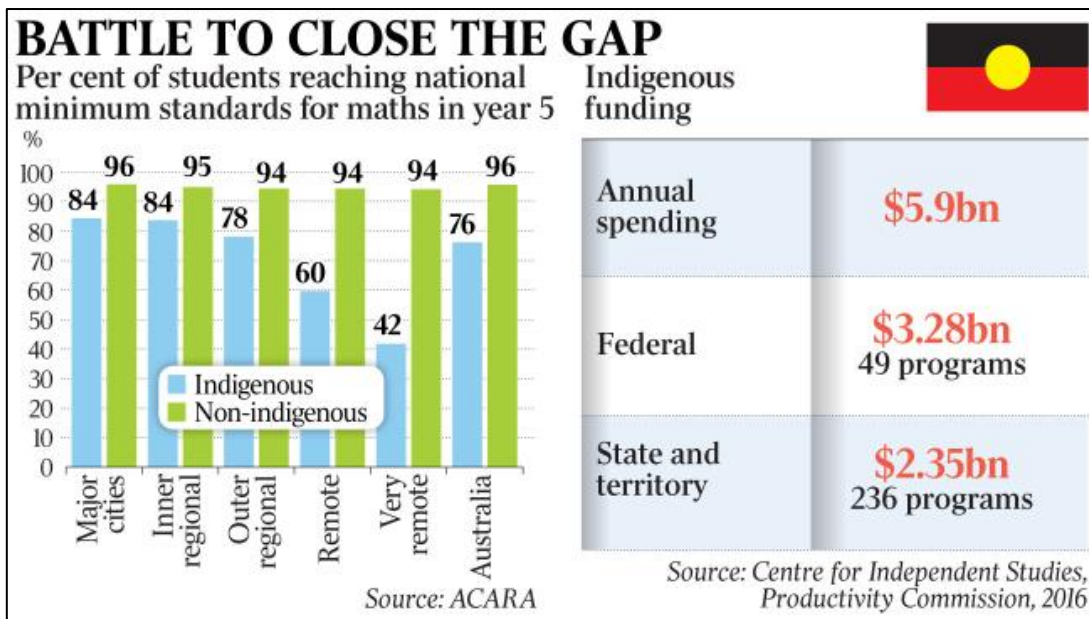
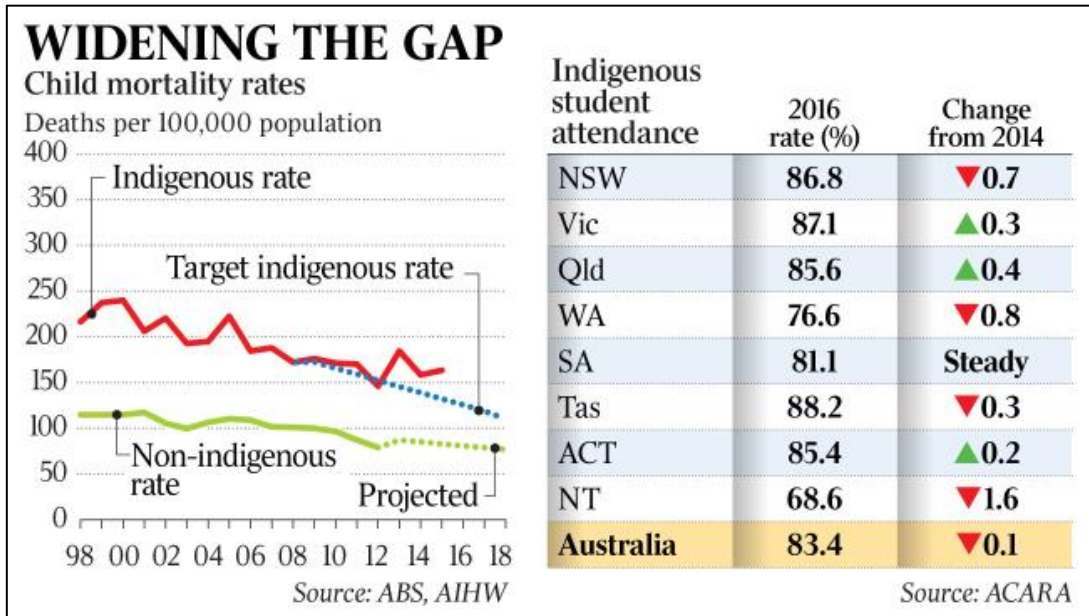


\$5.9bn fails to close the indigenous gaps



By Stephen Fitzpatrick
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Only one of seven Closing the Gap targets to reduce indigenous disadvantage is now projected to be met, with child mortality rates joining the grim list of failing - objectives despite \$5.9 billion being spent annually on indigenous programs.

Delivering the ninth annual report in an assessment project launched by Kevin Rudd in 2008, Malcolm Turnbull said he was “saddened and disappointed that the target to halve the gap on child mortality is not on track”.

The Prime Minister said that while successes had been achieved at local levels across the country — by individuals, communities, organisations and government — national progress had been too slow. However, he also said that while it was important “to accelerate progress and close the gap, we must also tell the broader story, not of deficit, but of achievement. I’ll continue to tell those stories”.

Critics of the Closing the Gap model say it focuses too much on deficit thinking, leading to a view indigenous Australians are universally responsible for their own disadvantage, rather than setting targets that would strengthen communities and build resilience. The approach to indigenous affairs generally has been criticised for a lack of rigour in analysis and assessment of actual need.

A Centre for Independent Studies report last year identified that of a total \$5.9bn of indigenous-specific spending annually, consisting of 1082 programs, only 88 had been evaluated. A subsequent Productivity Commission report found just 34 had been rigorously evaluated.

In response, Mr Turnbull announced he would appoint an indigenous productivity commissioner and make a \$50 million investment “for research into policy and its implementation (because) so much is published about indigenous communities and, as many indigenous Australians have said, not much is published for indigenous communities”.

This would, he said, “assist in the next phase of closing the gap”. CIS researcher Sara Hudson praised the announcement, saying “one of the reasons for the low return on indigenous investment is that funding has not gone to where it is needed most or been used in ways that respected indigenous input into program design and delivery”.

Of the seven targets, only indigenous Year 12 attainment is on track this year to a halving of the gap with non-indigenous Australians by 2020. Five other targets — closing the gap in life expectancy by 2031, halving the gap in literacy and numeracy by 2018, closing the school attendance gap by 2018 and halving the unemployment gap by 2018 — are not on track to be met. A sixth, aiming for 95 per cent of indigenous four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education by 2025, is at 87 per cent.

Mr Turnbull said closing the gap would require “uncompromising collaboration with indigenous people” and promised a renewed focus from COAG on reassessing which of the seven targets needed renewing, given that four expire next year.

Bill Shorten called for indigenous incarceration rates and the high rate of indigenous children being removed from their families to be considered as new targets.

The Opposition Leader said it was time “to forget the insulting fiction that First Australians are a problem to be solved, but from now on, First Australians must have the first say in the decisions that affect their lives”.

Mr Turnbull cited the Empowered Communities model of local engagement, which has begun to be rolled out across eight districts nationwide. One of the architects of the scheme is new Indigenous Advisory Council member Andrea Mason. Another architect is Cape York leader Noel Pearson, whose proposal of a constitutionally recognised indigenous parliamentary body is gaining traction.

At a breakfast in the Great Hall earlier, indigenous leaders from a range of fields told Mr Turnbull they “had the answers” to reducing disadvantage, and asked him to ensure government involved indigenous communities in decision-making and policy planning, as well as restoring operational funding to the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples.

They presented him with a copy of the Redfern Statement, a blueprint for engagement between indigenous Australia and governments with a focus on community self-determination, signed by around 50 peak groups and other stakeholders.

“We see the Redfern Statement as being there beyond the cycle of governments,” Congress co-chair Rod Little told him, adding that he expected Congress to have a direct relationship with the new six-member Prime Ministerial Indigenous Advisory Council. It met with Mr Turnbull for the first time yesterday.