

## **Pearson launches fight against truancy**

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CAPE York indigenous leader Noel Pearson has called for radical new laws to stamp out truancy, forcing education ministers to report to parliament every quarter on the reasons why cases of chronic non-attendance at school have not been prosecuted.

Writing for *The Weekend Australian* today, Mr Pearson backs a call by fellow indigenous leader and Australian of the Year Mick Dodson for all children to be enrolled in school by January 26 next year, and challenges the Rudd Government to ensure the goal is achieved.

Mr Dodson said the so-called Education Revolution was worth "bugger all" if investment was not poured into teacher quality, relevant curriculums and providing school reports parents could understand.

But Mr Pearson has taken Mr Dodson's call a step further, calling on governments to overhaul the way truancy is dealt with and insisting on much more ambitious targets to improve indigenous education.

"Professor Dodson is dead right to set 26 January, 2010, as the date for closing the gap on school attendance," he said "If the governments led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his state and territory counterparts, and the leaders of indigenous Australia, cannot respond to the primary school participation gap and close it by start of the next season, then we might as well forget about closing the gap on anything.

"It is not rocket science. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Australia can attend schools as well as anybody."

The challenge falls squarely into the lap of Ken Langford-Smith, principal of Alice Springs' Yipirinya School.

Yipirinya caters to possibly the most disadvantaged indigenous students in the country, the children of the town camps.

Mr Langford-Smith said Yipirinya, which has children from preschool through to Year 10, had an average 60 per cent attendance. "And we work hard to get that," he said.

"Alice has a mobile population and people come and go. But if you want to close the gap, the first step, we'd agree, is attendance.

"Our council of elders would strongly agree our children should go to school, and that we can close that attendance gap within a year. They believe there should be some kind of

compulsion -- that's the elders saying that, not me -- and they see it as being tied to welfare benefits."

Mr Pearson said the Council of Australian Governments' goal to halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievement within a decade was "depressing in its lack of imagination and ambition".

"The gap could and should be closed -- not halved -- within seven years," he said. "Ten at the outside."

The key was firstly to get children into classrooms and secondly to mandate effective literacy and numeracy programs.

The Cape York indigenous leader said the law was rarely enforced to prosecute the parents of truants. In Queensland in any year, the numbers of chronic absences were counted in the thousands, and the number of prosecutions could be counted on "less than one hand".

"I propose that these laws be amended to require every case where a child has missed more than a minimum number of school days in a term -- and there has not been a prosecution -- that principals be required to provide a report to their chief executive, on every case of chronic absence and the action taken to resolve it", Mr Pearson said.

"And if the absence is not resolved, the relevant minister should table a report to the parliament every quarter on the reasons why any case of chronic non-attendance was not prosecuted".

Leading indigenous educator Chris Sarra said Mr Dodson's target was ambitious but, without trying, nothing would change.

Mr Sarra, head of the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, said there were "magic bullets" that could turn around indigenous education, and get students coming to school.

"First and foremost, we have to confront the belief that Aboriginal children are worthy of a quality education and capable of educational excellence," he said.

"It involves embracing a positive sense of Aboriginal identity, it's embracing indigenous leadership in schools and school communities, and it's having high-expectation classrooms and teacher-student relationships. If you do all these things, you will get results."

Mr Langford-Smith agreed the literacy and numeracy gap could be completely closed within 10 years, but said health and nutrition programs were also critical.

Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard said she backed Mr Pearson's push for a focus on indigenous education, but she would not elaborate on whether she supported his law reform proposals. She also dismissed the call to change the closing the gap targets, arguing they were ambitious enough.

"The goals set by the Rudd Government are unashamedly ambitious, reflecting our determination to make a difference," the Education Minister said.