



Warren Mundine's call for fines if kids aren't in class



Warren Mundine says research showed students needed to be at school at least 90 per cent of the time to avoid falling behind. Picture: Britta Campion

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- Rebecca Urban

Indigenous leader and former Labor Party national president Nyunggai Warren Mundine has called for the states and territories to face hefty fines unless school - attendance by indigenous students improves, claiming the latest Closing The Gap report masks the severity of the problem.

Released on Monday, the tenth annual progress report on the push to reduce indigenous disadvantage showed no improvement in the national school attendance rate for indigenous students, which remained at 83.2 per cent, compared to 93 per cent for non-indigenous students.

Attendance fell in some parts of the country, including a 4 per cent decline in the Northern Territory, while the national attendance level — which measures the proportion of students attending school at least 90 per cent of the time — was just 48 per cent for indigenous students last year.

As bleak as the figures are, Mr Mundine said aggregated data was effectively meaningless and criticised the states and territories for their unwillingness to provide

more detailed information to enable support funding to be directed where it was most needed.

He singled out NSW, which publishes attendance rates — a measure of the total number of school days attended by full-time students as a percentage of the total number of school days over the year — but not attendance levels, agreeing in 2013 to implement the additional measure in a bid to increase transparency.

“There might be 100 kids at a school and on average 45 turn up each day. But is it the same 45 every day or a totally different 45?” said Mr Mundine. “We don’t know, and that’s a problem.”

According to the My School website, some NT schools have attendance levels below 10 per cent. There are two schools where attendance levels are zero, meaning not one child attends school at least 90 per cent of the time.

In NSW, secondary schools with high indigenous student populations are struggling to contain rising truancy. Bourke High School’s annual report shows attendance slipped from 78 per cent in 2013 to 71.7 per cent in 2016. Year 11 attendance was just 47.5 per cent. At Coonamble High, attendance was 77 per cent across the school but as low as 60 per cent in Year 11 and 72 per cent in Year 9.

Both schools are part of the multi-million-dollar NSW Connected Communities program, which aims to improve academic outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Mr Mundine said research showed students needed to be at school at least 90 per cent of the time to avoid falling behind.

“My little fantasy would be to see fines for the state and territory governments for their failure to meet targets for attendance rates,” he said, adding that governments were reaping billions of dollars and needed to be held to account.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Nigel Scullion said the federal government’s Remote School Attendance Strategy had turned around falling rates of attendance in 77 remote schools but it was “disappointing” improvements were not widespread. “The Northern Territory ... is the only jurisdiction we continue to have serious concerns about - attendance data,” he said.

NT Education Minister Eva Lawler said it was “not acceptable that some of our schools have extremely low student attendance rates. We need schools, families and the community working together to support young people to attend school every day.”