

## **Closing the Gap: improvements in living standards take root through steady school attendance**



*Below 80 per cent attendance is as bad as not attending at all.*

- *The Australian*
- 17 February 2018
- **NYUNGAI WARREN MUNDINE**

School attendance is the most important factor in ending indigenous disadvantage. There's no disparity in employment between indigenous and non-indigenous people who complete Year 12 with the ability to go on to further education or training. But people can't complete Year 12 if they don't go to school.

Politicians, bureaucrats, teachers, unionists, indigenous leaders and parents should all be committed to ensuring indigenous children attend school every day. They are not. Many parents aren't sending their kids to school, despite extensive help. Too many of the rest make excuses, ignore the problem or even actively resist it.

A case in point is attendance data. To get an effective education, kids must attend school 90 per cent of the time. If a child frequently misses more than half a day of school a week (attendance below 90 per cent), their education is considered at risk. Miss one day of school every week (attendance below 80 per cent) and their education is significantly diminished. Ninety per cent attendance at a bad school is better than below 90 per cent at a good one. Below 80 per cent attendance is as bad as not attending at all.

Aggregate school attendance rates are meaningless. An aggregate rate of 70 per cent could mean half the students attend 90 per cent of the time and the other half 50 per cent, or that all students attend 70 per cent of the time. In the first scenario, half the students are getting an effective education. In the second scenario, none are.

School attendance must be measured with individualised data, the attendance level of each student. Otherwise we don't know how many kids are getting an effective education. So why is the Closing the Gap school attendance target measured using aggregate data? Because for years state and territory governments refused to provide individualised data. They claimed privacy issues; demanded more money for collection costs; departments didn't want to answer to the commonwealth; teachers unions weren't happy. Northern Territory teachers went on strike in 2014, saying new attendance measures would create larger classes and put teachers under pressure.

The 2016 Closing the Gap report was the first to include individualised data. But it was limited to semester one and excluded NSW, where nearly a third of indigenous people live. How frustrating to pick up the 2018 Closing the Gap report last week and find NSW still refusing to provide individualised data. I'm sure Department of Education secretary Mark Scott and Education Minister Rob Stokes say they want to close the gap. Let them show it by pulling their department into line.

Once you see the individualised data, you realise why states and territories don't like disclosing it. It shows they're not doing their job. Aggregated data shows a 10-point gap between indigenous and non-indigenous school attendance. Individualised data is far more bleak. Only 49 per cent of indigenous students meet the critical 90 per cent threshold, compared with 79 per cent of non-indigenous students — a 30-point gap. In very remote areas there's a whopping 47-point gap. So half of all indigenous students and a fifth of all non-indigenous students aren't getting an effective education because they aren't attending enough school. And we've no idea what's going on in NSW.

Leading up to this year's Closing the Gap report, I heard another narrative of resistance, including from some prominent indigenous people on social and mainstream media, that efforts to improve indigenous education are assimilation; about making indigenous people "white". Aboriginal leaders pleaded with Australian governments in 1938 for equal education opportunities, saying: "Give our children the same chances as your own, and they will do as well as your children!" Now we have indigenous people turning their noses up at education as a form of assimilation.

This narrative is rubbish. All over the world, in every continent, every culture, kids go to school. Schooling is a major priority of international aid agencies for developing nations. Are we expected to believe indigenous Australians are the only humans on the planet who aren't suited to school? Most people I've observed making these comments had a Western education, many at university, and made the most of all the opportunities it provided. The gap has closed for them. They don't complain of being assimilated or having become "white". Apparently it's one rule for them, another for Aboriginal people still living in poverty.

End the excuses and resistance or forget about closing the gap. Imagine what Australia's indigenous population would be like if every indigenous child went to school every day. Imagine the 2028 Closing the Gap report if this were achieved.

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