

Revisiting Indigenous Education



Murrngatja Homeland Learning Centre

Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes

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Executive Summary

Literacy and numeracy of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote Australia have not improved in 20 years. A perceived gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has masked the real gap between non-performing Indigenous remote schools and mainstream schools, laying the blame for low Indigenous achievement on ethnicity rather than on education policies. Because the causes of poor remote schooling have not been identified, government attempts to improve remote Indigenous schools have been ineffective.

The National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in 2008 shows that:

- Indigenous students in mainstream schools in Victoria, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory perform at the same literacy and numeracy levels as non-Indigenous students.
- New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, and Queensland have non-performing remote Indigenous schools. But the problems in the remote Indigenous schools of the Northern Territory are even more serious and systemic.

The Commonwealth government has increased funding for remote Indigenous education substantially, but the state and the NT governments have been unable to effect the policy changes necessary to improve remote Indigenous schools.

The NAPLAN results show that past state and territory illiteracy and non-numeracy rates have been significantly understated.

- Around 10% of all Australian children did not sit or failed to reach national minimum standards, but up to 60% of all NT children did not sit or failed the tests. This means that in many remote schools, almost 100% of Indigenous children either did not sit the tests or did not reach national minimum standards.
- NAPLAN failure rates for Indigenous children by location were 25% in remote and very remote New South Wales; 50% in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland; and 75% and more in the Northern Territory. These percentages do not include the children not sitting the tests. If children not sitting are included, failure rates rise in the states and approach 100% in the Northern Territory.

Indigenous ‘bilingual’ programs have become contentious because they do not deliver literacy and numeracy in any language. Students must meet NAPLAN English literacy standards to be able to work and participate in society.

Australia undoubtedly has the resources to bring remote schools to mainstream standards within three years, but governments will have to take politically tough decisions to get rid of non-performing schools in this time frame.

Two steps are immediately necessary:

- NAPLAN results must be published school-by-school so that parents and remote communities can evaluate their education options and identify the causes of non-performance for each school.
- All children in remote schools, notably in the Northern Territory, must sit the forthcoming May 2009 tests for years appropriate to their age.

Bringing remote schools to mainstream standards entails three sets of measures.

- The buildings and equipment of all schools must meet mainstream standards. There must be electric services, water, toilet blocks, and furnishings for all enrolled students and for staff. Books, DVDs and other teaching aids must be made available. All schools must be cleaned regularly and maintained properly.
- Mainstream curriculums must be introduced and all classes must be taught by qualified teachers. An emphasis on ESL teaching is essential. Assistant teachers must be trained to national teaching standards before taking classes, or be employed as teachers’ aides.
- Mainstream administrative rules must govern staffing ratios, enrolling children, maintaining attendance records, scheduling classes, assigning playground duty, and ensuring that children are driven in registered vehicles by licensed drivers.

Bringing schools to mainstream standards requires the immediate transformation of 44 Homeland Learning Centres in the Northern Territory into schools. If the numbers of children are not sufficient for a school, and if distance education is not practicable, children will have to be bussed or boarded, or parents will have to move to larger centres during term time.

Australia wide the following steps are essential:

- All children must be taught English from pre-school. It is up to parents and communities to decide whether they want to teach their children their natal languages and cultural traditions at home, or whether they want natal languages also taught at school. Learning English is not optional in Australia.
- The hours of the school day, days of the week, and weeks of the year must not be eroded. Children who have to catch up require extended teaching hours.
- Public and private funding should be withdrawn from festivals and other activities held during term until they are rescheduled to vacations. Extended funerals cannot be an excuse for missing school.
- Welfare quarantining or incentives for school attendance are desirable, but if they do not work, truancy laws must be implemented.
- School choice contributes to the maintenance and elevation of education standards. Departments of education should welcome independent school initiatives.

1. Introduction

A year ago, on 7 April 2008, we released *Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory*,¹ which showed that almost 100% of Indigenous children at remote schools in the Northern Territory were leaving school unable to read, write or count. We pointed out that the Northern Territory had accumulated more than 10,000 young Aborigines in their late teens and early 20s who were illiterate and non-numerate. These young men and women cannot qualify for jobs and are condemned to a life on welfare. They cannot get a driving license because they cannot pass the road rules written examination. They cannot compare prices in shops, read directions on a medicine package, or manage budgets. They are not literate and numerate, so they cannot catch a bus and pay the fare. When they leave remote settlements for towns such as Darwin and Alice Springs, they end up in the ‘long grass.’

Indigenous education targets

1989	The MCEETYA Hobart Declaration on Schooling included ‘Agreed National Goals for Schooling’: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a the skills of English literacy, including skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing b the skills of numeracy, and other mathematical skills.
1995	Following its consideration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Taskforce’s report at the December 1995 MCEETYA meeting, Council agreed ... to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> set as an objective that literacy and numeracy outcomes for Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders will be similar to those of non-Indigenous Australians and agreed to review progress towards this objective by the year 2000.
1997	MCEETYA stated: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> That every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standards within four years.
1998	The MCEETYA discussion paper reviewing the Hobart Declaration listed ‘Agreed National Targets’: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase proficiency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Standard Australian English and numeracy. By the year 2002, education and training systems/providers demonstrate significant increase in the proficiency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Standard Australian English to levels comparable to mainstream Australian children. education and training systems/providers were to demonstrate significant increases in the proficiency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in numeracy to levels comparable to mainstream Australian children.
1999	The MCEETYA Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century included as goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> attained the skills of numeracy and English literacy; such that, every student should be numerate, able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students
2008	November—COAG meeting agreed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade December—The MCEETYA Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Australia has failed to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians and addressing this issue must be a key priority over the next decade.

Of the 520,000 Australians who identify as Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders in the censuses, only some 70,000 now live in remote Indigenous settlements. But these 70,000 account for much of the high unemployment, ill health, alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence that are often falsely attributed to all Indigenous Australians. It is not surprising that many illiterate youngsters seethe with anger. No education and its consequence—a life on welfare—is a principal cause of the family and social breakdown that marks many remote settlements.

The crisis in remote Indigenous education has been known and documented for more than 20 years. Indigenous Australians who went to mission schools 40 years ago received a better education than those attending remote schools today. Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers, through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), have been setting targets for ‘closing the gap’ in Indigenous education since 1989.

Targets have moved from ‘fix the problem in four years’ in 1997 to ‘fix half the problem in 10 years’ in 2008.

Literacy and numeracy have not improved in 20 years. Large volumes of taxpayer funds have been committed, but the politically painful, tough policy decisions have not been made. Governments have published hundreds of pages discussing *participation, retention, active engagement, innovative and cohesive services, cross-agency coordination, and cultural appropriateness* that have had no impact on remote schools. MCEETYA ‘declarations’ have gone from commitments to generalities, while specific targets have moved from ‘fix the problem in four years’ in 1997 to ‘fix half the problem in 10 years’ in 2008.

The only tangible policy improvement has been the Howard government’s National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) to test all Australian children annually in literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to be able to monitor school performance and progress consistently over time and across Australia. The publication of the results of the first NAPLAN literacy and numeracy tests held in May 2008 revealed the dismal state of the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children in remote communities. The NAPLAN results completely vindicated and underlined the research findings of *Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* that CIS published in April 2008. At that time, we were accused of writing ‘a flimsy and selective diatribe about education in the Northern Territory.’²

This monograph summarises the 2008 NAPLAN results that show that while South Australia, Western Australia, and Queensland have remote Indigenous education problems, in the Northern Territory Indigenous education is in crisis. Homeland Learning Centres are ‘pretend’ schools that have no place in Australia. The steps that have not been taken to introduce effective schooling for Indigenous children are indicated. At the end of 2008, another 1,000 illiterate and non-numerate youngsters were added to the pool of unemployed Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders languishing in remote settlements; at the end of 2009, 1,000 more will graduate from remote schools. The monograph concludes by listing the measures necessary to ensure that remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait children receive the same education as other Australian children.

2. 2008 NAPLAN results

In July 2006, the MCEETYA decided that all Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 should be tested annually for literacy and numeracy from 2008. The Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) followed up by commissioning the Curriculum Corporation to conduct these tests in 2008 and 2009.

Under NAPLAN, in May 2008 all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 were tested in literacy (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation) and in numeracy. They are to be tested again on May 12, 13 and 14, 2009.

The 2008 NAPLAN results enabled students’ literacy and numeracy results to be compared across Australian states and territories. Chart 1 compares the percentage of students in each state and territory that did not pass; that is, they did not meet the national minimum standard in the 2008 NAPLAN tests. Students that did not meet the national minimum standard fall into three groups.

1. Students who sat the test, but did not meet the national minimum standard.
2. Students who were exempt from the NAPLAN tests. This is a small percentage in each state and territory and consists primarily of students with documented learning difficulties such as autism and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. Exempt students were not assessed and are deemed not to have met the national minimum standard.
3. Students who were not exempt, but did not sit the test. Generally these are the students who were not at school on the days when the tests were administered. In the Northern Territory, however, this group also includes students at schools, Community Education Centres, and Homelands Learning Centres where the NAPLAN tests were not administered to students who were at school on the days of the tests. This continued the practice of prior years where students known to be illiterate did not sit the NT literacy tests and, therefore, did not appear in NT Department of Education literacy and numeracy data.³

Chart 1 shows that in New South Wales, Victoria, and the Australian Capital Territory failure rates were only around 10% until Year 9 when they ranged slightly above 10%. In Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia, however, failure rates were substantially higher. The Northern Territory stood out in the percentage of students who could not meet the national minimum standard—the sum of those not tested, exempt and failed—for all four grades tested and for all four literacy tests and for the numeracy tests. The NT failure rates for all students ranged from a shocking 40% to 60%.

Chart 1: Percentage of students not meeting NAPLAN National Minimum Standards: Years 3 and 5

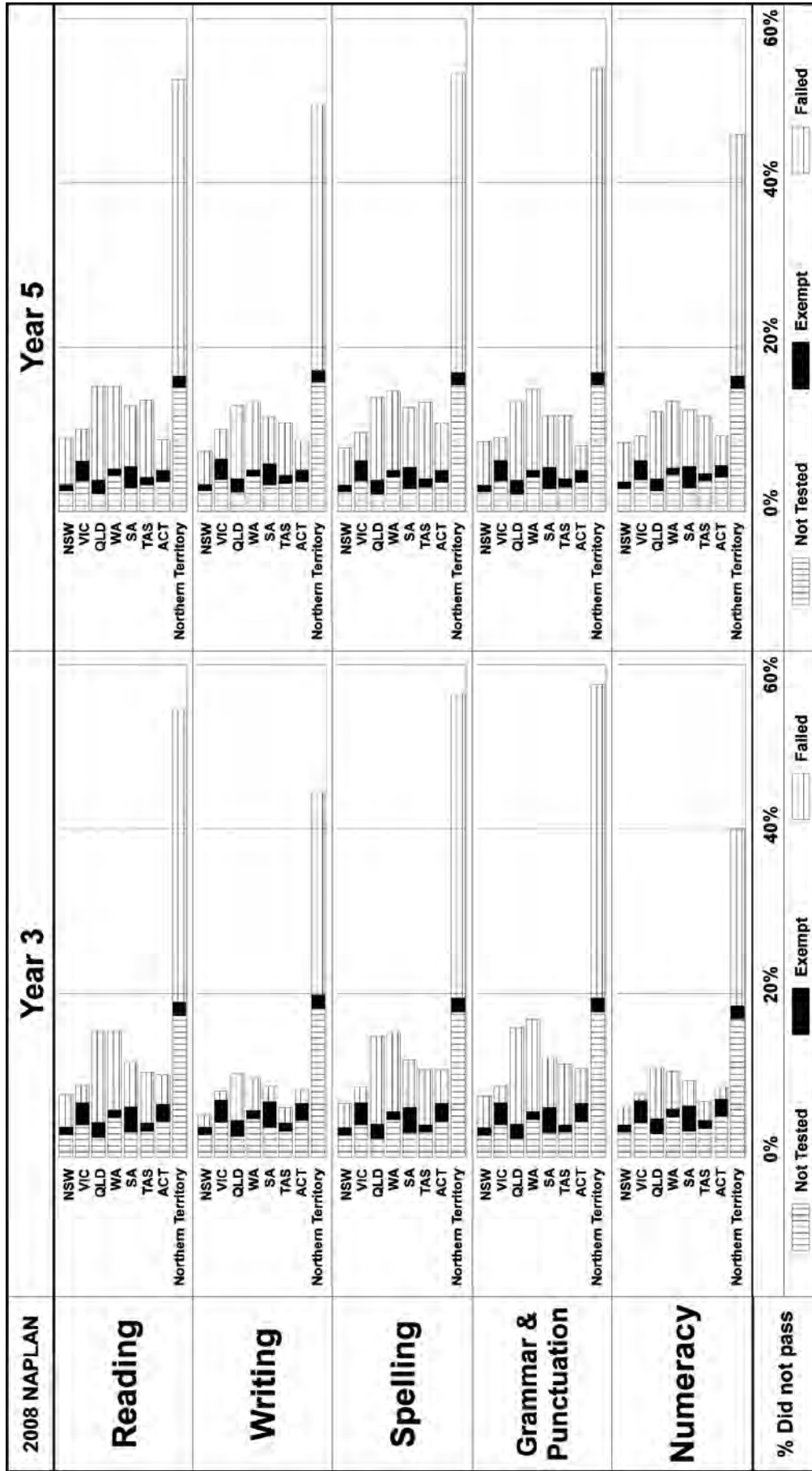


Chart 1: Percentage of students not meeting NAPLAN National Minimum Standards: Years 7 and 9

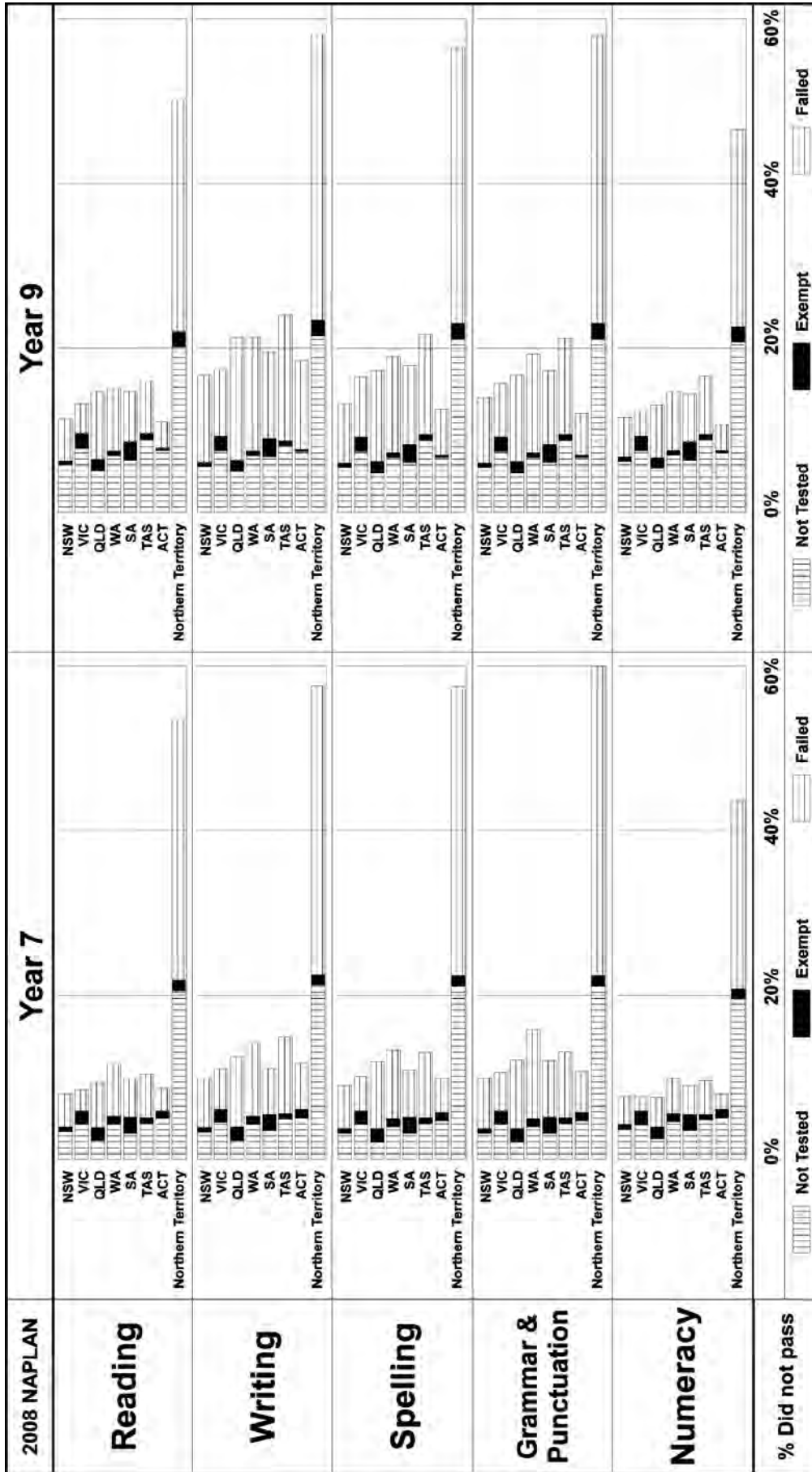


Chart 2: Percentage of Indigenous students failing NAPLAN National Minimum Standards by location

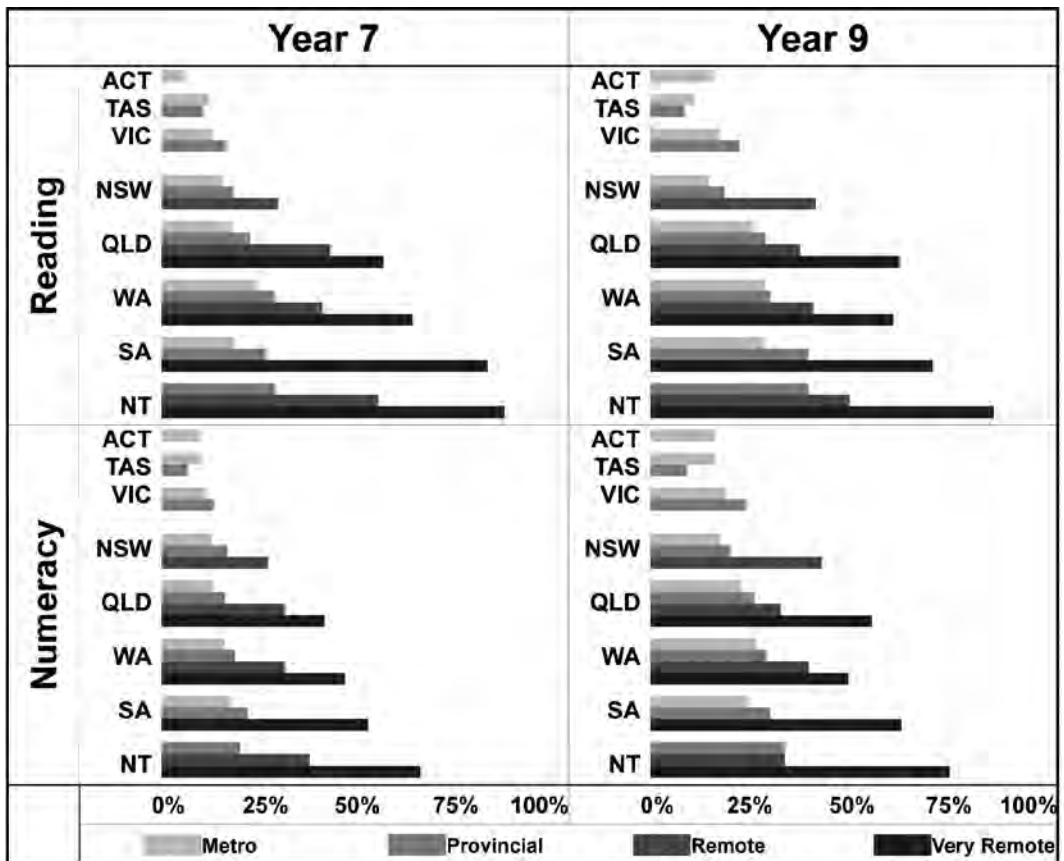
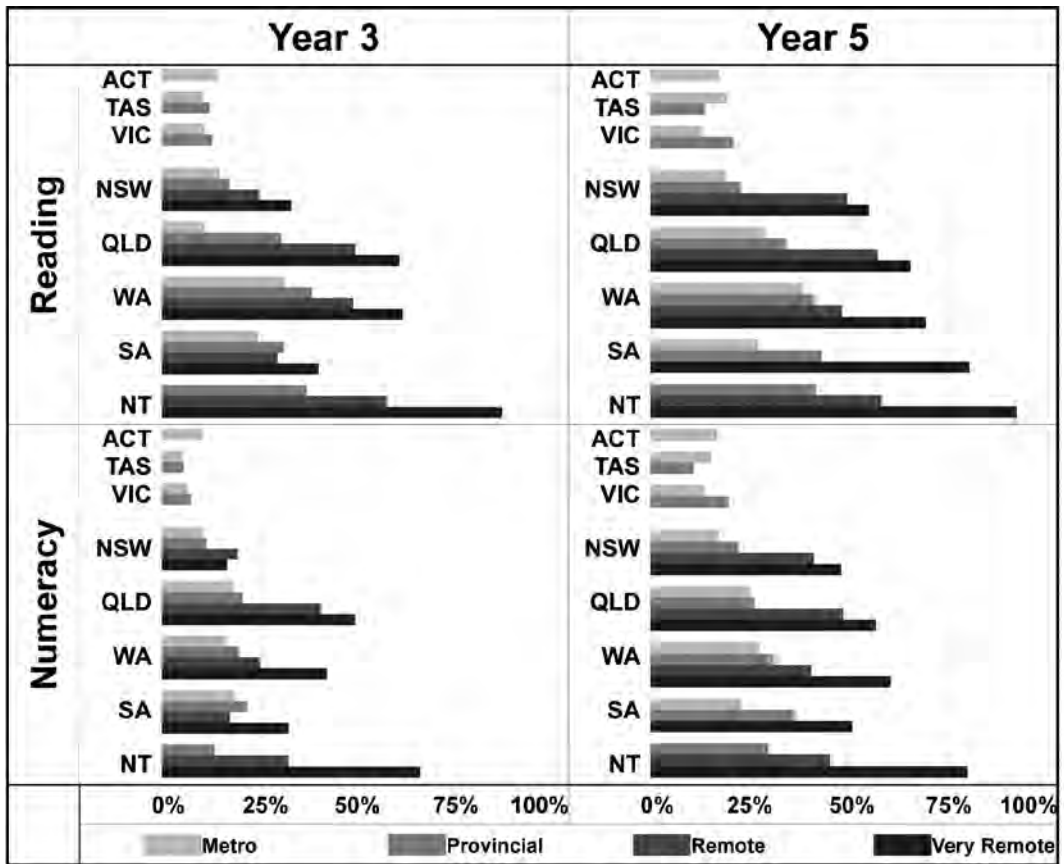


Chart 2 shows failure rates for Indigenous students by location. Students that are not exempt but did not sit the tests are not included in these charts. NAPLAN locations follow the Australian Bureau of Statistics definitions of ‘remoteness.’ This means that major centres, including Alice Springs, Broken Hill, Mount Isa, Port Lincoln, and Broome, are all classified as remote although they have mainstream infrastructure and services such as primary and secondary schools, hospitals, shops, and cinemas. NAPLAN remote school results thus include some mainstream schools where many Indigenous students perform as well as non-Indigenous students. Some of these towns, however, also have non-performing schools, which have separate curriculums and lower teaching standards, that are only attended by Indigenous students.

It is clear that despite islands of welfare dependence, the majority of Indigenous students in metropolitan and provincial areas in Victoria, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory have literacy and numeracy failure rates that match those of other Australian students. Nearly 90% passed the tests. Their parents generally work, and they own or are buying or renting their homes commercially. These families represent more than 60% of the 520,000 Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who identify as ‘indigenous’ in censuses. They live in mainstream Australian society. Their children attend mainstream schools that have mainstream curriculums and are staffed by qualified teachers.

NAPLAN results thus demonstrate that mainstream schooling enables Indigenous children to achieve normal, mainstream literacy and numeracy. There is no ‘gap’ between the literacy and numeracy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The gap is between Indigenous students in mainstream schools, and Indigenous students in non-performing remote schools. The education ‘gap’ is a myth perpetuated to mask the failure of non-performing schools. The improvements in Indigenous literacy, numeracy, and high school retention rates claimed by education departments are almost entirely the result of the movement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to work in the mainstream where they can send their children to mainstream schools.⁴

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The NAPLAN results are unequivocal. Schools, not ethnicity, determine outcomes. Only when school-by-school NAPLAN results are published will the evidence needed to reform non-performing schools be available. Labor recognised the importance of school-by-school reporting when it promised in its 2007 election campaign that ‘a Rudd Labor government will publish the annual results of individual primary and secondary schools on national literacy and numeracy. Publication of school performance information will form an integral part of federal Labor’s plan to improve literacy and numeracy.’ In November 2008, Julia Gillard, the Commonwealth Minister for Education, said, ‘Every school, government or non-government, wherever it is located, whatever its ethos, will provide information about its performance in national tests.’⁵ School-by-school NAPLAN data exist but have not yet been made available to parents and the public. Labor has not yet honoured its election commitment.

Many remote parents, notably in the Northern Territory, are not even aware that their children were supposed to, but did not, sit the NAPLAN tests. Teachers did not think it worthwhile for students to sit the NAPLAN tests if they were unable to read them or complete them. All students in remote schools must sit the NAPLAN tests in May 2009 so that they become part of the school system and so that the real deficiencies of remote schools can be assessed.

The NT Year 12 results support NAPLAN evidence. The Northern Territory Certificate of Education (NTCE) provides recognition that a student has successfully completed the requirements for secondary education in the Northern Territory. In 2008, 154 Indigenous students were awarded their NTCE, and the NT Education Department commented, ‘There was ... a significant 22 per cent increase in the number of Indigenous students completing their NTCE since last year.’⁶ But these students were just 12% of the total Year 12 Indigenous cohort of students as measured by the census. The 22% increase only raised the number of Indigenous students being awarded their NTCE from 10% in 2007 to 12% of Year 12 students in 2008. At this rate of progress, all Indigenous students eligible to complete Year 12 would only be awarded their NTCE in the year 2053, that is, in 44 years’ time.

The NT Department of Education also provides insights into the schools attended by Year 12 Indigenous students. In 2008, all of the 50 students with the highest NTCE/Tertiary Entrance Records scores, and 23 of the 25 students who between them received 34 Merit Awards (for achieving 20 out of 20 for an NTCE subject), attended a mainstream school. Academic subjects such as maths, science, history, and legal studies are marked centrally. Awards in these subjects only went to students at mainstream schools. The two Merit Awards given to students at non-performing remote schools were for 'Art and the Community,' which is marked at the school. The inability of Community Education Centres and other non-performing remote schools to graduate students in the sciences, mathematics and history highlights the separate, 'dumbed-down' curriculums of these schools.

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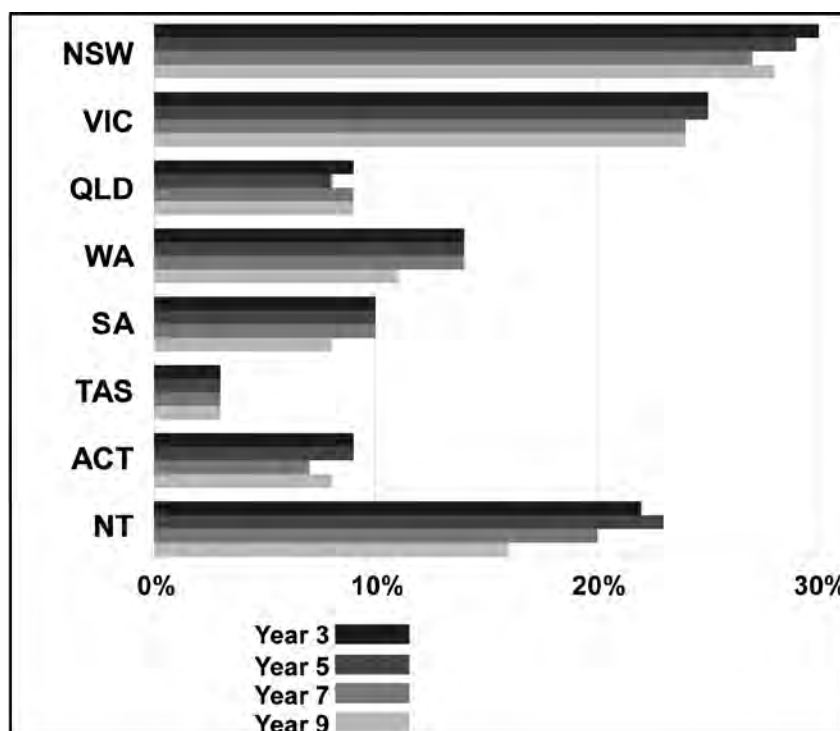
For Australia as a whole, the number of Indigenous students enrolled in Year 12 more than doubled from 2,206 in 1999 to 4,779 in 2008.⁷ These enrolments unfortunately include Year 12 students in non-performing remote schools not working at Year 12 level. Some still cannot read, write or count. The numbers of Indigenous students who have graduated from Year 12 with high enough Tertiary Entrance Records to qualify for academic and professional faculties at universities are only published spasmodically. In Western Australia, of the 369 Aboriginal students in Year 12 in 2007, only 206 met the requirements of a Year 12 Certificate. Of these, only 20 obtained a

high enough Tertiary Entrance Records to be able to enter university.⁸ The number of Indigenous students entering universities is growing, but they are dominantly graduates from mainstream schools, not from remote schools. Their increase is mostly the result of the movement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders out of welfare to jobs in cities and towns.

3. Non-lingual and bilingual education

A language background other than English is not the cause of high Indigenous literacy and numeracy failure rates. Victoria and New South Wales have higher ratios of families where a language other than English is spoken at home than the Northern Territory (Chart 3), but their literacy and numeracy failure rates (Chart 1) are below 10%.

Chart 3: Percentage of students with LBOTE (Learning Background Other Than English) —NAPLAN Reading Assessment, 2008



Virtually all non-Indigenous children in Australia attend schools where tuition is in English except for second language lessons. While a few French, Japanese, and other foreign language independent schools teach in other languages, they also teach English to a high standard. Typically, in Year 12 their students qualify for the International Baccalaureate, which has higher standards than Australian state and territory Year 12 certificates.

All Australian states and territories, including the Northern Territory, provide ESL for migrant children either as components of mainstream schools or, where numbers justify, as annexes to schools. The children in these classes come from a large range of European, Asian, African, and Latin American countries. Many migrant parents choose to maintain fluency in natal languages by continuing to speak them at home. Many also wish their children to retain literacy and cultural studies in their natal languages so that communities of Greek, Italian, and other migrants organise after-school and weekend classes for their children. Australia's culture has been enhanced by the wider knowledge of languages. Most children with a background other than English, however, have the same literacy and numeracy pass rates as children from English-speaking homes because they study mainstream curriculums in mainstream schools. Indigenous children in non-performing remote schools are the only exception. They are being denied the opportunity to become bi- or multi-lingual by misconceived non-lingual programs.

Indigenous bilingual programs have become a political football only because they have failed to deliver literacy and numeracy in any language. So-called 'Indigenous bilingual' programs that mandate education only in natal languages during early years of schooling only pretend to be bilingual. They are responsible for most children leaving the so-called bilingual schools after years of schooling, unable to read, write or count in any language. In literacy terms, these children are non-lingual.

A language background other than English is not the cause of high Indigenous literacy and numeracy failure rates.

Existing bilingual programs in non-performing remote schools are fundamentally flawed. It has long been established that younger children are more receptive to learning a second language than older children and adults. Babies in multilingual societies learn to speak in two or more languages. Several European and Asian countries introduce English in pre-schools, so that by the time children reach secondary school they are well on the way to being fully bilingual, often learning other languages as well. Comparisons of international educational achievements indicate that countries with early language teaching perform well in literacy and numeracy tests.⁹

Western Australia appears to be the most advanced state in delivering education in English. All children are entitled to go to kindergarten at the age of four, and 28 Aboriginal kindergartens have been established. Forty-two community schools provide transition programs from home to school. Two programs foster English language and literacy for Indigenous students. The Aboriginal Literacy Strategy in the four remote districts of Kimberley, the Pilbara, the Mid-West, and Goldfields introduces a daily two-hour session of English language and literacy for every student who attends school. In 2007, it operated in 49 remote schools for the first time covering all four remote districts. Improved attendance was observed. An ESL/Indigenous Speaking Students program that includes staff language training also operates in remote districts.¹⁰ As in the other states and in the Northern Territory, the multiplicity of programs and initiatives, including *Follow the Dream*, *Aboriginal Awards of Achievement*, *Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum*, *Dare to Lead*, and *Leading from the Front*, unfortunately mean that more time is spent on rhetoric and administration than on classroom teaching.

Marion Scrymgour, the former NT Minister of Education and Deputy Chief Minister, recognised that English had to be an essential component of education if Indigenous children were to be able to work and live in Australian society. In October 2008, Scrymgour announced that all schools would teach in English for the first four hours of the day from the beginning of 2009.¹¹

Opponents to this initiative, particularly from the nine schools that had supposed bilingual programs, protested. In November, Scrymgour nevertheless emphasised, 'I'm not pussyfooting around this issue. I think it is very serious.'¹² Opposition continued. In December, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, argued against 'teaching indigenous children dominantly in English on human rights grounds,' citing the

Convention on the Rights of the Child that ‘indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.’

Nobody disputes the right of Indigenous children to speak their own languages at home. But as *The Australian* editorialised, ‘Mr Calma and others need to recognise that lack of basic skills, including English language proficiency, is holding his people back from better lives and job opportunities.’¹³ But in December, Scrymgeour bowed to pressure and announced that the introduction of four-hour teaching in English ‘would be negotiated with each of the Territory’s nine bilingual schools on a case by case basis.’¹⁴

The Executive Director of NT schools, Alan Green, claimed in March 2009 that they ‘had support staff in every bilingual school at the end of last year, [and were] working through with them a plan about how they would go about implementing this (teaching in English for the first four hours) from the beginning of the year.’ But Paul Henderson, the Northern Territory Chief Minister, who added the education portfolio to his responsibilities after Scrymgeour’s resignation from her cabinet positions, said that ‘schools are undertaking the changes at their own pace, and the government is working with them.’¹⁵

The delay and confusion in introducing English teaching, literacy and numeracy in just nine schools shows the inability of the Northern Territory to implement evidence-based policy reform in the face of the opposition of a vocal minority. If teaching only in natal languages for several years was as successful as its proponents claim, NAPLAN results would improve from Year 3 through to Year 9. They do not. Releasing school-by-school NAPLAN results will reinforce evidence that the current program is non-lingual rather than bilingual. Whether children learn multiple languages is a choice that they and their parents must make. Some Indigenous parents want their children to be educated entirely in English at school, while they take responsibility for teaching them their natal language and cultural traditions at home. Others want natal languages also taught at school. Indigenous parents thus face the same choices as other Australians. But learning English is not optional.

Indigenous bilingual programs have become a political football only because they have failed to deliver literacy and numeracy in any language.

4. Attendance and the school year

Indigenous students miss significant portions of the school year because of poor attendance, a shorter school day, week, and year, and institutional diversions from school during term time. Not attending school is widely accepted by many parents and by education departments. Attitudes to attendance, which would not be tolerated by parents or schools in metropolitan areas, are unquestioned in many remote areas. Funding typically depends on enrolments, so that all schools make strenuous efforts to maximise their enrolments. Patrick McCauley reported that in a Catholic school at Wadeye, 731 students were enrolled on the first day of 2008 ‘but the number dropped to about 350 within a week.’ McCauley observed:

On most days there would be no more than 150 children at the school. On census day however, the brightly decorated school bus and two ‘troopies’ handing out lollies and trinkets (not dissimilar to those John Batman offered the Yarra Yarra people two centuries ago) drove round the settlement picking up every child possible. It was not that this was not done every morning, but on census day there was also a showbag of lollies and other small enticements to be had at the end of the day. The census was the benchmark for the funding made available to the school for the following year, so it was important to get as many children to school as possible. On census day it was recorded that there were 400 children attending the school.¹⁶

A Community Education Centre in East Arnhem Land had 700 students enrolled, but only 200 attending school. A surprising 74 students were enrolled in Year 12. Many of these were Assistant Teachers. When they and other ‘phantom’ students were removed from the roll, seven students remained.¹⁷ A comparison with census data suggests that very few Indigenous

primary children are not enrolled in school, but daily attendance falls far short of enrolments.

Departments of education typically blame parents for not sending their children to school. There is no doubt that some remote children are badly nourished, suffer from hearing and other health problems, do not get a night's sleep because of noise and violence, and do not see the point of learning when everyone is on welfare. Some parents are too dysfunctional to send their children to school. But these are a minority of parents and students. Education departments are unwilling to admit that badly run schools with dumbed-down curriculums and poor teaching are major reasons for non-attendance. Children become used to not going to school. In settlements that have no shopping malls, cinemas or other entertainments, it should not be difficult to make schooling attractive. Properly run, challenging schools, such as Canteen Creek and Gawa Christian School in the Northern Territory, are examples of performing schools with high attendance.

The linking of welfare quarantining to school attendance through Centrelink is having positive attendance effects. Cape York is following a more positive approach, with the Family Responsibilities Commission seeking to support parents so that they fulfill their obligations to their children.¹⁸ Since 1999, Mexico has also been using a carrot rather than a stick. In the *progresas* programs, families are rewarded for positive behaviour such as sending children to school rather than penalised for failing to comply with social norms. Children are said to concentrate more on learning because they are aware that they are contributing to family income.¹⁹ Such more positive policies are now used by several countries.

Where neither penalties nor incentives work, enforcing existing school attendance laws should not be the responsibility of teachers but of police. With the extension of special funding for 73 NT settlements for policing, enforcing school attendance should be a high priority. Noel Pearson has suggested that because compliance with truancy laws has all but been abandoned in Australia, attendance should at least be strictly reported.²⁰

Research about children in US schools who fail to meet literacy and numeracy standards indicates that such children require extended hours of schooling to catch up with mainstream students.²¹ Their schools therefore provide early morning classes, after-school classes up to 8pm in the evening and later, and Saturday classes. Libraries are open during these hours, computers are available to students, and staff are on duty to assist children.

Many non-performing remote schools, in marked contrast, are open for fewer hours per day, fewer days a week, and fewer weeks per year than other Australian schools. The few exceptional schools that enable children to catch up with mainstream standards are also open for extended hours and at weekends.

Short teaching days—averaging two and a half to four hours—are typical of the Homeland Learning Centres that rely on drive-in or fly-in teachers. These teachers' travel is generally included in their working day. Their terms of employment do not allow for travel time outside school hours. They generally only teach two or three days in a week. Most Homeland Learning Centres are not staffed five days a week. Children who turn up at school are often bored by morning break or lunch time; when they go home for a snack they typically do not return. Such boredom is also evident in Community Education Centres, and other remote schools and colleges, where students start to evaporate during the day. Theoretically, before the drive-in and fly-in teachers arrive, and after they leave, untrained and poorly paid Assistant Teachers are in charge of classes. It is hardly surprising that morning bells are not rung until qualified teachers arrive. Short school hours are too common to attract comment in many remote schools. Short school hours mean that by the time students reach Year 4, many may have missed an entire year of schooling.

In the Northern Territory, Queensland, and western New South Wales, the remote school year is shorter than in mainstream schools. A spokeswoman for the Queensland Education Department sought to explain that 'schools in the far north and west of the state finished a week earlier because of the remoteness of their location ... teachers made up the lost week of work throughout the year and the students were not disadvantaged by it.'²² The NAPLAN results tell a different story. Northern Territory Homeland Learning Centres commonly start each term a week late and end

Not attending school is widely accepted by many parents and by education departments.

each term a week early. Eight weeks are lost every year.

In contrast to mainstream schools where cultural events are integrated into the curriculum or take place in school holidays, Indigenous festivals disregard school terms so that children often miss weeks of school to participate. State agricultural shows, in contrast, are held in school vacations. Yet the highly regarded Garma festival in East Arnhem Land is held during the school term. Its major sponsors, including Commonwealth and NT governments, Rio Tinto Alcan, and the Telstra Foundation, claim that they support Indigenous education. In fact, they undermine school attendance by funding these and other events that take Indigenous children out of school. The Commonwealth government also funds the 'Community Festivals for Education Engagement' program. Under this program, 13 Indigenous festivals will be held during 2009 in country locations in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory.

Students leave school during term time ... to learn 'it's fun to be at school every day'.

With the exception of Broome, all are to be held during school term time rather than during school holidays. They range from two to nine days. Festival activities include 'music, song-writing and story-telling ... film, singing, writing, sport, dance and art.'²³ Students leave school during term time to attend government funded festivals to learn 'it's fun to be at school every day' and 'to achieve a higher standard of reading and writing and maths.'²⁴

Extended funerals are another major cause of long absences from school. In remote settlements where work commitments are absent in welfare societies, funerals have developed into the primary form of social interaction. At best they have become frequent, extended social get-togethers that take up weeks of time and conflict with the ability of parents to turn up at work or students to attend school. At worst, they have become lengthy gatherings with rampant alcohol and drug abuse, combined with outbursts of violence. In some settlements, people receive CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) payments at the rate of four hours a day for attendance at funerals. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who work and live in mainstream society, although no less sorrowful when a beloved family member dies, take only two or three days to express their grief. They do not remove their children from school for several weeks.

5. The state of remote schools

NAPLAN (Chart 2) shows a clear divide in Indigenous failure rates between low rates in metropolitan and provincial schools, and high rates in remote and very remote schools, indicating blocks of non-performing schools. While remote and very remote schools in the four states have high failure rates, the Northern Territory is even further removed from Australian norms in every test in every school year. Indigenous education in the Northern Territory is truly of Third World dimensions.

Non-performing remote schools are characterised by lower standards in three areas: buildings and equipment, curriculum and teaching, and administration.

The physical infrastructure of remote schools ranges from recently constructed or refurbished high standard and well-equipped schools to ones that are a disgrace to Australia. While some separate lower standard buildings and poor equipment are evident in remote schools in all states, the NT Department of Education admits that all of the NT Homeland Learning Centres are not standard schools. The NT 2008–09 budget allocated \$2 million each to two Homeland Learning Centres to turn them into schools. This shows how far they are from a standard school. Many Homeland Learning Centres are built of unlined corrugated iron, and do not have electricity or ablutions blocks. Unpainted walls and shutters make for gloomy interiors. Septic tank toilet blocks remain a rarity; 'long drop' dunnies are common. Classrooms are typically fewer and smaller than in normal schools. In some schools, there would not be enough desks and chairs if all the enrolled children actually turned up. There may be no secure storage for teaching materials and equipment such as radios, DVD players, and computers. In some schools, there are no books, there is no paper, and there are no pens or pencils. The alphabets, numbers, and other educational aids that hang on the corrugated iron walls would only qualify for a rubbish bin in a mainstream school. Remote schools dependent on diesel generators for electricity may not have fuel reserves. When there is no fuel, there is no electricity so students sit in semi-darkness. Fly-in teachers

usually do not have staff room facilities. To be able to teach for two or three consecutive days in a Homeland Learning Centre, some teachers try to stay for a night or two, but this is difficult without accommodation, cooking facilities, showers, or toilets. They camp in broken down huts or on school verandas. In extreme cases, they have camped in sand dunes without water, power or toilet facilities. In some settlements, there is no shade so that teachers suffer from dehydration and even sunburn.

Separate, sub-standard curriculums and limited teaching capacities are a second characteristic of non-performing remote schools. Dumbed-down curriculums do not develop literacy and maths skills by building on successive blocks of knowledge. In small schools, children are divided into junior classes of five- to 12-year-olds, and senior classes of those over 13 years of age. Mixed classes require considerable skill if children are to progress from grade to grade, but all the children in a class are often given the same work so that the younger ones are struggling while the older ones are bored by repetition. After a generation of educational neglect, most children come from homes in which most adults are illiterate and non-numerate. These children receive little help at home with school work. Most children in remote schools either speak natal languages or Aboriginal English. Without ESL teaching skills NAPLAN results will not improve. Children taking dictation in classes write down letters at random. They may be encouraged to produce meaningless scrawls in examinations which are then marked as passes because they are merely deemed to be illegible.²⁵ Children who may be quite good at maths fail numeracy tests because they cannot read the questions on test papers. Remote schools do not expand children's horizons through history, geography or science. They do not have the facilities to use art and drama to supplement lessons. Secondary education is dire. Most remote secondary teaching in the Northern Territory has been in Community Education Centres and other schools with a separate dumbed-down 'post primary' curriculum. Until recently, except on the initiative of dedicated teachers, a secondary curriculum was specifically not taught in remote schools. The first remote children to complete Year 12 certificates and achieve tertiary entrance scores that enabled them to attend university were at Kalkaringi School in 2003. But generally, because remote Year 10 graduates were so poorly prepared that they could not do Year 11 work in the high schools in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tenant Creek, or Nhulunbuy, the NT Department of Education extended remote Community Education Centres to Years 11 and 12. Students graduating from these classes, after years of attending school, are often still illiterate and non-numerate.

Much of the time, the staff in front of a class are untrained Assistant Teachers. Untrained teachers' aides work with trained teachers in the class room throughout Australia. They print and distribute teaching materials and art supplies and repeat lessons with slow learners. In the Northern Territory's remote schools, however, such untrained helpers are termed 'Assistant Teachers' if they have 'traditional cultural knowledge.' Some Assistant Teachers have had rudimentary literacy and numeracy courses at Batchelor College, often many years ago, or have attended other short courses. Most Assistant Teachers are thus semi-literate and numerate or totally illiterate and non-numerate. They have been neglected and inequitably treated for years. In October 2008, 126 Assistant Teachers were to be moved from CDEP to NT public sector employment with Commonwealth funding. The Commonwealth has also funded training for them. Some, however, did not pass the 'working with children' police checks when they were administered for the first time.

Separate sub-standard administrative arrangements are the third characteristic of non-performing remote schools. The student-to-teacher staffing ratios that apply in mainstream schools are not applied in many remote schools. Staffing rules for Homeland Learning Centres are contradictory. Although 12 children are supposed to qualify a settlement for a Homeland Learning Centre, a school needs 17 children to qualify for a permanent teacher. Other NT Education Department rules mandate a teacher for 22 children for a primary school, 17 children for a middle school, and 14 for a senior secondary class. Homeland Learning Centres that are entitled under NT Department of Education rules to one or two permanent teachers plus

Non-performing remote schools are characterised by lower standards in three areas: buildings and equipment, curriculum and teaching, and administration.

administrative and cleaning staff may be lucky if they see a fly-in teacher for a few hours one or two days a week. Seats on charter flights to Homeland Learning Centres are subject to competition from health and other service workers and visitors to settlements. In the wet season, flights are often delayed or cancelled by poor weather. Other staff have never undergone the 'working with children' police checks. Normal oversight standards and 'duty of care' procedures are not followed. There may be no staff providing playground supervision at recess, lunch, and before and after school. Students are transported in unregistered school vehicles driven by unlicensed drivers.

Payment of the AIC allowance to parents of children attending Homeland Learning Centres confirms that these are pretend schools.

Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) payments compensate parents of students 'who are unable to attend an appropriate state school on a daily basis, mainly because of geographic isolation.'²⁶ Payment of the AIC allowance to parents of children attending Homeland Learning Centres confirms that these are *pretend* schools. As parents are illiterate, the 'hub' school for the Homeland Learning Centre administers the AIC program on behalf of the parents, taking an administrative cut of between 15% and 50%. Parents do not realise that they are only receiving Commonwealth AIC payments because the Northern Territory has not provided a real school.

The Northern Territory has allowed unqualified staff and community activists to make decisions on school administration, school staffing, and curriculums that should be made only by qualified departmental staff. This has created an atmosphere of intimidation. There are several instances where teachers who tried to enforce rules have been moved to other schools or positions.

The NT Department of Education recorded 46 Homeland Learning Centres in 2008.²⁷ It was announced in the 2008–09 budget that two of these would become primary schools. At this rate of conversion, it would take 22 years to turn the remaining Homeland Learning Centres into schools. The Northern Territory also has 15 Community Education Centres that are larger and better equipped than Homeland Learning Centres, but they also have dumbed-down curriculums and do not follow mainstream administrative rules and practices. Three Homeland Learning Centres and five schools are run by the Catholic Education Office. Many of the Catholic schools are also minimally equipped. They follow the same dumbed-down curriculum as government schools. Western Australia has 26 remote community schools.

Exceptional remote communities and schools exist. Well-managed remote communities that do not tolerate alcohol, drug abuse, noisy nights, and violence have been requesting the permanent resident teachers to which their numbers of school age children entitle them.²⁸ Their schools are not covered in graffiti. Parents send their children to school in spite of poor curriculums and inadequate teaching. A handful of remote schools are working to mainstream standards and achieving mainstream results. But identifying the remote schools that perform and those that do not will only be possible when NAPLAN school-by-school results become available. The dispiriting NAPLAN evidence indicates that most of the Indigenous remote schools are not performing.

Most of the Indigenous remote schools are sharply distinguished from schools in remote locations that are dominantly attended by non-Indigenous students. Primary and secondary schools in Nhulunbuy differ sharply from the Yirrkala Community Education Centre that is only a 20-minute drive away. Weipa schools are different from the notoriously non-performing Arakun School. Non-Indigenous teachers in non-performing remote schools typically teach their own children through distance education or send them to boarding schools. Only in those remote schools that are working to mainstream standards is there no apartheid. The children of non-Indigenous teachers sit side by side with Indigenous children.

Independent schools and scholarships

In the CIS Issue Analysis No. 72 'School Autonomy: A Key Reform for Improving Indigenous Education,' Julie Novak introduced the case for school choice as a key to improving Indigenous education.²⁹ In mainstream Australia, families can choose independent schools for their children as a matter of course. A significant proportion of parents in non-remote Australia make that choice so that Australia in general, and the Northern Territory in particular, has

legislative frameworks for the setting up of independent schools. A range of independent schools in major centres provides alternative options for Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous parents. But independent schools in remote settlements have been rare in the past. Dissatisfaction with non-performing schools has turned the attention of parents in these settlements to the need to organise independent schools, first at the secondary level, but more recently at the primary level.

Djarragun College at Gordonvale, south of Cairns, is one of the older independent Indigenous schools. Starting with a small enrolment in 2001, it has grown to 400 day and boarding students that reach from a preparatory year to a post Year 12 class. The school is managed by an independent board and owes its success to an outstanding principal. In addition to classrooms and playing fields, its facilities include a library complex, arts and craft rooms, and a hospitality kitchen for vocational courses. Starting with many disturbed children, its emphasis on excellence in education has made it so successful that it is now attracting non-Indigenous students.

It would take 22 years to turn the remaining Homeland Learning Centres into schools.

Nyangatjatjara College was established by the Nyangatjatjara Aboriginal Corporation because of its discontent with government schools. A fine boarding facility at Yulara has been built with campuses in the corporation's three constituent settlements at Impanpa, Docker River, and Mutitjulu. The corporation intended to prepare children through vocational courses for work in the Yulara tourist resort, but the college is struggling with basic literacy and numeracy. The college structure is that boys board for one term at Yulara and then return to outlying campuses while girls occupy the boarding facilities for a term. In March 2009, however, the boarding facility did not have any pupils, and 51 children were being taught by a single teacher at Docker River.³⁰

Tiwi islanders, despairing of NT government and Catholic Education Office schools, established the Tiwi College as a secondary school. The Tiwi Education Board has chosen the NT Christian Schools Association to run the college. While some Tiwi children, who had managed to get some primary education despite the islands' dysfunctional primary schools, left for high school in Darwin and further afield, the first Tiwi College intake of 70 students in 2008 had to adapt to regular school hours and discipline while learning the alphabet and elementary arithmetic. The college is thus still in transition to becoming a real secondary school. Tiwi islanders are becoming increasingly aware that unless they reform primary schooling, Tiwi College will continue to struggle and will be unable to meet the ambitious agenda of educating their children to mainstream standards.

The unwillingness and inability of the NT Education Department to reform remote education is driving a more general impetus toward independent, autonomous but professionally managed primary schools. Independent schools are flexible in assisting with community programs such as shops, arts and crafts, transport, and other infrastructure in addition to providing mainstream education.

Unfortunately, despite its own poor remote school record, the NT Department of Education has not been supportive of communities wishing to explore the option of independent schools. To discourage communities from opting for independent schools, the Department has offered enticements such as new classrooms, 4-wheel-drive vehicles, and the increased staffing numbers to which communities have long been entitled but haven't received.

Scholarship programs for academically promising youngsters have been another approach to overcoming the deficiencies of remote education at the secondary level. The Cape York Institute initiated a scholarship program of sending promising students to mainstream boarding schools. Some have now gone on to university. The Anindilyakwa Land Council on Groote Eylandt sends promising secondary students to interstate boarding schools. Indigenous students from western New South Wales are attending boarding schools in Sydney. There are other scholarship programs so that, in total, perhaps 2,000 academically promising students from remote areas are now in mainstream boarding schools. Where selection has been by academic criteria, most of these students have achieved high success rates, and many have moved on to universities and other post-secondary education. Selection by football ability has been less successful. Scholarship programs are a valuable option, but cannot substitute for the reform of remote schools.

The publication of school-by-school NAPLAN results is essential so that parents and communities know which schools—government and independent—are reaching national minimum standards. Parents and communities have to be able to compare schools to evaluate their options.

6. Has there been progress during 2008?

Early in 2008 the Commonwealth government provided nearly \$100 million in additional funding for NT education.³¹ Fifty of the 200 Commonwealth funded teachers that were to be added by 2011 were supposed to be in place by September 2008.³² The states and the Northern Territory have also increased funding for Indigenous education. But there have been no substantive policy changes.

The Northern Territory listed the contributions that it made during 2008 to ‘close the gap.’ These included some additions to resources, but the policy changes needed to end separate curriculum and administrative standards in remote standards in remote schools are missing.

Northern Territory ‘Progress on Key Initiatives to Close the Gap’³³ in 2008

Three additional mobile pre-schools in Central Australia in Lasseter, Tanami and Bandy.
10 additional teachers were placed in remote schools and Indigenous education units.
15 additional classrooms were completed (location not stated) and another 16 were commenced in remote communities.
School attendance teams that track students have received three additional staff members; the Six-Point Plan of Attendance was implemented. School responses in Darwin, Katherine, Tenant Creek, and Alice Springs camps were to identify the needs of children living in these camps.
A ‘value of schooling’ campaign was launched on 2 June 2008.
Planning and community consultation was commenced for two Homeland Learning Centres at Yilpara (East Arnhem) and Ariparra (Utopia, Central Australia) for upgrading to school status in 2008–09. They were informed in February 2009 that this would take until 2010.
IT improvement included improved band width in some remote schools, all new teachers to be provided with laptops. Phase 1 of local area network upgrades in some remote schools to be completed and funding provided to schools to support the Australian Government’s Computer fund initiative.
15 Community Education Centres are to be upgraded, beginning in Ramagining, Ngukurr, Alekarenge, Yuendumu and Yirrkala.
The Northern Territory agreed to support operational costs for three regional hostels that are under consideration by the Australian Government.
School and community partnership agreements were signed with Top End Clontarf football programs at the dominantly non-Indigenous Palmerston High, Katherine High and Sanderson Middle Schools High, and with the Smith Family to provide administrative support for the Indigenous Student mentorship program in Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine, and Ramagining and with the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory Youth crime Prevention and Reduction program.
Negotiations commenced for the establishment of the Early Childhood Centre of excellence and for a research program involving Charles Darwin University and the Menzies School of health Research. A senior officer was seconded to the Menzies School.
Specialist Enhanced Literacy teams were formed to provide support to 27 schools to develop staff and implement transferable literacy programs in remote communities.
22 houses for teachers were built in remote communities.
Remote Learning Partnership Agreements were signed with Yirrkala and Ramagining and were expected to be signed with another 12 of the larger remote settlements.

The NT Department of Education was extremely proud of its comic book *Going Places* produced in Central Australia 'with key messages for Indigenous students in Years 10–12. It boasted that this was 'the first comic book with a story line created by Indigenous students about their issues relating to 'moving into a town from a remote community to gain further education.'³⁴

Under the Commonwealth government's 'An Even Start'³⁵ program, students who were exempt from, or sat but did not pass benchmark literacy and numeracy tests in 2007, were each eligible for \$700 of remedial tuition. Parents had the choice of whether the tuition would be delivered by their children's school, or by a private tutor chosen by the parent. Homeland Learning Centres, some Community Education Centres and other remote schools did not administer the tests in 2007. Parents of these students were not informed of the existence of the scheme, and by not sitting the tests the students were automatically ineligible for the remedial tuition they so desperately needed. The NT Department of Education confirmed in late December 2008 that not one child from Homeland Learning Centres had been registered for the scheme. A West Australian Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme for Year 4, 6 and 9 students who had failed or nearly failed the previous years' standard tests appears to have been more successful. When re-tested at the end of the program, 'on average, these students had gained considerable literacy and numeracy skills.'³⁶

Teachers in NT remote schools receive subsidised housing, extra leave, assistance with electricity costs, up to three airfares annually, remote study leave and freight subsidies to compensate them for 'remoteness.' Teachers complain that instead of staffing classrooms with qualified teachers, the NT Department of Education is recruiting *training and employment coordinators, school attendance officers, youth development coordinators*, and other supernumeraries. The bulk of principals' and assistant principals' time is taken up with negotiating *partnerships* and reporting on the other *initiatives* and *programs* that substitute for education. Teachers also complain so much about the poor management and rigidity of the NT Department of Education that it is impossible to evaluate to what extent the recruitment of teachers is a problem of remoteness and to what extent teachers are discouraged by Department practices. Homeland Learning Centres such as Mirrngatja must certainly discourage recruitment.

The NT Department of Education has not been supportive of communities wishing to explore the option of independent schools.

7. Conclusion

The failures of remote education are systemic. Current government approaches are not evidence-based and have therefore been unsuccessful.

NAPLAN results show that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attend mainstream schools in Victoria, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory have mainstream achievement levels. While a handful of exceptional remote schools work to mainstream standards, non-performing remote schools deprive their students of the life skills that every Australian needs. Low achievement is not a problem of Indigenous children but of non-performing remote schools.

Governments will need time to make budget appropriations for building and refurbishing schools, equipment, and houses for teachers; for advertising and letting tenders; and for construction. This suggests a three-year timetable.

Mainstream curriculums and administrative rules, which already apply in remote schools attended by non-Indigenous children, could be in place in all remote schools by the beginning of the 2010 school year. The current recession has already increased the availability of qualified teachers. Supply is likely to increase further during the next two years so that additional qualified teachers could be available as soon as buildings and equipment are ready.

Non-performing remote schools are only a very small proportion of the total number of schools in the states. In the Northern Territory, there are probably about 80 non-performing remote schools out of a total of some 200 government and 50 independent schools. Communities currently discussing a change to an independent school could have such a school operational within three years.

A three-year timetable is realistic if there is the political will to transform non-performing schools and bring remote Indigenous literacy and numeracy to mainstream levels. Australia has the resources, and it must find the political will to transform non-performing schools. Non-specific targets and decade-long timeframes are no longer acceptable. MCEETYA must commit to bringing remote schools to mainstream standards within three years.

Homeland Learning Centres in the Northern Territory are the most visible evidence that separate is not equal. They must disappear, not in 22 years as presently envisaged, but within three years. Where there are sufficient numbers of students, Homeland Learning Centres must be transformed into schools with full-time qualified teachers. Alternatives must be found for smaller groups of children. If they cannot be taught by distance education, like other small groups of Australian children, they will have to be bussed, boarded Monday to Friday, or boarded during term time. Alternatively, their parents must move to larger centres during term time. The NT Department of Education must take back the responsibility for running its schools from unqualified staff and community activists to ensure that education priorities are met. Assistant Teachers cannot be left hanging. They can either be employed as teachers' aides or enrolled in courses that will give them nationally recognised teaching qualifications.

Throughout Australia, policy reform must tackle inadequate school buildings and equipment, introduce mainstream curriculums and teaching standards, and apply the administrative rules of other Australian schools.

Learning English is not optional. All children must learn English from pre-school so that they can pass NAPLAN tests from Year 3. This does not affect bilingual programs, but it excludes non-lingual programs.

Cultural activities are valuable, but they are not a substitute for school attendance. Festivals should be scheduled during school vacations. Extended time away from school for funerals cannot be justified. Incentives that reward school attendance have a role to play, but truancy is a matter of law. Attendance must be enforced.

Chronically short school days, weeks and years in remote schools are associated with high NAPLAN failure rates. Experience with remedial teaching indicates that students require additional school hours to catch up. Short hours in non-performing schools must end.

School choice is essential for raising standards. Where communities chose to establish an independent school, their decision should be supported by education departments. Education options include government and independent schools, boarding, and distance education. All must be professionally managed to meet standards. The publication of individual NAPLAN school-by-school results is essential if parents are to be able to evaluate schooling alternatives.

Aboriginal and Torres Islander children in remote communities must not be viewed as 'different' from other Australian children. So long as cultural traits justify the removal of children from mainstream literacy and numeracy, science, and humanities classes, remote schools will fail. All Australian children deserve the same high standards of education.

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