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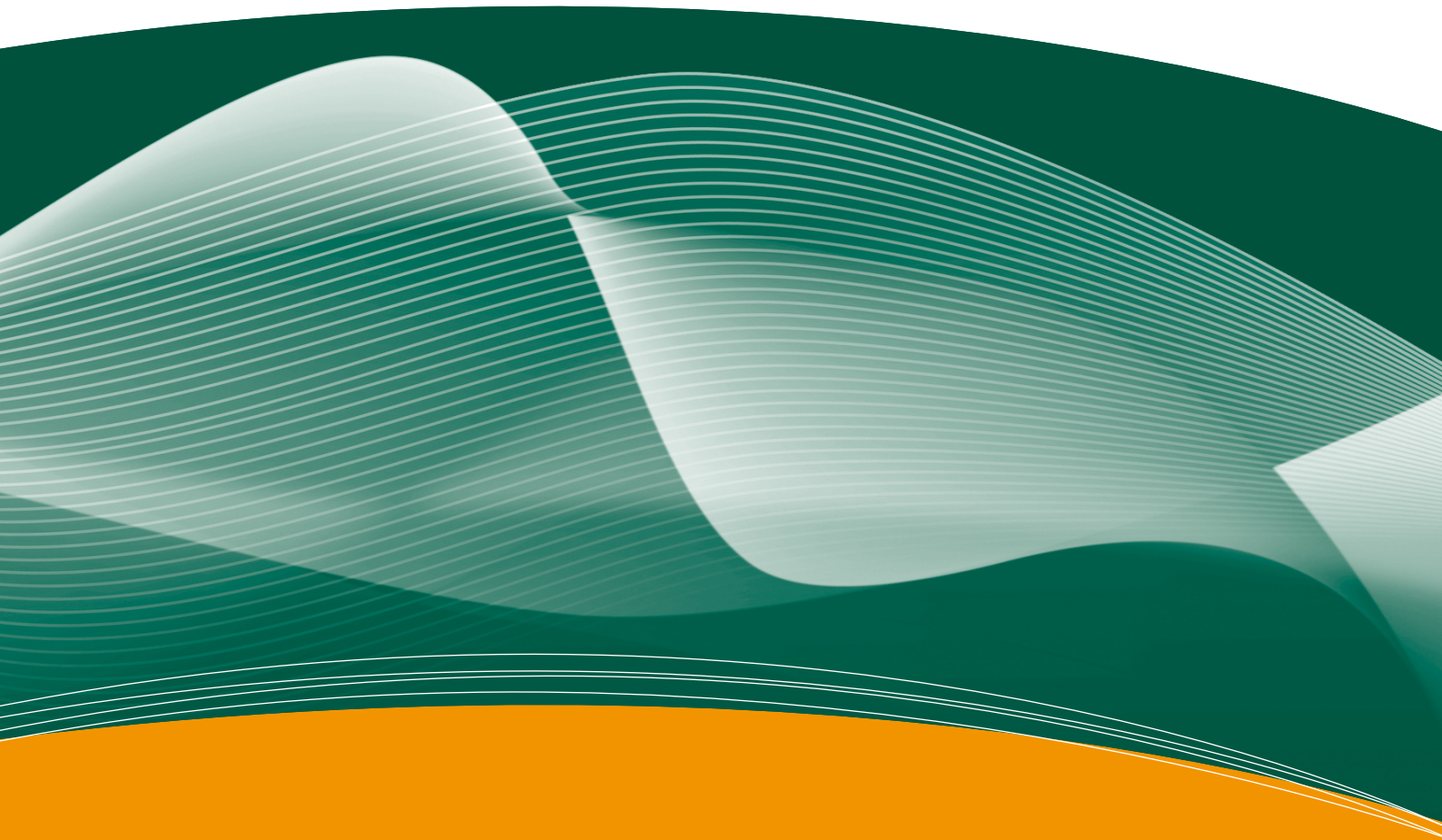
Indigenous Education 2010

Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes



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Indigenous Education 2010

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Helen Hughes, 'Strangers in Their Own Country: A Diary of Hope,' *Quadrant* 52:3 (March 2008)

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Executive Summary

The 2009 NAPLAN results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students again show high rates of failure to meet the national minimum standards. Failure rates of 40 to 50% are common in Indigenous schools and rise to more than 70% in the Northern Territory.

If schools are ranked by NAPLAN results, almost all the bottom 150 schools in such a notional list are Indigenous schools. There are few non-Indigenous schools in this bottom grouping and only a few Indigenous schools above this grouping. About 20,000 of Australia's 150,000 Indigenous students are enrolled in these Indigenous schools.

About 40,000 Indigenous students from welfare dependent communities attend mainstream schools. They have failure rates of more than 20% compared to non-Indigenous failure rates of less than 10%.

Some 90,000 Indigenous students attain national minimum standards. They are presumably the children of the more than 60% of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who are working, owning, buying, or commercially renting their houses and paying their taxes like other Australians. They show that Indigenous education failure is not ethnic in origin.

The causes of high Indigenous education failure rates are well understood. On the supply side, lower expectations of Indigenous students have resulted in inadequate school facilities (exemplified by 45 Northern Territory Homeland Learning Centres) separate Indigenous curriculums, short school hours, and a lack of school discipline. On the demand side, cargo cult welfare dependent cultures lead to low expectations and result in low attendance.

There are positive initiatives to report. Julia Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, has made a lasting contribution by introducing NAPLAN testing and making NAPLAN results for each school available to parents and voters, thus establishing an evidence base for policies. Ms Gillard is introducing a National Curriculum with improved literacy and numeracy teaching to all Australian schools in 2011. This could be a major win for Indigenous children if the phonics approach to literacy and rigorous mathematics teaching replace current teaching practices that have led to years of failure. The Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, has begun to tackle cargo cult welfare cultures by refining and extending income management policies that initially only applied to selected communities in the Northern Territory.

Cape York Partnerships are introducing new model academies on Cape York in Queensland. Several independent schools are delivering real education to Indigenous students, and more are planned.

Further essential education and welfare reforms include:

- Education departments should move away from the rhetoric of special programs and projects to put teachers in front of classes to teach the National Curriculum effectively. Principals should have greater autonomy to run disciplined, no excuses schools. Schools should have the same high expectations of all students.
- Effective adult literacy and numeracy classes are needed for young men and women who have left school without education. Welfare payments should be conditional on attendance in certified remedial literacy and numeracy courses in the 29 remote target townships, capital cities, and regional towns for all young men and women who cannot pass literacy and numeracy tests.
- Welfare should be reformed to cease encouraging cargo cult welfare dependence. Positive incentives should be used to encourage responsible behaviour.
- The 45 Homeland Learning Centres cannot remain as pretend schools. They are an anomaly that has no place in Australian education.

The forthcoming ministerial *Indigenous Education Action Plan* should include yearly targets to 2014 for schools, school regions, territories and states for reductions in the number of students failing to meet national minimum standards. By 2018, high Indigenous failure rates should be a distant memory.

Introduction

This is our third annual report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Unfortunately there has been no improvement in Indigenous student achievement. The 2009 NAPLAN (national literacy and numeracy tests) confirmed the 2008 results. More than 50% of Indigenous students* in remote Indigenous schools still failed to achieve national minimum standards in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. More than 20% of Indigenous students in mainstream schools also failed to achieve national minimum standards. For non-Indigenous students, failure rates averaged less than 10%.

These are not new results. Noel Pearson, Bernardine Denigan, and Jan Götesson in *The Most Important Reform* found:

> The Indigenous education achievement gap is a history of failure that has defied reform attempts for three decades now. There is a predictable cycle of public revelation and consternation about failure followed by a new policy review, a new policy framework and a new commitment. This Groundhog Day seems to occur every three to five years.[1]

Numerous studies and reports have documented poor Indigenous student literacy and numeracy rates since the 1990s. The most recent of these, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs' (MCEECDYA) Directions in Indigenous Education 2005 to 2008 had no significant improvements to report.[2] Peter Buckskin, the report's chief investigator, concluded that 'the overwhelming evidence is that much remains the same. The gaps are not closing at anywhere near the rates contemplated or required by government.'[3]

Territory, state and federal governments have endlessly stated their concerns about poor Indigenous education outcomes and introduced policies, strategies and programs to improve Indigenous literacy and numeracy. In his annual report to Parliament on Indigenous disadvantage in February 2010, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reiterated his government's commitment to 'halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievement for Indigenous children by 2018' and 'to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.'[4] The government's target has moved from 1997's 'fix all the problems by 2002' to today's 'fix half the problem by 2018.'

The government's target has moved from 1997's 'fix all the problems by 2002' to today's 'fix half the problem by 2018.'

The introduction of the NAPLAN annual literacy and numeracy tests and the My School website with its school-by-school results is a new element in Australian education. Julia Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister and Commonwealth Minister for Education, has implemented a bi-partisan effort that has exposed core literacy and numeracy performance to parental and public scrutiny. Literacy and numeracy are, of course, not identical with education. Schools contribute more than just literacy and numeracy. But with NAPLAN, Australia has a foundation for evidence-based policies for high quality education for all children.

At the time of the 2006 Census, there were 147,000 school-age Indigenous children, or about 4% of total 3,750,000 Australian school students from kindergarten through to Year 12. The majority of Indigenous students (86%) attended government schools with the remainder in non-government schools.**[5]

Chart 1 shows that in 2006, New South Wales had the highest number (46,000) of Indigenous students, then Queensland (42,000), Western Australia (19,000), and the Northern Territory (16,000).

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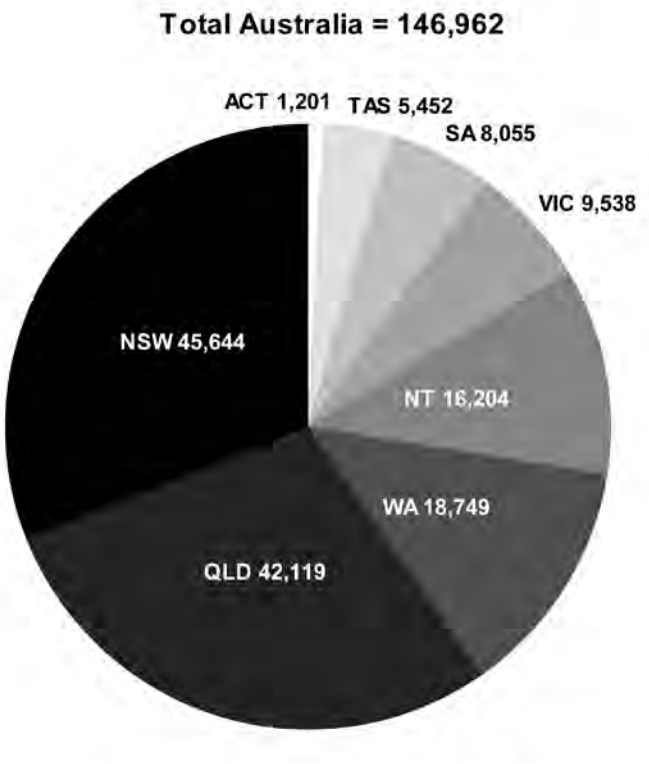
* In the interest of simplicity, the word Indigenous, despite its ambiguity, has been used in this paper for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Schools with 80% or more Indigenous students are referred to as Indigenous schools.

** Non-government schools include the Catholic education systems and a range of independent schools.

Chart 1: School-age Indigenous Australians by territory and state



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census.

This study marshals data to show that current policies are not working for a significant minority of Indigenous students. The first section reviews the 2009 NAPLAN results, discussing the implications for Indigenous primary and secondary schools and for Indigenous students attending mainstream schools. The second section analyses the principal supply and demand factors responsible for poor performance by Indigenous schools and Indigenous students. The third section summarises MCEECDYA's policies and programs, and examines new models of Indigenous schools being developed in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

The final section draws together the principal steps needed to make a substantial difference to Indigenous education by 2014, the target date set by MCEECDYA's draft Action Plan.

NAPLAN results

NAPLAN results are available for 2008 and 2009, covering Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. Individual student results are available to students, their parents, and their schools. Aggregate results for individual schools are publicly available on the My School website (www.myschool.edu.au).

Most Indigenous students live in capital cities and regional towns.

Overall, NAPLAN 2009 results showed improvement over 2008 results. States that had the best test results in 2008—New South Wales and Victoria—moved more of their students from minimum to above national minimum standards. States with lower results in 2008 moved more of their students from below the standard to achieving the national minimum standard. The second year of testing showed fewer inconsistencies and gaps in the data as schools became more familiar with the NAPLAN process. The Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, and particularly the Northern Territory increased their test participation rates.

The NAPLAN summary data are an extremely valuable source of information that will enable Australia to test and develop education policies to keep Australian education up with best international practices. More than 90% of Australian students are achieving national minimum standards in all tests and in all years, indicating a sound benchmark from which to proceed.

Included are 60% (90,000) of Indigenous students who achieved national minimum standards. The hypothesis in this paper is that these are overwhelmingly the children of the 60% of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who are working, owning, buying or commercially renting their houses, and paying their taxes like other Australians.[6] As in any emerging social group, a greater proportion of these Indigenous students lag at higher levels of achievement and retention to Year 12, but many who attended mainstream schools and met national minimum standards in Year 9 stayed on to qualify for further education. These Indigenous students were the principal sources of the more than 70,000 Indigenous students enrolled in vocational training, more than 1,500 in diploma courses, and some 10,000 in universities. There are already more than 25,000 Indigenous graduates.[7]

Overall, NAPLAN results show that student performance, particularly at higher levels of achievement, is greatly influenced by parents' levels of education and occupation.[8] In other words, for Australia as a whole, education systems do not transcend socio-economic backgrounds as they should, but allow them to influence student outcomes appreciably. From the socialist left to the market liberal right, there is agreement that schools should compensate for socio-economic background by providing education that gives all students equal opportunities. Socialists believe this should be achieved through government schools; liberals believe it should be achieved through school choice. NAPLAN shows that these objectives are not being achieved. Indigenous students are not the only ones for whom schooling must overcome socio-economic disadvantages if equality of opportunity is to be more than a slogan.

As 60% of Indigenous students pass NAPLAN, indigenousness is clearly not a determinant of performance.

NAPLAN results are also helpful in dismissing common excuses for poor education. A language background other than English need not condemn students to lower academic achievement. Victoria and New South Wales have the highest proportion of students with a Learning Background other than English (LBOTE), while achieving the highest NAPLAN results.[9] A review of school by school NAPLAN results also shows that school size is not a factor in academic performance. Nor is whether schools are government or non-government. As 60% of Indigenous students pass NAPLAN, indigenousness is clearly not a determinant of performance.

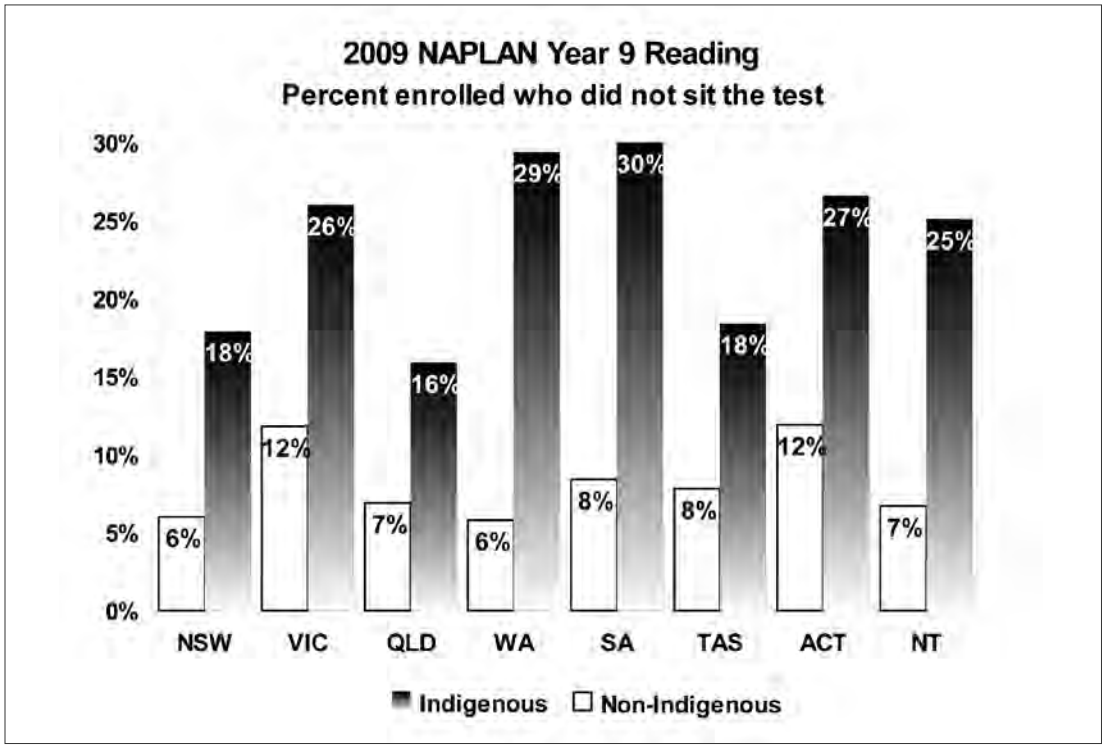
Indigenous NAPLAN exempt and absent / withdrawn

NAPLAN results are affected by the proportion of students who do not take the tests. These are:

- Exempt: 'Students with a language background other than English, who arrived from overseas less than a year before the tests, and students with significant intellectual disabilities may be exempted from testing.'[10] These students are deemed not to have met the national minimum standard. They are included in NAPLAN reports.
- Absent/Withdrawn: Students who are enrolled, not exempt, but did not sit the tests. They do not appear in the NAPLAN reports.

In this paper, we refer to these two groups as 'did not sit' or 'not sitting.' The proportion of students in these two categories is significantly higher for Indigenous than for non-Indigenous students. The 'not sitting' proportion rises from Year 3 to Year 9. Surprisingly, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory have very high 'not sitting' rates. The only significant change in participation between 2008 and 2009 was in the Northern Territory, which markedly increased the proportion of students sitting the tests in 2009. It is probable that most students not sitting would not meet the national minimum standard, and the NAPLAN results therefore understate Indigenous failure. Chart 2 highlights the problem.

Chart 2: NAPLAN Year 9 reading—not-sitting by state and territory



Source: NAPLAN 2009 Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy.

Indigenous failure rates

The 2009 NAPLAN results for Indigenous students were again appalling. Literacy and numeracy failure, while critical, is not the whole story. It signals a more general failure of education for substantial numbers of Indigenous children.

Forty percent of Indigenous students (60,000) failed to meet national minimum standards. This proportion mirrors the 40% of Indigenous families who are welfare dependent.[11] Every state and territory has a problem, in every year, in every subject. New South Wales, with failure rates of 20%, Queensland with 30%, and Western Australia with nearly 50% have the largest Indigenous student populations. The Northern Territory remains an outlier with failure rates significantly higher than any other state or territory.

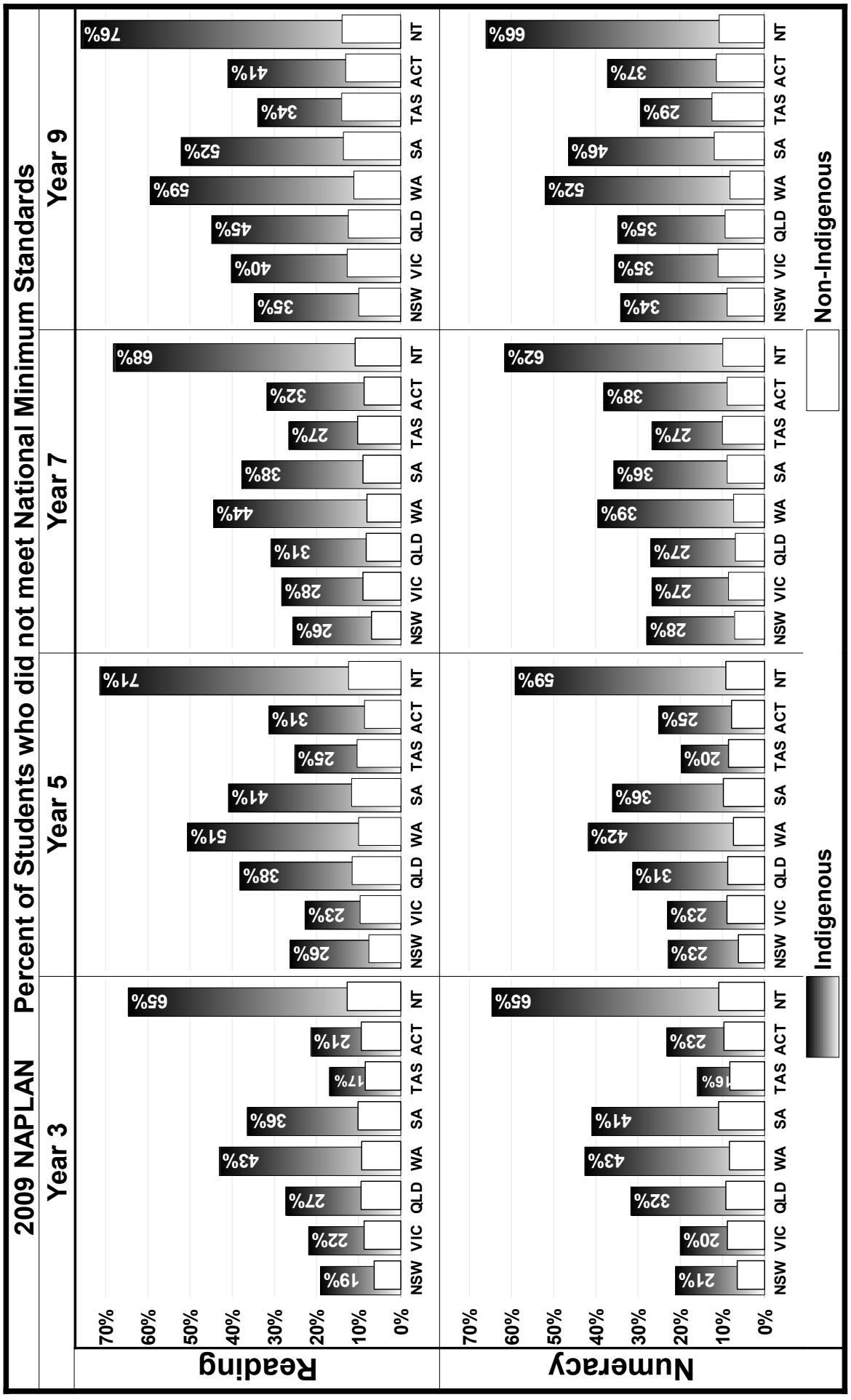
The race to the bottom—Indigenous schools

We argued in *Revisiting Indigenous Education* that the schools attended mainly by Indigenous children were the principal concentrations of Indigenous education failure. The My School data confirm that finding.

There are about 9,500 primary and secondary schools in Australia. Ranking these by NAPLAN results (excluding a few special schools catering for children with physical or severe emotional disabilities), we take the bottom ranked 100 primary schools and the bottom ranked 100 secondary schools to create a notional list of about 150 schools (many are both primary and secondary schools). Almost all of these 'bottom of the table' schools are Indigenous schools attended only, or almost only, by Indigenous students. These schools have about 20,000 Indigenous students—15% of Australia's total. The list of non-performing schools only includes a handful of schools with few or no Indigenous students.

If a list of the bottom Indigenous schools were published, parents would not be surprised at the results. Dissatisfaction has been running deeply in Indigenous communities for years because parents know that their children are not learning to read, write or count, let alone acquiring general knowledge. Studies have shown that in some Indigenous schools, the average student was falling around nine months behind in literacy for every year of primary school.[12] It is well known

Chart 3: NAPLAN reading and numeracy failure rates by state and territory



Source: *NAPLAN 2009 Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy.*

in remote communities that academically gifted primary school graduates who win scholarships to mainstream boarding schools need two years or more remedial teaching to catch up with normal classes.[13] NAPLAN data confirm the communities' fears.

Only a handful of Indigenous schools are performing to minimum national standards, that is, they are not on the list of Australia's worst performing schools. Exceptional principals supported by dedicated teachers have been able to improve the performance of a few Indigenous schools. These staff claim that the only way they achieve acceptable results is by ignoring education department directives.[14] For example, they use texts and teaching methods not supported by their departments. They establish discipline, focus on classroom teaching, and attract high attendance. When such principals and teachers leave the school, results quickly deteriorate.

Table 1 shows average NAPLAN reading and numeracy results for five Indigenous schools—each on a notional list of 'bottom 50 schools' in Australia—compared with an average from five non-Indigenous schools in middle income suburbs in capital cities. The average NAPLAN scores reveal that for these schools, the Indigenous students in Year 9 are achieving similar levels to non-indigenous students in Year 3—the Indigenous students' performance trails by six years. Indigenous parents do not want to compare their children's performance to that of students from other disadvantaged backgrounds. Such comparisons lead to reinforcing low expectations and poor performance. Parents want to know how their students compare, at least to those from middle-income suburbs. The My School website should facilitate such comparisons.

Table 1: Average NAPLAN results from five Indigenous schools and five non-Indigenous government schools from middle income suburbs.[15]

2009 NAPLAN		Average score		Percent of students achieving minimum standard	
		Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
Year 3	Reading	234	461	37	98
	Numeracy	250	436	36	98
Year 5	Reading	327	541	16	98
	Numeracy	361	531	36	99
Year 7	Reading	402	560	28	96
	Numeracy	411	575	32	98
Year 9	Reading	442	590	16	95
	Numeracy	465	606	41	99

Source: My School Website.

Remoteness is not responsible for low school achievement. The following schools in northern Australia are classed as 'very remote.' Within 14 kilometres of each other, they are one example of many such 'pairs' of schools. Their average NAPLAN scores show that students in the Indigenous school are four years behind their counterparts in the non-Indigenous primary and high school.

Table 2: NAPLAN results for government schools in the same very remote location: an Indigenous school (100% Indigenous students) and predominantly non-Indigenous primary and high school (between 10% and 20% Indigenous students)[16]

2009 NAPLAN		Average score		Percent of students achieving minimum standard	
		Indigenous school	Non-Indigenous school	Indigenous school	Non-Indigenous school
Year 3	Reading	263	364	43	90
	Numeracy	299	368	69	94
Year 5	Reading	325	476	6	87
	Numeracy	393	484	82	96
Year 7	Reading	428	519	33	92
	Numeracy	413	524	33	94
Year 9	Reading	453	587	29	98
	Numeracy	458	578	14	100

Source: My School Website.

Principals in government schools are expected to deliver performance without being given the authority to make changes. Responsibility for school performance therefore remains with education departments and other providers. Clusters of schools at the bottom of the achievement list indicate where government education departments and other providers have failed. In the past, it was only possible to describe failing schools. The NAPLAN results provide quantitative data that show that children have been leaving school unable to read, write or count and believing that education and work are not for them. These schools are the nurseries of a lifetime of welfare dependence.

Indigenous students' failure in mainstream schools

The problems of Indigenous students from welfare dependent families who attend mainstream schools have been neglected. Some of these schools have mainly Indigenous students, while in others they are a minority.

Bi-partisan support for the extension of income management to all Australian welfare recipients is at last beginning to recognise that welfare dependence creates serious social problems for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. In New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia, these welfare dependent Indigenous populations in capital cities and regional towns are large. NAPLAN failure rates shown in Chart 3 combine those from working families with those from welfare dependent families. It is probable that better results from working Indigenous families offset poorer results from welfare dependent families, and that the failure rate of Indigenous students from welfare families is much higher than shown on Chart 3.

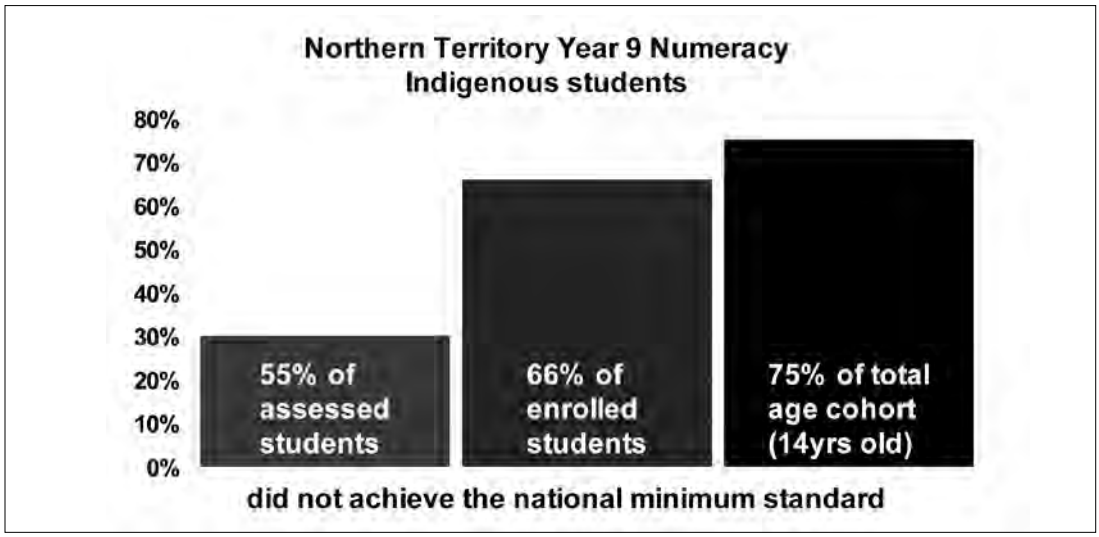
In mainstream schools, the facilities, administration, and teaching are generally the same for all students. Indigenous families may have additional handicaps deriving from their entrenched dependency on welfare. It also seems that lower expectations (discussed below) are an important factor in low Indigenous achievement in mainstream schools.

The poor performance of Indigenous students in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory stands out because they have small numbers of Indigenous students and no very remote areas.

The illusion of secondary schools

My School data are a valuable source of information about Indigenous secondary education. Results often peak in the Year 5 tests, then do not improve or even decline through Years 7 and 9. Students below the standard in Year 5 have virtually no chance of catching up to meet the standards in later years. Chart 3 understates secondary failure because in later years, the number of students enrolled decreases, as does the number of enrolled students who sit the tests. Chart 4 shows the effect on the failure rates in Year 9 (14-year-olds) when data are adjusted for those enrolled but not sitting, and for those not even enrolled.

Chart 4: Northern Territory NAPLAN failure rates adjusted for attendance and enrolment[17]



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census and My School website.

Parents know that remote Indigenous secondary schools do not match mainstream secondary schools. Tiwi College and Woolaning Homeland Christian College were born of community concerns that their children were not being educated. These secondary schools accept students from failing primary schools in dysfunctional communities. Their NAPLAN results are poor because children often start secondary school in Year 7 in January not knowing the alphabet or times tables, then sit NAPLAN tests in May. These schools deliver a number of educational streams, primary curriculums for some students and secondary curriculums to others. Some of their students manage to catch up and receive real certificates of education at the end of Year 12.

Parents know that remote Indigenous secondary schools do not match mainstream secondary schools.

Other Indigenous secondary schools also have to run remedial primary courses in Years 7 and 8 and deliver multiple educational streams. Most of these students do not catch up to mainstream standards. Subjects such as physics, chemistry and history are dumbed down or replaced with 'soft' cultural studies.[18] Some students 'graduate' at the end of Year 12 with secondary certificates of education even though they are still barely literate and numerate. Special Year 12 prizes have been created for Indigenous students to compensate for their inability to compete in physics, chemistry and history. Low expectations of Indigenous students' performance are entrenched. Nicholas Rothwell reports:

> One recent star graduate of a Top End remote community secondary school moved this year to Darwin and was perturbed to find that she was, by the standards of mainstream Australia, still functionally illiterate and innumerate. She spent four months in the city fruitlessly looking for work, without income, before being placed on the treadmill of Centrelink. Her story could be repeated 100 times. Each of those tales is a new tragedy of lost opportunities and squandered gifts. Each one reflects the strange truth that today's remote community young adults are far less educated and confident than their mission-schooled grandparents.[19]

Indigenous students attending mainstream secondary schools have a better chance of more rigorous secondary education, but most still only complete secondary certificates of education. Western Australia reported honestly in 2008 that of 585 Aboriginal students in Year 12, fewer than half—227—met the requirements for a Year 12 certificate. Only 16 received a Tertiary Entrance Rank high enough for entry to a university.[20] Other states and territories avoid publishing such data. Recording the extent of the problem is the first step toward fixing it.

Education departments and MCEECDYA publish incomplete and even misleading data on senior achievements. MCEECDYA estimated on the basis of the 2006 Census that 47% of

Indigenous students continued their schooling from Years 7 and 8 through to Year 12 (compared with 76% of non-Indigenous students).[21] MCEECDYA figures show increasing numbers completing Year 12, but although these students may be attending school through Year 12, they are not completing a normal Year 12 academic curriculum.

Djarragun College near Cairns stands out in delivering real secondary education. Tiwi College and Woolaning Homeland Christian College are both trying to deliver real secondary education. Marrara Christian College in Darwin boards Indigenous students from remote communities in Family Group Homes. Other students from remote communities accessing real secondary education are scholarship students in mainstream boarding schools. The largest group of Indigenous students receiving real secondary education are those from working families attending mainstream secondary schools in cities and regional towns.

The young adults who missed out

Substantial numbers of young Indigenous men and women completely lack literacy and numeracy. Some of these were enrolled in Indigenous schools but others failed to take advantage of mainstream schooling. They are not only evident in gangs in the larger northern Indigenous townships but also in Adelaide, Murray Bridge, Port Augusta, and other cities and towns throughout Australia. There are an estimated 10,000 illiterate and non-numerate young adults in the Northern Territory alone.[22] They need remedial education if they are to get jobs. Fifteen, sixteen and seventeen year-olds and young adults cannot sit in classrooms with six- to eight-year-olds whose literacy and numeracy they match. Capital cities, regional towns, and the 29 Indigenous townships targeted for development have the economies of scale to deliver courses that will meet these young adults' needs. In these locations, welfare payments should be conditional on attendance in certified remedial literacy and numeracy courses. Remedial education is much harder to organise in remote outstations. There is little evidence of illiterate 15- to 35-year-olds currently gaining literacy and numeracy. Existing remedial programs have failed.[23]

There are 10,000 illiterate and non-numerate young adults in the Northern Territory alone.

The causes of failure

Education departments employ a litany of excuses to justify their failure to deliver Indigenous education. They claim that Indigenous population growth is high; Indigenous students are dispersed in many small communities; a high proportion of Indigenous students do not speak English; and Indigenous students come from 'Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage' backgrounds.[24] Family dysfunction is another excuse. Just below the surface still lurks the excuse of students' ethnicity as the real cause of failure. If all else fails to vindicate the providers of inadequate education, they fall back on parental failure to prepare children for school, to send them to school, and even to read to them before putting them to bed.

NAPLAN results show that small size, remoteness, and non-English speaking background are not the causes of educational failure. The cargo cult cultures of welfare dependent communities are a factor (discussed below) but they cannot be accepted as excuses. Difficulties facing education providers must certainly be identified, but educational policies must transcend and overcome barriers rather than hide behind them. The greater the challenges, the harder must the education providers work to ensure that children have equal educational opportunities. In a democratic society, offsetting family, socio-economic and other disadvantages is a major responsibility of education providers.

Australian education providers are not alone in clutching at excuses for poor educational outcomes. Cultures of excuses are world wide.. Australians, however, have been left behind in creating first-class national education systems by countries such as Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, whose no-excuses education policies indicate the seriousness with which authorities approach school reform.[25]

An endless stream of Indigenous education studies and reports have been published during the past decade.[26] Despite being dominated by bureaucratic concerns, these reports have identified the principal supply and demand reasons for the failure of Indigenous education. On the supply

side, the structure of education departments is itself a problem. Other supply side causes of failure include inadequate buildings and equipment, special curriculums, a shortage of teachers in front of classes, poorly managed and disorderly schools, and inadequate school hours. These problems are mainly evident in Indigenous schools. The principal barriers on the demand side are low expectations and chronically low attendance. These are evident in both Indigenous and mainstream schools.

Education department responsibilities

Territory and state departments of education have three functions. They develop policies, operate government primary and secondary schools and vocational education, and regulate education systems, including non-government education providers. Most states recognise these separate and sometimes conflicting functions. They have independent statutory bodies that accredit and regulate non-government schools. The Northern Territory has not yet established an independent entity to carry out this role. This is leading to long delays and inconsistent decisions on approving non-government schools for Indigenous communities.

The NT Government has not budgeted to convert the Homeland Learning Centres into schools.

Operating government schools is a formidable task. Non-government schools have long been a feature of the Australian education system, and school choice is becoming more important to the parents, even in small Indigenous communities.

Unequal school facilities

Most Australian schools, even small primary schools, are up to international standards. Some outstanding government and non-government schools set very high benchmarks for buildings, play grounds, and other facilities. Territory and state governments' construction programs generally improve school facilities over time, with the Commonwealth providing additional funding.

Some remote Indigenous schools, and in particular the 45 Homeland Learning Centres in the Northern Territory are exceptions. John Greatorex, coordinator of Yolgnu studies at Charles Darwin University and former teacher in Homeland Learning Centres in Arnhem Land, has noted that small remote non-Indigenous schools 'have computers, Internet access, distance learning, teacher accommodation, resourcing, all the things that you find in normal schools, but that doesn't happen in black communities.'[27]

Several Homeland Learning Centre communities have been agitating for new school buildings and permanent, qualified teachers since the beginning of the 2000s. The NT 2008–09 Budget allocated $2 million to convert two Homeland Learning Centres into schools. These sums indicate how much had to be spent before they became schools. Forty five Homeland Learning Centres remain. Many were built without electricity, water or ablution facilities and some remain unlined, corrugated iron sheds. Qualified teachers fly or drive to Homeland Learning Centres for a part of the week. Although the NT Department of Education is improving some Centres, and some have sufficient student numbers to entitle them to become schools under NT Department of Education rules, the NT Government has not budgeted to convert the Homeland Learning Centres into schools.

'Traditional cultural knowledge' is the principal qualification of Indigenous Assistant Teachers who take classes in Homeland Learning Centres most of the time. Many could not pass NAPLAN literacy or numeracy tests.[28] Many Assistant Teachers were employed for years on CDEP funding. Many have not been receiving the full travel and other payments to which they were entitled. The Commonwealth has funded transfers to NT Department of Education payrolls for some, but this process is difficult despite the federal funding. Twenty (of 299) Assistant Teachers have started a Diploma of Education Support qualification.[29] Twelve coaches have been placed in remote NT schools to support Assistant Teachers' studies.[30] Some training is also being developed by the NT Catholic Education Office. None of these courses will qualify Assistant Teachers to be registered to teach in mainstream schools. Even unqualified positions as teachers' aides are out of the reach of many Assistant Teachers because of their inadequate literacy and numeracy.

Children can learn to read, write and count without modern facilities. In the nineteenth century, school buildings were basic and the Bible was often the only text. In many developing countries, children are learning under trees. But Homeland Learning Centres are in Australia, and Australian children attend them. Yet the NT Department of Education's program of 'transforming Indigenous education' proposes to continue to operate Homeland Learning Centres indefinitely. It aims to:

- 'increase the delivery of teaching services up to five or six hours per day in a virtual or face to face context to each site
- through a combination of solar and wind power, provide an 'always on' network
- enable local voice and video calls to the community free of charge
- train local staff and/or senior students to install, build and maintain the network
- provide increased choice of subjects
- enable professional training of Indigenous teachers.'[31]

Even if Assistant Teachers and 'senior students' were able to install and maintain 'meshed networks' with interactive screens, 'up to five or six hours' of virtual education cannot deliver basic literacy and numeracy in English to primary school children. Such technology is useful in providing distance education to literate students supported by literate parents. It is unrealistic to expect that a mixed class of six- to 14-year-old non-English speakers could learn to read, write and count with only the support of an untrained Assistant Teacher and a talking head on a screen.

Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments have long conceded that Homeland Learning Centres are not schools. Parents of children enrolled in Homeland Learning Centres are entitled to Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Children payments of $3,463 per child per year. These payments only go to parents who do not have a local school—confirming that Homeland Learning Centres are only pretend schools. Unlike the Assistance for Isolated Children payments that enable parents to send children to boarding schools, or pay for other distance educational expenses, for Homeland Learning Centre parents the scheme appears to be a bribe for accepting pretend schools.

The appallingly low educational outcomes of Homeland Learning Centres have been known for years. The NAPLAN tests merely confirm that these Centres have no place in Australia. The newly created NT Director of Homelands Education and Service is well positioned to implement the Homeland Learning Centres' demise. Several communities have decided, after years of fruitless attempts to get real education for their children, to change to independent schools. Others are likely to follow. Some Homeland Learning Centres could be consolidated so that children could be bussed to central schools as they are elsewhere in Australia. Other solutions include boarding children weekly or during term time and parents moving to larger population centres during school terms. Assistance for Isolated Children allowances could then be properly used. By 2014 at the latest, there should be no Homeland Learning Centre left in Australia.

By 2014 there should be no Homeland Learning Centre left in Australia.

The Northern Territory has benefited from the Commonwealth Government's funding for 200 teachers by 2011, half of whom are already in place. It is not clear, however, whether these positions have instead enabled the NT Department of Education to appoint supernumeraries and consultants for its special programs.

The governments of Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia should ensure that their construction and maintenance programs support schools that need facilities rather than those that are the most effective claimants. Breaking up construction, equipment and maintenance expenditures into 'closing the gap,' 'closing the gap initiative to construct new schools,' and 'closing the gap to upgrade schools' programs has fragmented funding and increased bureaucratic loads on education departments and schools at the cost of efficiency and effectiveness. It has been argued that Indigenous schools in the Northern Territory have consequently not received a fair share of the additional Commonwealth funds released in 2009 and 2010.[32]

Separate curriculums

Most Indigenous children in remote communities and many in other welfare dependent communities do not attend pre-schools (variously called pre-school, kindergarten, or pre-prep in different states and territories). The importance of early schooling, particularly for children from non-English speaking and low socio-economic backgrounds, is reflected in the rhetoric of every territory, state and federal government education publication. The range of government, community and private early childhood facilities is expanding, but remote areas are the least well served. In Western Australia, 28 Aboriginal kindergartens and 42 remote community schools run programs to assist Aboriginal children to transition from home to school.[33] The Northern Territory has introduced mobile pre-school services that visit several remote communities each week. These clearly cannot provide the full-time pre-school education necessary to prepare non-English speaking children for the first year of school (termed variously kindergarten, prep, transition, or reception in different states and territories). The Commonwealth government has promised to expand early childhood facilities to 12 to 15 hours a week for 40 weeks per year throughout Australia by 2013.[34] The pre-school program will have to be accelerated markedly if it is to achieve this objective, let alone provide full-time pre-school education for all Indigenous children by 2013.

Dumbed down Indigenous curriculums and ineffective teaching bear substantial responsibility for low NAPLAN results in Indigenous schools. Pearson, Denigan and Götesson discuss the reasons why 'culturally' and 'socially' appropriate curriculums have been particularly damaging to Indigenous students by depriving them of the basic learning necessary to working and living in the modern world.[35] Many Indigenous communities, observing how handicapped they were by their declining ability to communicate in English, led the movement away from teaching children only in Indigenous languages in the earlier years. They want early schooling to be in English so that their children can communicate in the modern world. Parents are willing to take responsibility for teaching their languages and culture at home so they can concentrate on English at school. Research shows that the younger children are when they begin new languages, the more quickly they learn them. Research also shows that children easily learn to speak several languages simultaneously.[36]

Indigenous students, like other students from low socio-economic backgrounds, have suffered particularly from post-modern educational philosophies that placed a low value on classroom discipline, rejected maths drills, and opted for the 'whole word' approach to literacy. Professor Kevin Wheldall argues that in a normal cohort of students, the top 25% will learn to read no matter how they are taught; the middle 50% will learn to read by any competently taught teaching method; while the bottom 25% of students will not learn to read without a well taught phonics approach. This bottom quartile will include children who have innate or acquired learning difficulties and are from low literacy, low socio-economic, and non-English speaking backgrounds. A phonetics approach which works for the bottom quartile will also work for the main 75% of students provided that more able students can proceed at their relevant learning levels.[37] For Indigenous language and 'Aboriginal English' speakers, English is not decipherable without phonetics. Some teachers, becoming aware that children could not learn to read with 'whole word' instruction, taught children using phonetics. They had to hide their teaching materials when education department inspectors came around.[38] The failure to teach mathematics rigorously is reflected in instructions issued to teach only 2x, 5x and 10x tables to Indigenous secondary classes. Limited curriculums that did not lead to progress from week to week and year to year contributed to children's boredom with school. They explain why so many Indigenous children left remote schools unable to read, write or count.[39]

Indigenous students particularly have suffered from post-modern educational philosophies.

Multilit is used widely for remedial literacy for non-Indigenous children. A pilot project was successfully introduced for Indigenous students in Coen in 2005–06. [40] The Exodus Foundation Tutorial Centre in Redfern includes Indigenous students in its *Multilit* classes. It famously tells the story of the 12-year-old Aboriginal boy who had been failing every year in every subject. On his first day back at school after a *Multilit* literacy course, the class took a maths test in which the boy came first. His teacher asked how was this possible. 'Simple,' said the boy. 'I could read the

questions.' The Exodus Foundation finished its first 18 months of intensive courses in Darwin in October 2009. It plans to open four Indigenous Literacy Tutorial Centres in Darwin.[41] These *Multilit* courses are compensating for education department failures for which taxpayers have already paid.

The proposed national curriculum to be introduced nationwide in 2011 may still require clarification and discussion but, despite shortcomings, will be enormously valuable for Indigenous students if it puts an end to separate, damaging Indigenous curriculums and ineffective teaching methods. The draft national curriculum stipulates that sound-letter combinations be taught in reading from the first years of school. New South Wales was the first state to release literacy teaching guidelines that instructed teachers to teach children the sounds of letters and how to blend and manipulate sounds to form words in September 2009.[42] Similarly, Western Australia has introduced an ESL program for Indigenous language speaking students in the Indigenous schools of Kimberley, Pilbara, Mid West, and Goldfields. Other education departments are still wedded to post-modern philosophies. As recently as February 2010, Queensland was ridiculed for spending federal funds for remedial literacy on sending children who couldn't read to a summer camp 'to catch bugs' to improve their self-confidence rather than actually teaching them to read.[43]

NSW was the first state to reintroduce teaching guidelines that instructed teachers to teach children sounds of letters and to blend and manipulate sounds to form words.

Immigrant children have been the most fortunate in Australia because they have the benefit of ESL classes with phonetics and grammar. Little wonder that many migrant children perform better than English speakers on NAPLAN tests. That a return to grammar in the classrooms is needed was demonstrated by the Queensland English Teachers' Association release of a *Grammar at the Coalface Guide*, which contained 65 grammatical errors.[44] The new National Curriculum will only be effective if 'whole word reading' and the texts developed for it are abandoned. The National Curriculum must not be dumbed down for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It should no longer be possible to restrict Indigenous students to 2x, 5x and 10x tables!

In the past, Indigenous schools often spent much of their time exploring Indigenous cultural issues in their locality at the expense of the mainstream curriculum. Students in mainstream schools complained of endlessly repetitive, naïve Indigenous studies. In the new National Curriculum, all Australian children have to learn about Indigenous history and culture systematically in the context of global history, but all Australian children, including Indigenous children, are also to be exposed to the humanities and science subjects for a grounding in general knowledge.

NAPLAN results demonstrate the role of school principals in setting a school's tone so that teachers can teach and students can learn. Once discipline is lost, Indigenous schools experience high teacher and principal turnover. Teachers and principals 'burn out' when schools have discipline and attendance problems. Principals' inability to 'hire and fire' and consequent difficulties in enforcing high standards contribute to high staff turnover. Three weeks after the beginning of the 2009 school year, NT schools were still missing 20 permanent principals.[45] Teachers claim education departments do not encourage innovation and initiative. Dr. Chris Sarra and Professor James Ladwig found the NT Department of Education struggling with two dilemmas: structural incoherence and a lack of focus on the quality of performance and results.[46] All education departments appear to suffer from severe bureaucratic sclerosis, but the NT Department at least had the courage to invite two outsiders to undertake a structural review. Many teachers who want to teach in northern Australia complain that they cannot get jobs. In comparison, independent schools that are flexible and give principals authority have positive staffing experiences.

Silver bullets

A lack of focus on classroom teaching has been critical in failing schools. Education departments have sought to avoid fundamental reforms by inventing 'silver bullet' programs. Supernumeraries have been hired to implement these programs and to report on them.

Western Australia's *Aboriginal Literacy Strategy* operates in 52 schools in the four remote education districts of Kimberley, Pilbara, Mid West, and Goldfields. It is well positioned to change to the National Curriculum's sound-letter combinations method of teaching reading.[47]

A lack of focus on classroom teaching has been critical in failing schools.

South Australia introduced an *Indigenous Student Support System* with district offices that employ Aboriginal Community Engagement Officers to improve school attendance.[48]

New South Wales delivered accelerated literacy pedagogy training to 700 consultants and teachers to improve Indigenous literacy, and 66 teachers across three regions were trained in the *Reading to Learn Program*. Workshops were conducted in the New England region to develop numeracy plans and support the Count Me in Too Indigenous initiative with 160 teachers, Aboriginal support staff, and community members. Parent workshops were also conducted at Moree East Public School, Toomelah Public School, and Boggabilla Central School. For 24 schools, $1,000 programs were provided for *Aboriginal Early Language Development* in early years of schooling. Additional Indigenous programs were *Two Ways Together Packages* of *Kids Excel* and *Youth Excel*.[49]

In 2008–09, Queensland was in the second year of a $10 million *Indigenous Education Support Structures* pilot program. This program gave Indigenous students direct literacy, numeracy and other learning support and provided in-class professional development to help teachers more effectively engage with Indigenous learners. Ten professional support teachers coached and mentored classroom teachers in Mt. Isa, Cairns, Charleville, Cunnamulla, Rockhampton, and Ipswich. The department reported: 'Feedback from cluster sites indicates that they are satisfied with their progress and are using key learnings from 2008 to inform the way they support Indigenous students in 2009.'[50]

The most recent NT Families as First Teachers program allocated $11.7 million 'to help deliver improved education outcomes for remote Indigenous students.' Learning with Family materials include 'a handbook, posters, pamphlets and CDs' distributed to health clinics, child care centres, preschools, and women's centres in 73 remote communities. Additional materials are to be developed later in 2010 'to build the foundations of literacy and numeracy.'[51] Unfortunately, the parents involved cannot read or write. The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, which developed these materials, does not have a strong record in teaching literacy and numeracy.[52]

Most of these programs supported ineffective teaching methods. They displaced classroom teaching. Each of the programs has some impact because of the spurt of additional attention paid to students. The Prime Minister's *Closing the Gap* reported that the *Quick-smart—Improving Numeracy* project showed that Indigenous students improved 'in both speed and accuracy.'[53] The 2007 *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* included in its 'things that work' the *Yachad Accelerated Literacy Project* (initially designed for Ethiopian children learning Hebrew) because 'the program stakeholder's report includes anecdotal evidence of the positive outcomes of the program.' The NT's *Scaffolding Literacy Program* was included in 'things that work' because five years after it was introduced at Kulkarriya Community School on Noonkanbah Station in the Kimberley, the numbers of non-reading students dropped from 25 to 19. Charles Darwin University found that the 2006 average progress rate for the NT *Accelerated Literacy Program* students was 1.74 reading year levels per year. On average, one reading level per year increase is expected of students without the benefit of additional assistance. *Scaffolding Literacy* and *Accelerated Literacy* morphed into the *National Accelerated Literacy Program* in 70 schools by 2009. *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* again included this program as having worked, although Charles Darwin University found that 'the 2007 average progress rate … was 1.18 reading year levels per year'—again compared with the average one reading level per year improvement expected of all students. The Productivity Commission, which acts as the secretariat for the Steering Committee that authors *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, the biennial evaluation of Indigenous progress, appears to consider this

a significant outcome. As both *Scaffolding* and *Accelerated Literacy* are based on the 'whole word' reading method rejected by the new National Curriculum, an initial spurt followed by negligible outcomes is not surprising. The Productivity Commission also included Tasmania's *Finding Your Pathway into School and Beyond* program. This program was introduced at Port Dalrymple and South George Town primary schools in Tasmania in 2007 'to improve Aboriginal students' literacy.' The Commission reported that the program assisted 55 Aboriginal students, raising their attendance to 95%.[54] The Productivity Commission's 'things that work' do not seem to meet their own criteria of 'measurable outcomes.'[55] Overall, these programs have not raised Indigenous literacy and numeracy to non-Indigenous levels.

Short hours

Despite it being long established that students lagging academically require longer school hours, remote Indigenous schools have shorter hours than mainstream schools.

Homeland Learning Centres have the shortest school year. Classes start a week late each term to enable Assistant Teachers to travel to hubs for instruction and often end a week early to fill out attendance and other records. In a four-term year, this accounts for up to eight out of 40 weeks of school time. Remote schools in New South Wales and Queensland also have a shorter school year. Indigenous schools may not open on days when welfare cheques are cashed.[56]

Remote Indigenous schools have shorter hours than mainstream schools.

Homeland Learning Centres are often only open when a qualified teacher appears for half a day or so. On other days, they are likely to start late and finish by lunch time. Children may not even return after they go home for a morning snack.

Many cultural and sporting festivals are held during term time. The Commonwealth generously funded a *Community Festivals for Education Engagement* program in 2007 (seven festivals), 2008 (15 festivals), and 2009 (13 festivals). This Engagement took students out of school for two to nine days to learn that 'it's fun to be at school every day.' The Productivity Commission felt so strongly that these festivals encouraged 'students to attend school and lead healthy lifestyles' by participating 'in concerts and cultural activities' that without a shred of evidence, it included them twice in its 2009 *Indigenous Disadvantage Report* as 'things that work.'[57] In marked contrast, progressive Indigenous communities are adamant that assaults on their children's education disguised as 'Indigenous culture' must cease. The issue is not the holding of cultural festivals, as some festival organisers claim, but that they should be held during vacations and long weekends rather than during term time.

The Central Desert Shire, because of the high proportions of Aborigines in the schools in its jurisdiction, decided that 'Sponsorship, shire-managed sporting facilities and in-kind support from shire employees, such as sports and recreation officers, will only be available for events that take place over a long weekend or outside the school term.' The Shire argues, 'Today, many school children in the shire, our future leaders and workers, miss out on school time for weeks at a time because sports carnivals are held during school term.' The Shire President, Norbert Patrick, said: 'In a region where school attendance and education outcomes are the worst in Australia this is wholly unacceptable. We are now calling on other organisations which support sports and cultural festivals, for example royalty associations and government sponsors, to follow our lead.' The Central Desert Shire Council CEO, Rowan Foley, added: 'Our future managers and workers are missing out on the education they need in order to take over from non-Aboriginal staff. At the same time, there is a lack of organised activities for school children during the school holidays. Moving sports carnivals into the school holiday period will help to solve both problems.' Mr Foley urged that royalty meetings, which have a similar effect, should also be held during public holidays and school holidays. The Yuendumu community immediately decided to hold its sport carnival over a long weekend.[58]

The first Year 12 graduates from a remote NT school were in 2003 from Kalkaringi.[59] In 2005, they were followed by graduates who achieved TER scores. This was only possible because both students and staff committed extra time to their studies. Each of the students studied at school until 6pm each school night, spent Saturday at school from 10 am to 4 pm, and often spent

Sundays at school from after lunch until just before tea. In 2005, students remained at school for the main four-week block of holidays to participate in tutorials for each Year 12 subject, delivered by George and Robyn Hewitson.

Expectations

Lower expectations for Indigenous education are a principal cause of persistent educational failure. Lower expectations by education departments allow sub-standard schools to remain. Lower expectations by principals and teachers allow poor discipline, poor attendance, and poor results. Lower expectations by parents and students allow low attendance, contributing to lower results. Lower expectations by students allow them to accept that education is for others.

Education departments and school staff

Education departments' low expectations are evident in sub-standard school facilities (notably Homeland Learning Centres), dumbed down curriculums, lax administrations that do not run disciplined schools, and poor oversight of non-government schools. Some departments still believe that Indigenous children need not be taught using mainstream curriculums because they will in any case spend the rest of their lives on welfare in remote communities. Students are expected to learn only enough English and literacy for occasional visits to Alice Springs, Halls Creek, Cairns, or Darwin and enough numeracy to manage the bank accounts into which their welfare cheques are paid. Even in mainstream schools, some principals and teachers consider that students do not need an education because they will remain forever on welfare in their local community.

Some education provider bureaucracies, some principals, and some teachers still believe that Indigenous students are not capable of the same level of achievement as non-Indigenous Australians.

Dr. Sarra has played a leading role in identifying the importance of expectations in Indigenous student failure.

Dr. Sarra has played a leading role in identifying the importance of expectations in Indigenous student failure. He founded the *Stronger Smarter Institute* in the Faculty of Education in the Queensland University of Technology to tackle expectation issues. The institute's *Stronger Smarter Leadership* program, 'designed to challenge and support leadership at all levels of education to improve outcomes for Indigenous students,' targets low expectations of Indigenous students by education systems. In 2010 it ran 10 national and regional programs. The costs of $4,400 per participant were heavily subsidised by Telstra and the Sidney Myer Fund.[60] Dyonne Anderson is the principal of a small Indigenous school on Cabbage Tree Island in northern New South Wales and pushes her students to achieve mainstream standards. She commented, 'I was wondering if I was the only person who had that view and was I pushing too hard.' After attending a Stronger Smarter Summit, she said, 'it was very reassuring … to know it's OK … There's still a lot of negative thoughts out there … Our school is a school of excellence and I accept nothing less.'[61]

Parents

Parents have high aspirations for their children's education, but these often conflict with their low expectations. Their low expectations derive from their own lack of education, the non-delivery of basic services, and the over-promising of extra services, resulting in a cargo cult welfare culture.

A welfare and human rights lobby continues to foster a cargo cult view that 'the government' will provide mainstream standards of living to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders without their having to go to school or work. A majority of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders—the 60% who do work—have recognised that schooling and working are prices that have to be paid for prosperity. They have accepted that to enjoy Australia's high standard of living, they have to go to school every day for 13 years and then work for 40 years. And if they want an even higher standard of living, further education for another three to six years may be necessary. Working men and women also know something else not being told to welfare communities: education and a job are more interesting and rewarding than a 'one way journey to idle misery' on welfare.[62]

Cargo cult views are constantly being reinforced by public policy. Patrick McCauley found that 'many Aboriginal people in Wadeye believe that all Australians are given a free house by the government as a right of citizenship.'[63] In welfare dependent communities, in spite of an evident effective demand for private housing, government policies are focused on public housing.[64] Families living in crowded conditions are not advised to get a job, save and buy their own house, but to wait until public housing becomes available.

Indigenous parents are regularly blamed for their children's poor school achievements. This is a genuine problem driven by the persistence of welfare dependence. It should not be used by education providers to divert attention from the deficiencies of schools or to talk about 'partnerships' and 'engagement.'

Even in troubled communities, Indigenous parents, just like non-Indigenous parents, want the best for their children. For years, barely literate parents in remote communities have been fighting highly articulate obstructionist bureaucrats for a decent education.[65] These parents plan, save and use family networks to send their children to better schools in Darwin, Brisbane and other centres. The Cape York Partnerships' voluntary student Education Trusts, into which parents, relatives and friends put small sums weekly to build resources for their children's education, have been remarkably successful. The trusts cover 474 children in Aurukun, Hopevale, Mossman Gorge, and Coen. In Coen, 136 children (100%) have been signed up. The total of the four trusts is $525,000 with an average per child of more than $1,000.[66]

Students

Indigenous students themselves often have confused expectations. They are acute judges of the quality of education they receive. Students attending Homeland Learning Centres know that they are not attending real schools. Even remote students have seen schools in Darwin, Cairns or other cities. They know their older relatives did not receive the same education as non-Indigenous Australians and they know that Assistant Teachers, whom they may love as cousins or aunties, are not qualified teachers. To encourage their students, teachers may tell them and their parents that they are performing well in their schoolwork. Teachers do not tell them that this schoolwork is years behind what other students their age are doing. Even in mainstream schools, differences in expectations of Indigenous attendance and performance are picked up by the students. Dr. Sarra has correctly identified the importance of truthful assessments and students' own high expectations.

Attendance

Because schools rely on enrolment data for their territory, state and federal funding, most make considerable efforts to ensure that all children are enrolled. Patrick McCauley has described how students were enticed to enrol at the Wadeye Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic School at the beginning of the year with a gaily decorated bus and 'troopies' collecting children around the township, rewarding them with lollies and finishing the day with 'showbags' of lollies and trinkets.[67] Most Indigenous children are enrolled in school in their early years, but enrolment falls off in later years.

It has long been known that attendance is far lower than enrolment. NAPLAN's 'sitting the test' percentages confirm low attendance. John Taylor's recent study of the Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic School in Wadeye found attendance records (taken eight times a year for the average daily attendance during the previous four weeks) less reliably recorded than enrolment records. He reported that only 20% of students were attending school regularly. The attendance of the other 80% of students was clustered around 38 to 75 days and 76 to 112 days in a school year of 189 days.[68] These attendance patterns appear to be typical of the larger Indigenous townships. In communities such as Palm Island, Aurukun, Maningrida, and Wadeye gangs take over from schools as young people come into their teens.[69]

Reporting of attendance varies by state and territory so that even for mainstream schools, attendance data are not comparable. For mainstream schools, MCEECDYA data average the attendance of children from working families with non-working families. This hides the seriousness of non-attendance by children from welfare dependent families. The NT figure of 70% attendance is doubtful, even though it includes students from working families in Darwin and other major towns.[70] It is far above the 20% attendance found in Wadeye.

Cape York Partnerships, as a component of its reform of four Cape York communities, has established an Attendance Case Management Framework, which records and reports the details of each absence, including the reasons, and follows up with parents if necessary. The accurate quarterly attendance data are a valuable diagnostic tool for raising attendance in Cape York schools.

Sub-standard schools will always have low attendance rates. Sarra, and every other principal who has achieved high attendance, knows that they have to run a strong, disciplined school that offered high academic standards to attract high attendance. Giving schools greater autonomy and principals the right to select their staff would have a considerable impact on increasing attendance.

Mobility

High mobility is a major cause of low school attendance and a serious deterrent to employment. Mobility is a problem for education providers, but is not caused by them and they have limited ability to affect it.

Indigenous families in remote communities travel because they can. Without jobs or their own comfortable, well-furnished houses, there is little downside to families travelling for weeks at a time. They may travel to the coast in South Australia to avoid the peak of the central Australian summer or to larger settlements to avoid being trapped in an outstation during the 'wet.' Whether families are crowded in with one lot of relatives or another does not matter greatly when they have few possessions.

Government policies support mobility although they know that it conflicts with education and employment. Welfare payments can be picked up anywhere. Indigenous parents are rarely penalised if they do not follow Newstart unemployment rules about applying for jobs. In the past, CDEP was so loosely administered that families did not lose payments if they were away at a funeral. Supported by modern technology, funerals are rostered to facilitate sequential large gatherings that have become a principal form of social interaction. Mobility is thus not so much related to classical nomadic lifestyles but fostered by welfare and the denial of private property rights on Indigenously owned and controlled land. It is well established that private home ownership increases employment and thus reduces mobility. Yet governments persist on focusing on public rather than private housing for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Negative and positive attendance incentives

Although the Northern Territory Emergency Response has had an appreciable impact on attendance by a complex of measures aimed at increasing responsibility, most policy instruments that attempt to raise school attendance have proved unsuccessful. Linking welfare income sequestration to school attendance has been tried for 30 years. It is difficult to implement. The principal of the Tiwi Islands' Murrupurtiyanuwu Catholic School, notorious for low attendance, pointed out that teachers were only able to follow up with a fraction of families who did not send their children to school and advise Centrelink that the carer's payments could be suspended.[71] Determining whether children's absence is justified is complex. The risks of cutting welfare unjustly are too great for teachers and Centrelink staff. Reducing income when carers—non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous—cannot make their children go to school, is deeply resented.

High mobility is a major cause of low school attendance and a serious deterrent to employment.

ABSTUDY should be used as an attendance incentive. Whereas youth allowances for children are paid to parents, ABSTUDY (which can commence at age 14) is paid to the student. Many regard it as pure cargo cult money, not to be used either for education expenses or for the cost of living, and certainly not as being connected with regular school attendance. The first ABSTUDY payment is spent as a rite of passage, particularly in townships, where large drinking parties are organised to celebrate it and the promise of fortnightly payments to follow.[72]

Traditional truancy laws are obsolete. Threatening parents with fines is the modern equivalent of throwing debtors into prison. Young people –Indigenous and non-Indigenous—who prefer to hang out in a mall rather than go to school regard penalties with derision. Their parents cannot force them go to school. Police know that they have no levers that can get students to school 90% of the time.

Appointing school truancy officers, engaging other staff to monitor attendance, and signing partnerships with parents and communities will continue to fail unless they address parental responsibility. Every territory and state has a long history of failed programs. The Commonwealth Department of Education micromanaged an $11 million *Parent School Partnership* program from 2005 to 2008 to involve parents in schooling, improve attendance, and have youngsters stay on in school to Year 12. Most of the funding did not reach any parents.[73]

Existing incentives that are effective rely on positive rewards. Swimming pools with strict 'no school-no swim' rules have had some success. The Clontarf Foundation, a private initiative that fosters sports programs, has had considerable success where 'no school-no team membership' is applied. The foundation is extending its programs to girls although they do not have the same professional sport prospects as male footballers. Not all children enjoy sport. Music, art and craft after-school activities conditional on school attendance would expand the incentives.

Cape York reforms are built around a positive approach to improving attendance and other reforms by rewarding responsibility with community approval. The Family Responsibilities Commission recommends income management if all else fails, but only at the end of a process that first attempts to improve attendance by an appeal to responsibility. School attendance is rising in its four communities. For other remote communities and for welfare dependent ones in capital cities and regional towns, changes from present incentives that encourage cargo cult attitudes to rewarding responsible behaviour are urgently needed across the board.

Existing attendance incentives that are effective rely on positive rewards.

Mexico, where welfare is extremely limited, has found that positive incentives are more effective than penalties. Instead of penalising families by reducing their welfare when their children do not attend school or health check-ups, the Mexican system rewards families for attendance. Both families and children learn responsibility; children know they are contributing to family income.[74] Nine countries have implemented similar systems. The successful American reduction of welfare dependence in the early 2000s had many positive aspects. Positive incentive systems are politically more acceptable than programs that cut welfare and are more suited to the modern world.

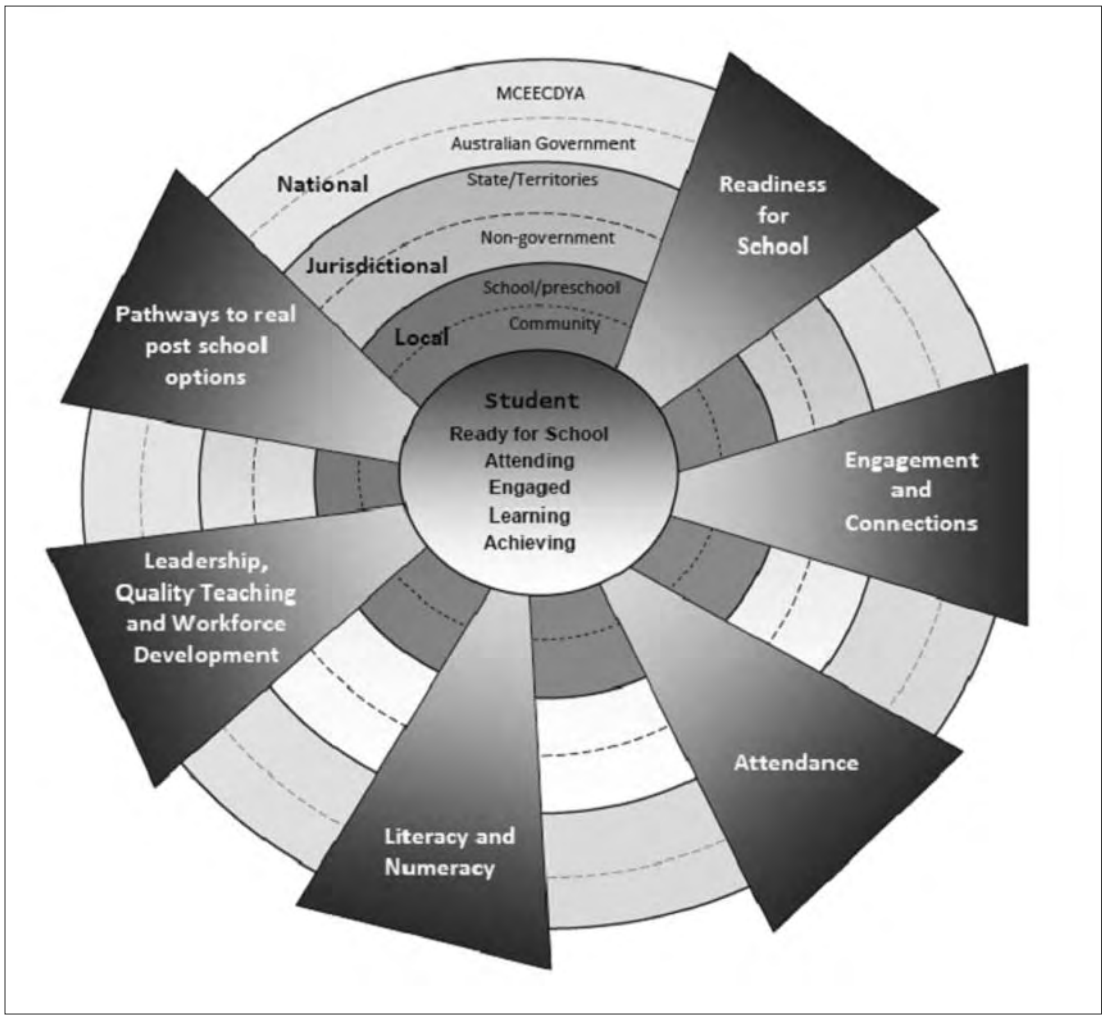
MCEECDYA Action Plan

The MCEECDYA *Indigenous Education Plan Draft 2010–2014* proposes to improve Indigenous educational outcomes for the decade to 2018 by:

- 'Better connections across the six building blocks agreed under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, including with health and community services.
- Increasing number of Indigenous students performing at equivalent or better rates to other students in on-entry assessment.'[75]

The following diagram encapsulates MCEECDYA's reform program:

Figure 1: MCEECDYA's Indigenous Education Action Plan



Source: MCEECDYA, *Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft, 2010–2014*.

Table 3 summarises literacy and numeracy components of the territory and state programs intended to deliver MCEECDYA targets. The table lists only a small proportion of the many programs listed. There are virtually no measurable targets or mention of classroom teaching by qualified teachers. The Northern Territory component of the MCEECDYA *Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft* includes the provision of pre-school for every child 'taught by a four-year degree qualified … teacher.' It does not reveal that the Northern Territory intends to continue to run primary and secondary classes in Homeland Learning Centres that will not be taught by qualified teachers.

Table 3 MCEECDYA Literacy and numeracy programs of states and territories

Victoria's *Wannik–Learning Together–Journey to our Future* strategy employs literacy and numeracy specialists in schools with high concentrations of Koorie students and provides tutorial assistance and homework clubs. Literacy coaches are employed for Indigenous students, and all students identified by NAPLAN data as being at 'educational risk' are monitored and assisted. *Dare to Lead*, *Managed Individual Pathways* and support for 20 students in the *Foundations for Young Australian Worlds of Work* focus on retaining students to Year 12. *Wannik* strategy includes 'Governance arrangements that include community input at all levels of decision making and the production of resources for schools to assist with cultural awareness.'
Queensland proposes to tackle its 30 to 50% Indigenous student reading and numeracy failure rates by giving support to highly mobile Indigenous students to stay in one school for longer periods; providing targeted support to students whose first language is not Standard Australian English; assisting schools to recognise Indigenous student numeracy learning needs and raise numeracy education outcomes for Indigenous students; and implementing a whole-school approach for improving literacy and numeracy involving partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families.
South Australia puts its emphasis on literacy and numeracy specialists to provide staff with access to expert support and coaching through the *Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership*; consultants to monitor student progress, provide case management, support the development of individualised programs, promote best practice strategies, and facilitate student review meetings with schools, parent/care givers and students; and coaching and mentoring support to provide school leadership to support a whole -school change philosophy through the *Low Socio Economic Status School Communities National Partnership.*
Western Australia proposes individualised tuition for students not meeting minimum standards; strategies to assist teachers in meeting minimum standards with a focus on schools where significant numbers of Indigenous students are not meeting standards; and targeted support for students whose first language is not English.
Tasmania targets Indigenous students performing below minimum standards through state and COAG (but not limited to) *Raising the Bar*, *Closing the Gap* and *Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership* programs. These students are also supported by personalised learning plans, the monitoring of individual performance, and the driving of whole-school improvement.
Northern Territory plans to establish explicit literacy and numeracy components in school improvement plans; increase Indigenous participation in NAPLAN; achieve a 9% increase in the proportion of Indigenous students at or above minimum standards; encourage parents to participate in adult literacy classes and take part in activities with children to support early literacy and numeracy development; and manage and maintain data systems to monitor individual student performance and drive whole-school improvement in literacy and numeracy.
Australian Capital Territory intends to provide an inclusive program to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait students to advance their reading skills; introduce a *Proud and Positive (You can Read)* program in selected schools from Kindergarten to Year 4 in partnership with parents and caregivers; and support successful transition from primary to high school.
New South Wales will provide resources to focus on language, literacy and numeracy development for Aboriginal students in their first years of schooling; continue to implement a wide range of programs to support improved outcomes in literacy and numeracy in Years 4, 6, 8 and 10 who are not meeting minimum standards; and develop strong and effective schools plans based on performance data.

The Prime Minister has stated that literacy and numeracy gaps between non-Indigenous and Indigenous students are to be halved by 2018:

- New South Wales—the 20% Year 7 reading gap would be reduced to 10%
- Western Australia—the 34% Year 3 reading gap would be reduced to 17%
- Northern Territory—the 62% Year 9 reading gap would be reduced to only 31%.

Should these targets be acceptable to parents—or to voters? In any case, the MCEECDYA *Action Plan Draft* with its lists of nebulous statements of intent rather than concrete and measurable programs will not deliver even these targets. There were more than 90 submissions to the MCEECDYA *Action Plan Draft*. The Metropolitan West Regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's submission commented 'the halving of the gap is not good enough...it should be eliminating the gap completely' and 'we have some difficulty in identifying this as an action plan.'[76] In contrast, the Australian Education Union's submission—authorised by its President, Angelo Gavrielatos—considered 'the realistic timeframe that should be considered to achieve outcomes for Indigenous people equal to the rest of the community is to focus on the outcomes that should be expected for the children to be born in 20 to 25 years from today.'[77] This is a 35-year horizon!

Successful Indigenous students are persistently ignored by the 'closing the gap' approach to improving Indigenous education. Political spin sees a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students whereas an evidence-based approach would identify the differences between the majority of Indigenous students who achieve national minimum standards, and the admittedly large minority of Indigenous students who do not.

The final MCEECDYA *Action Plan* should acknowledge that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve NAPLAN standards and focus on the responsibility of education providers to deliver effective education to those Indigenous students who are failing. This would mean abandoning rhetoric and its associated displacement programs, failed teaching methods, and failed instruction materials. The first step in introducing the National Curriculum would put teachers in front of classes to teach phonics, literacy and rigorous mathematics.

Positive initiatives

Positive initiatives exist. Cape York Partnerships have followed up a decades' work on four Cape York communities with a proposal to transform Indigenous schools in Aurukun and Hopevale into Aboriginal Australian Academies that will provide real education.[78] Their academy concept follows research and the successful track record of schools that have broken through ghetto school disadvantage in the United States. It is a bold initiative. Aurukun has been so dysfunctional that some parents proposed that even primary school children be boarded outside the community to enable them to be educated. An American academic educator specialising in the difficulties of African-American ghetto schools commented that he had never seen educational deprivation of the depth of Aurukun.[79] Cape York Partnerships has negotiated the introduction of these two 'academies' as part of the Queensland government's school system in the expectation that such academies could be developed throughout Indigenous schools in Queensland.

The first step would put teachers in front of classes to teach phonics, literacy and rigorous mathematics.

Independent Indigenous schools are a second initiative.

When Jean Illingworth took over Djarragun College in Cairns in 2001 it was derelict. It now has around 600 students (including boarders) from pre-school to Year 12 with vocational classes on a campus at Gordonvale that is indistinguishable from that of any first rate Australian non-government school. Non-Indigenous parents are seeking entry to the school.

In the Northern Territory, the NT Christian Schools Association has developed three models. Gawa is a school on the tip of Elcho Island in Australia's furthest north in a community founded to escape the dysfunctional environment of Galiwinku, the island's principal population centre. It is one of the most remote schools in Australia. There is no airstrip and no all-weather road.

The NT Christian Schools Association also runs the secondary boarding Woolaning Homeland Christian College, which is a two-hour drive south-west of Darwin, and managed Tiwi College for its first two years. Reminiscent of the establishment of Harvard (located in the wilderness at Cambridge to take young men away from the temptations of Boston), these schools were supported by parents appalled by the inability of government and Catholic schools to provide education and by their dysfunctional communities. They were set up as boarding schools away from communities so that children could learn in an environment free from alcohol, drugs and violence. Parents are reluctant to send primary children away to board, so these were set up for secondary students. Marrara Christian College has a Family Group Homes program to enable students from remote communities to attend its Darwin campus. Taking in students who are the product of failed primary schools, these independent schools cannot, however, cram 13 years of schooling into six. These secondary initiatives cannot be solutions until primary education is fixed.

Not all Indigenous non-government schools have been successful. Several have failed because they have not followed the principles that distinguish successful schools outlined below.

No excuses school culture

A no-excuses school culture centred on responsibility, respect, setting boundaries, and establishing discipline is essential to a school's success. It was critical to Dr. Sarra's success at Cherbourg and Mr. Hewitson at Kalkaringi. Jean Illingworth states that at Djarragun, 'First, we believe in discipline. We have strict codes of behaviour—not just for students but for staff as well. Our policy of tough love actually does work. Students feel safe in an environment where they know exactly what the boundaries are and how far they can push those boundaries. A disciplined environment makes it possible to actually get on with teaching instead of spending an inordinate amount of time on trying to discipline an unruly class.'[80] These are not principles unique or even particular to Indigenous schools. Every performing school in Australia is disciplined and every failing school lacks discipline. Responsibility, respect and discipline include the condition of buildings, facilities and environment. The NT Christian Schools Association has found that air-conditioning is as essential in the heat and 'wet' of far northern Australia as heating is in cold climates.

Effective instruction puts teachers at the centre of the education system. It is demanding.

Classroom teaching is the core

The Cape York Partnership has defined 'explicit instruction' as critical to the academy model. This is a concept with many aspects, but it is perhaps best expressed as a well-trained and dedicated teacher actually standing in front of a class and teaching. In contrast, the introduction by education departments of a succession of displacement programs reduces the number of teachers available for classroom teaching and the amount of time they spend teaching. Teachers should be able to devote their time to teaching rather than meeting paper work demands of programs, partnerships and engagements.

Cape York proposes that students are grouped and taught at their ability level, that lessons are carefully sequenced and articulated, that students are regularly tested, only promoted when they pass tests and receive constant feedback. Remedial lessons are given immediately. Student behaviour must be positively reinforced. Teachers and aides receive training and ongoing coaching.[81]

Effective instruction puts teachers at the centre of the education system. It is demanding. Dr. Sarra found that his disciplined approach led several teachers to resign. When *Multilit* English literacy was introduced in Coen, one of the four teachers transferred to another school. During the first six weeks of the introduction of the academy program in Aurukun, eight of 20 teachers resigned.

Long hours

Compelling American research evidence shows that the number of hours, days and weeks spent at school are crucial. A recent review of New York charter schools concluded that 'the association between a long school year and a positive achievement effect is the most important result …

We have singled out the long school year because its association is extremely robust. It shows up strongly no matter which other policies we control for.'[82] Lagging students need to spend longer times at school, and school hours have to be flexible. Cape York Partnerships proposes, and Djarragun and NT Christian Schools already mandate, extended schooling hours, albeit flexibly implemented. Gawa School has opted for five terms of eight weeks instead of the Northern Territory's mainstream four terms of 10 weeks. Additional hours may include summer school, pre- or after-school classes, weekend teaching, supervised homework, and meals. In northern Australia, the flexibility to provide the longest holiday during the 'dry' when families like to travel, rather than at Christmas during the 'wet,' raises attendance in independent schools. Children can learn in air-conditioned comfort during the 'wet.'

Indigenous cultural heritage

Cultural studies are an essential element of any schooling. Schools in Indigenous communities have a particular role to play in the transmission and preservation of local Indigenous traditions. Oral transmission is no longer central in an environment of books, magazines, films, television, and DVDs. Indigenous languages have been dying. So called bi-lingual education has failed to make students literate either in English or in their traditional language. The so-called bi-lingual schools have very low NAPLAN results. The introduction of a phonetic approach to literacy facilitates the learning of multiple languages. Gawa students' newsletter shows that they are learning to read and write simultaneously in English and Yolngu Matha.

Cape York Partnerships proposes that once the basics are covered in morning and early afternoon classes, its academies mount Indigenous cultural programs. Similarly, mainstream schools and ethnic groups already offer language, music and dance classes reflecting Australia's immigrant cultures after school hours and during weekends. These activities play a role in rounded education and teach children the intangibles of competitiveness, cooperation and loyalty, while encouraging creativity and leadership. They enable children to enjoy school and to fulfil their potential. Independent schools generally support a wider range of 'club' activities than government schools.

School and community

Cape York Partnerships and the NT Christian Schools Association regard a school's relationship with its community as critical. Cape York Partnerships have been working with the Cape York communities for a decade. The academies' initiative has emerged out of a prolonged process of discussion with communities appalled because their children were not being educated. The Gawa community approached the Christian Schools Association to take over their Homeland Learning Centre. They recently worked together to install a large wind generator to reduce their substantial electricity costs. The nearby community of Ban'thula decided to abandon its Homeland Learning Centre and bus its children daily to Gawa. Woolaning parents came to the Christian Schools Association because their children lacked secondary education. The Tiwi Education Board similarly approached the Christian Schools Association. The Mapurru community has struggled for several years for approval for the Christian Schools Association to replace its Homeland Learning Centre and assist with other community development. Several other remote communities are in the process of seeking an independent school.

The Cape York Welfare Reform program and the Cape York academies are mutually reinforcing. They restore individual, family and social responsibility standards in welfare dependent communities. The Cape York Family Responsibilities Commission is an independent statutory body that plays a key role in the Cape York welfare reform trials. If a child is absent from school without reasonable explanation three times in a term, the Family Responsibility Commission can intervene with a range of measures starting with a conference with the child's parent or guardian and culminating, only if the worst comes to the worst, in conditional income management. The Student Attendance Case Management Framework (see above) supports the Commission.[83]

Cash rewards

Several school systems have been experimenting with rewarding students financially for performance. Singapore has gone furthest with sizeable annual cash rewards to the best performing students, teachers, principals and schools. In Australia, a reward for outstanding university teachers and teaching institutes has been operating for some years.

Schools in the United States have been experimenting with rewarding students with restaurant meals, iPods, and flat screen televisions for performance at school, but the most effective rewards appear to be cash prizes. Secondary students from severely disadvantaged backgrounds are the principal targets of 'learn and earn' programs designed to motivate poor children. The proponents of these programs point out that for middle-class children, expensive rewards from their parents for exam success are common. A privately funded Texas program in 60 schools that gave bonuses to students and teachers for high performance was so successful that it led to a flood of imitators.[84] Other Texas cash reward high school programs have found that students went to college in greater numbers after they won cash prizes and, importantly, their results continued to improve. While many traditional educators point out that the purpose of education is to inculcate a love of learning and there is a danger that incentive programs will mean that students will not perform unless they are rewarded, those concerned with high failure and low retention rates of students from disadvantaged backgrounds point out that other policies have not worked.

Conclusions

The 2009 NAPLAN Indigenous students' failure to reach national minimum standards again confirmed that most Indigenous children in the far north and substantial numbers in the rest of Australia are not becoming literate and numerate. NAPLAN results showing that 60% of Indigenous students do reach national minimum standards confirm that failures of Indigenous education are not ethnic in origin.

The causes of high Indigenous failure rates are twofold: on the supply side they are non-performing Indigenous schools; on the demand side cargo cult welfare dependence cultures lead to low expectations of Indigenous students' performance and high levels of students' non attendance.

Important reforms are emerging. On the supply side, NAPLAN testing and the public availability of school by school results have changed the education environment. Poor literacy and numeracy performance can no longer be hidden. Australia now has the evidence base for policy changes that will end Indigenous disadvantage. A National Curriculum focused on research based teaching of literacy and numeracy is to be adopted in all schools from 2011. On the demand side, refinement and extension of policies that tackled welfare dependence behaviour and cultures in dysfunctional Northern Territory communities has begun. Perhaps most importantly, effective demand by parents for mainstream education is emerging in welfare dependent Indigenous communities. It is evident in the Cape York academies initiative within the Queensland Department of Education, and parent support for Djarragun College and other disciplined, effective, independent Indigenous schools. Even small remote communities are seeking independent schools to ensure mainstream education for their children.

Further action is needed on both education and welfare:

- Education departments should move away from the rhetoric of special programs and projects to put teachers in front of classes to teach the National Curriculum effectively. Principals should have greater autonomy to run disciplined, no excuses schools. Schools should have the same high expectations of all students.
- The NT Department of Education and Training should support parents' attempts to improve education for their children through independent schools. This requires following other states in resolving their conflict of interest between being an education provider and an education regulator.
- Effective adult literacy and numeracy classes are needed for young men and women who have left school without education. Welfare payments should be conditional on attendance

in certified remedial literacy and numeracy courses in the 29 remote target townships, capital cities and regional towns for all young men and women who cannot pass literacy and numeracy tests.

- Welfare has to be overhauled to cease encouraging cargo cult attitudes. Positive incentives should be used to encourage responsible behaviour. ABSTUDY, for example, should be tied to high attendance with cash prizes for high academic achievers.
- The 45 Homeland Learning Centres cannot remain as pretend schools. They are an anomaly that has no place in Australian education.

Quantifiable increases in students sitting NAPLAN tests and reductions in students failing to meet national minimum standards should be targeted for schools, school regions, territories and states year by year to 2014. By 2018, high Indigenous failure rates should be a distant memory.

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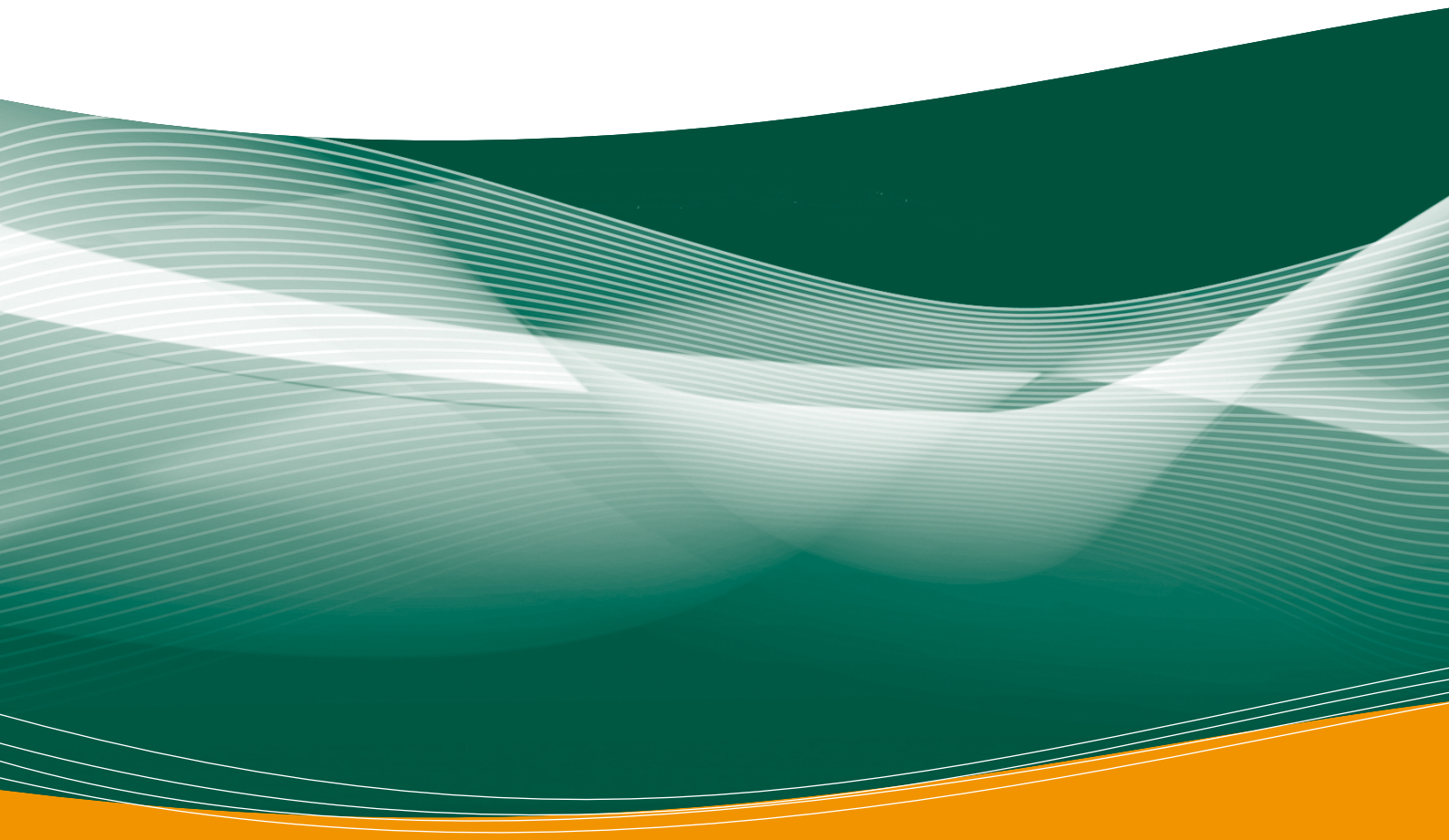
About the Authors

Emeritus Professor Helen Hughes has worked in the economics of development for many years, including a period of senior management at the World Bank followed by membership of the United Nations Committee for Development Planning. She returned to Australia to a chair in economics at the Australian National University, where she was also the executive director of the National Centre of Development Studies. She was the Distinguished Fellow of the Economics Society of Australia in 2004.
Professor Hughes is a senior fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney, where she is working on the south Pacific as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander development.

Mark Hughes is an independent researcher.



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