serious quantitative research approach to understanding Australian Aboriginal education. By 'serious', we mean systematic, rigorous, powerful, and sustained research directed at developing measures, using them to test and evaluate educational programmes, specific methods, and interventions, and to chart policy progress in achieving educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. Where else will education systems develop the capacity to do this if not through the research effort? <sup>19</sup>

#### Action 15

A national research agenda into Aboriginal education outcomes should be developed that establishes a systematic, rigorous and sustained programme aimed at both charting progress in achieving improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and at developing and evaluating programmes and strategies that produce measurable improvements.

Good and abundant research is necessary, but not sufficient, to promote change. The translation of research into policy remains a significant challenge across a wide range of research and policy domains (see commentary box entitled *Translating research into policy and practice*). The WAACHS has been developed with the support and input from education systems over a period of several years. While it is hoped that this involvement will increase understanding and use of these findings, and deepen researchers' appreciation of the environment in which educational policy and practice occurs, there are nonetheless factors that threaten the uptake of these research findings into policy and practice. An appreciation of this has resulted in greater attention to communication and dissemination strategies associated with the WAACHS findings.

### TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO POLICY AND PRACTICE

The movement of research into policy has generally been dominated by the view that researchers and policy makers comprise two fundamentally different communities and that mechanisms that bridge these communities and create a cycle of knowledge development and exchange are needed to enable the uptake and translation of research.<sup>20,21</sup> This requires political will and leadership, structures for better communication and exchange, and individuals in both research and policy settings who are trained to bridge 'the two communities'.

While this sounds reasonable, the general lack of evidence that this regularly happens would suggest weaknesses in this line of thinking.<sup>22</sup> Lin notes several potential pitfalls in the assumptions underlying research-to-policy transfer and cites Peterson's call for substantive and situational social learning among players (e.g. researchers, interest groups, bureaucrats and politicians) suggesting that policy

*Continued . . .*



**TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO POLICY AND PRACTICE** *(continued)*

outcomes will depend on ‘mechanisms for policy and research governance’.<sup>23</sup> While undefined, these governance mechanisms will, of necessity, require cross-sectoral (e.g. agency/bureaucracy, government/non-government/private) engagement in the search for, and establishment of, similarities in their views of human health and human development.

Merely presenting new data and ‘facts’ is unlikely to produce much policy change. This is because the communication of ideas (rather than just ‘facts’ or data) is central to policy change. Lavis (1998) notes that ideas can be used to set new goals and determine new political strategies or alternately they can be used as rhetorical camouflage for existing goals and strategies.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the political environment that receives ideas may be one characterised either by learning or conflict-resolution. These orientations to ideas are not ‘fixed’ and they change over time and may vary from topic to topic or portfolio to portfolio.

Are there specific actions that researchers should take to improve the likelihood that findings will result in change? Reviews and studies of the effectiveness of research transfer generally indicate the following:

- ◆ research-to-policy translation occurs more effectively when findings are translated into clear messages associated with actions
- ◆ messages must be tailored to specific target audiences and fine-tuned to the decisions and environments in which decision-making is carried out
- ◆ the credibility of the messenger is likely to be an important factor in the success of translation to policy
- ◆ interactive engagement of the target audience is more effective, particularly where reciprocal feedback between the researcher(s) and the target audience occurs over several occasions rather than just once.<sup>25</sup>

**CONCLUSION**

These concluding comments are written from the perspective of the Aboriginal people within the Kulunga Research Network who have been involved in the planning and implementation of this survey and the maintenance of the cultural integrity of the process.

Our intention in becoming involved in the survey was to get the undeniable evidence on the current situation of our families and the needs of our children and young people so that we could not only inform our families of these facts but, equally, provide the Australian and State Governments with findings that would evoke a full recognition of these circumstances and supply an evidence-base for action.

The work published in each volume of the WAACHS findings is complex, comprehensive and based upon rigorous scientific research processes. We needed a state wide view that ensured that the diversity of our communities and their voices was captured and reflected in a way that allowed each of the stories to be told in its own right.



While at one level the findings appear to reflect what we knew or suspected, the richness of the data and their analyses has enabled a holistic appreciation of the full meaning of the findings. In communicating the results of each of the preceding volumes to our communities and other relevant stakeholders in regional forums, they have challenged us to provide solutions to the issues identified, or to at least offer some directions on what government or workers within agencies should do in light of the findings.

Our initial response in providing this direction is that we collectively are not able to make the sustainable gains in health, education and socioeconomic wellbeing, relative to our non-Aboriginal peers or at all, because fundamental issues are not being addressed through our current approaches which are linked to our common history and, with some sadness, could be the predictors of our common future. This is no longer solely an Aboriginal problem, if it ever was. It is, and always was, an Australian tragedy being played out in our time.

The normal response in these situations is to square off and drop into respective roles for the blame game. We acknowledge that we will need to work through the issues from our respective ends – but if the approach is not premised on improving the circumstances of Aboriginal children and young people then we, as the responsible adults (regardless of our representations), will follow a well worn path that arrives at a familiar cul-de-sac where we fail to achieve the objective. It will be somebody else's fault, or limited by the way of resources, capacities or simply through the lack of political will. We will all be held responsible for the outcomes that result from our action or inaction from the decisions that we make in the positions we now hold – just as our forbears left us a legacy, so will we, for our children and their children.

The next steps we take are not set in concrete. We all need to acknowledge that we will all make mistakes. The fear of doing this in the past has limited our ability to work together usually with the Aboriginal side hunting down non-Aboriginal people when they get the process wrong, and with the non-Aboriginal side reducing the size of the target to avoid being tagged. Equally, to merely read this as a call for better administration of government and community resources under a 'we'll do this for you- if you do that' approach (because one party has the power to coerce the other) misses the foundation and basis of Aboriginal culture in its business within other communities and with the broader society – the development of trusted power sharing relationships. It also simplifies, or ignores at its own peril, the legacy of previous policies designed to control Aboriginal families.

The findings of this volume and the recommendations contained within this final chapter leave all parties with no place to hide. To continue to neglect the circumstances that have contributed to this totally unacceptable state of affairs in the education of Aboriginal children will require a comprehensive review of the current approach. The findings of the WAACHS can and should provide the basis for an evidence-based approach for future directions.

In responding to requests from the participants at our WAACHS Regional Forums regarding the implications for action of the survey findings, we would say to them that to fail to act completely on the findings of this volume would be to continue to maintain Aboriginal people as second class citizens without the opportunity to reach our full potential and to make a contribution to better ourselves, our families and the broader society. There is no scope to endure another 30 years of similar educational outcomes. To continue on the same course, to ignore the evidence and recommendations, would be an abrogation of responsibility.



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