ISSUEANALYSIS

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What is working in good schools in remote indigenous communities?

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- In remote community schools, children often miss one or two days of school a week. A majority cannot do maths or read at their age level, and few ever do so beyond the level of an eight-year-old. As many as half do not make the transition to secondary school and only a handful obtain a Year 12 certificate.
- School attendance, achievement and retention are among the *minimum* requirements for a good school education. Children who leave school unable to read or write at their age level and unused to a five-day-a-week work ethic will find only limited social and economic opportunities open to them. Knowing how schools perform on these most basic measures allows us to recognise and replicate successful programmes and to jettison programmes that might look good but are ineffective.
- Too often, schools are making excuses. They say that even well managed schools with good teachers have little influence over attendance, are unable to disguise the plain hard work involved in phonics and times tables, and have little chance of overcoming the results of family dysfunction, violence and chronic poor health.
- But some remote schools are reporting much higher rates of attendance, achievement and retention. So what is working in good schools in remote indigenous communities?
- On the school side, evidence-based remedial skills programmes, secondary school readiness programmes, and secondary boarding schools are some initiatives that have shown the potential to achieve results. In the case of literacy programmes, for example, research has shown that whole language instruction alone is not effective for 20 to 25% of children, who need intensive, systematic, skills-based instruction. Some good schools are already seeing results from evidence-based programmes like 'Scaffolding Literacy' and MULTILIT.
- On the community side, school readiness and attendance initiatives have shown promise, at least in the short term. Some school readiness programmes are now helping to develop the positive parenting behaviours that they need to achieve the mainstream outcomes to which they aspire for their children. Kuranda District State School is already seeing results from its 'Families as First Teachers' project.
- Many of the school-side initiatives at good schools are remedial and many of the community-side initiatives only boost demand in the short term.
- The best results come from a combination of good teaching and management on the school side, teamed with support and determination on the community side. Warrego Primary School and the 'Every Child is Special' programme are two initiatives that represent the way forward.
- Good schools can and do make a difference. We need to stop making excuses for poor school education in communities and to start learning from what is working, inside and outside communities.

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Introduction

In early February, Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop placed school performance squarely on the election agenda. She argued in favour of publishing attendance and performance data, establishing merit pay for teachers and giving more autonomy to principals, and she is seeking support from her state and territory counterparts.[1]

A genuine debate about what we expect from our schools—and from our students and their families —is keenly needed. For remote community schools, this focus on school performance is particularly overdue. Rates of attendance, achievement in literacy and numeracy, and retention and completion are chronically low in many remote community schools across the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

There is no doubt that remote community children *do* start school behind

Against the odds, some remote community schools are achieving better results. So what is working? This report looks at the school-side and community-side interventions with which some good schools are trying to break the cycle of low achievement afflicting remote community school education.

1. School performance matters

It has been asserted too often that indigenous communities are the cause of their own educational failure. Even well managed schools with good teachers are said to have little influence over attendance, to be unable to disguise the plain hard work involved in phonics and times tables, and to have little chance of overcoming the results of family dysfunction, violence and chronic poor health.

There is no doubt that remote community children *do* start school behind. They often have little grasp of standard spoken English. One reason that remote community children have this disadvantage is that much of the current generation of parents left the school system without basic literacy. Children are therefore growing up in low-literacy home environments and not benefiting from the same passive exposure to spoken and written English that other children do.

But does this mean that school performance does not matter? For children in remote communities to receive even an average education, their schools need to put in a better than average performance. Just because some good ideas—such as teacher bonuses—may not always be well implemented, does not mean they cannot work well. The challenges facing remote community schools may be difficult to overcome but they are not impossible, as some schools are showing.

2. Evaluating school performance

There is ongoing debate in education policy circles about evaluating school performance. Some argue school education is not only about academic achievement and say that some important educational outcomes—like self-esteem, values and ethics—cannot be measured in school performance data. Geoff Bateman from Woolanging Homeland Christian College is one school principal who takes a broader view of school success. Real school success, he told *The Australian* in late 2006, is about children having self-confidence and a vision of their future. Literacy and numeracy are important, he continued, but it is more important for children to say 'I can start to paint a picture of a future and put myself in it'.[2]

Others argue that it is unhelpful to release data on how schools perform against standards, such as tertiary entrance rankings. A review of school performance data in 2003 found that states and territories collect extensive data but tend to closely guard it.[3] In New South Wales, for example, education regulations made in 2001 prevent the publication of external test results that rank or compare the performance of schools.[4] Other states, including Victoria and Queensland, have moved toward greater disclosure of information about schools. The Western Australian Department of Education and Training also decided in 2006 to release individual school data on attendance, literacy

and numeracy.[5] (Unfortunately, it did not release literacy and numeracy benchmark data for schools with fewer than ten children in a grade cohort and this excluded the vast majority of remote community schools.)

It is certainly true that school education is not only about academic attainment. But school attendance, achievement and retention are among the *minimum* requirements for a good school education. Knowing how schools perform on these most basic measures—getting children there, teaching them and keeping them there—is helpful. It allows us to recognise and replicate successful programmes and to jettison programmes that might look good but are ineffective.

Without the literacy and numeracy skills, and the discipline that children learn from at least ten years of regular school attendance and participation, the vast majority of children will find it difficult to thrive after school—regardless of their level of self-confidence. Children who leave school unable to read or write at their age level and unused to a five-day-a-week work ethic will find only limited social and economic opportunities open to them. If children from remote communities 'need to be able to move between their own communities and the wider society, where many of them will go on to work and study', as Bateman told *The Australian* that they do, then a vision of their future will bring them little joy if they are not armed with the basic skills to make that vision a reality.[6]

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It is therefore not enough simply to claim that programmes are working. Programmes must be evaluated based on data, such as improvements in school achievement, attendance or retention. It is a position that Robert Somerville, Director of Aboriginal Education Training and Services in Western Australia, firmly supports. He says that no matter how popular or well-meaning a programme might be, if the data does not show improvement then it is not working. 'We need to set substantial goals and then work to meet them,' he told the *Dare to Lead* project, 'rather than saying "this is a really cool programme we're running" and dodging away from the fact that the results just aren't there.'[7]

Ideally, the performance of school education programmes should be evaluated on the basis of randomised trials,[8] like the well-known Perry Preschool Project in the United States.[9] Randomised trials involve the random sampling of participants and their random assignment into two groups, an experiment group and a control group. They allow for fair comparison between the outcomes achieved by children inside and outside a given education programme. Natural experiments and experiments without a control group do not provide the same rigorous evaluation.[10]

Randomised trials, otherwise known as true experiments, are few and far between in the Australian social policy landscape. Pilot programmes seldom involve a control group, let alone random assignment. The result is that gains may be attributable as much to the extra attention, for example, as to the programme methodology.[11]

In the absence of randomised trial data, this report highlights programmes that—with the caveats above—appear to be working well and producing improvements in attendance, achievement and retention among remote community students. This report does not contain field research and relies on the data provided by the programmes. There may be other programmes that are working well; there may even be better programmes. It is hoped that the architects of good programmes will rigorously evaluate them and share their findings.

3. How are schools performing?

Children in many remote communities attend school irregularly, do not learn to read and write beyond the level of an eight-year-old, and leave the school system entirely by their early teenage years. The data on attendance, achievement and retention collected in this report paint a shocking picture of school performance in remote communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

It is important at the outset to recognise that data from different jurisdictions may not be comparable. First, the data may be measured differently. Jurisdictions administer their

own literacy and numeracy tests and determine for themselves how test results correlate with the national benchmarks. Second, the data may relate to the whole or just part of the jurisdiction. Some data cited in this report are the aggregated data on all indigenous students in a jurisdiction, while other data relate to a specific remote area. Most notably, urban indigenous schools tend to vastly outperform remote indigenous schools.

Attendance

Average attendance rates for indigenous primary and secondary students in remote communities are alarmingly low. The average attendance rate on Queensland's Cape York Peninsula is four days per week,[12] and the rate on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in central Australia is still lower.[13] This means that children are, on average, missing nearly one and a half years in the course of seven years of primary school.[14]

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But the average annual attendance rates do not tell the whole story. First, attendance often declines over the course of the year and even the school week. In 2003, enrolment at the only school in Wadeye in the Northern Territory fell from two out of three children in February to only half the town's children in September. While the average attendance rate of enrolled children stayed stable at just over half, actual attendance of the town's school aged children on a given day fell from one third to one quarter.[15] Anecdotal evidence, reported in the *Cape York Justice Study* in 2001, suggests that absenteeism can vary with the season and community events and is 'often extremely high' on the Friday following welfare pay day.[16]

Second, average attendance rates tend to decline as children grow older. Across Western Australia in 2004, indigenous primary school children attended on average only four days per week. Children in Years 8 to 10 were attending half a day less per week.[17]

Third, a focus on averages can overlook the depth of chronic absenteeism (and the extent of good attendance). Recent research on attendance rates in Cape York found it to be a common concern that 'school and class attendance averages can disguise the fact that some students in every school have reasonable, even excellent, patterns of attendance, while others are rarely seen.'[18] Northern Territory case studies in 1998 revealed a more disturbing picture than the reported average attendance rate of three and a half days per week. In three out of the five case studies, half the students attended only three or less days in the surveyed week. In the other two case studies, around half the students did not attend a single day of school in the surveyed week.[19]

Finally, there is reason to believe that the reported average attendance rates are not accurate. In one remote community known to the author, the school was only open on a few days in the six weeks leading up to the end of term. When non-indigenous teachers did not fly in from the 'hub school' in a larger community, the indigenous aides did not teach. In Queensland, it is departmental policy that children absent for 15 days or more are taken off the school rolls. Chronic absentees, being no longer enrolled, do not show up in the attendance statistics.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE: HOW THE JURISDICTIONS FARE

Northern Territory

- In Wadeye in 2003, official enrolment fell from 67% in February to 56% in September, while average attendance stayed at around 51 to 54% over the year. [20] As a result, only a quarter of the town's children were attending by September. 82% of enrolled students were absent for more than one quarter of the school year, and the attendance rate of 12 year olds was only 13%.[21]
- In 1998, the reported attendance rate of indigenous children in the Territory

was around 68%.[22] However, in three out of the five case studies by the *Learning Lessons* report team, half the students attended only three or less days in the surveyed week. In the other two case studies, around half the students did not attend at all in the surveyed week.[23]

Queensland

- In the first two terms of 2005, the average attendance rate for indigenous children on Cape York was 80.5%.[24]
- At one remote Queensland school in 2005, average attendance was lower than 60% in term three and dropped as low as 50% in term four.[25]
- In 2001, anecdotal evidence suggested that as much as half the Cape York student population could be absent on a given day. Absenteeism could vary with the season and community events, and is 'often extremely high' on the Friday following pay day.[26]

South Australia

- In 2004, the primary school students on Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands attended on average only 77% of the time (up from 71.8% in 2002) and secondary school students attended only 76.4% (up from 64.3% in 2002).[27] Attendance at Anangu Schools has steadily increased since 1999 when it was 53%.[28]

Western Australia

- In 2004, the average attendance rate for indigenous primary school children was 80.7%. For Years 8 to 10, the rate was 68.8%.[29]
- In 2006, Halls Creek District High School in the East Kimberley had an average attendance rate of 58.4%.[30]
- In 2006, Jigalong Remote Community School in the Pilbara reported an average primary school attendance of 77.2% (up from 39.5% in 2004) and an average secondary school attendance of 54.4% (up from 34.4%).[31]

Many indigenous children are not achieving the minimum literacy they need to progress through school, let alone to thrive

Literacy and numeracy

The three 'R's—reading, writing and arithmetic—are basic outcomes that we expect from a school education. For the last decade, the States and Territories have been assessing and reporting performance against national minimum English literacy and numeracy benchmarks for Years 3, 5 and 7 and, from 2008, Year 9 will come under the same regime. The annual *National Report on Schooling in Australia* provides a basic (though significantly belated) picture of the achievement gap facing indigenous children.[32]

Many indigenous children are not achieving the minimum literacy they need to progress through school, let alone to thrive. Around nine out of ten children across Australia achieve the English literacy benchmarks in Years 3, 5 and 7.[33] Far fewer indigenous children are achieving the benchmarks and the difference is particularly marked in Year 5. Out of every ten indigenous children in Year 5, more than seven in Western Australia, fewer than seven in South Australia, six in South Australia, and only four in the Northern Territory achieve the literacy benchmark.[34]

The situation in remote communities is worse still. Northern Territory data for 2004 showed that only two out of ten children in remote Territory communities passed the Year 3 or 5 literacy benchmark.[35] On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in 2005, three in ten children achieved the literacy benchmark in Year 3, more did so in Year 5, and four in ten did in Year 7.[36] This follows significant improvements in recent years.

It should not be surprising. Research in the late 1990s revealed that 'estimations of 20% performing at grade level is a massive exaggeration' and 'almost no children

in remote schools demonstrated achievement at these levels'.[37] The researchers found schools and districts where 80% or more of the children who actually attend school read at Kindergarten level or below and the majority of the remaining 20% read at Year 3 level or below. In the Pilbara in Western Australia, 80% of the children tested were 'non-readers'.

There continue to be too many examples of schools producing such low literacy levels. In the Torres Strait alone, six of the sixteen schools reported at least one year group in which not a single child achieved the literacy benchmark in 2005.[38] On Queensland's Cape York, research conducted in Coen State School in 2005[39] and Kowanyama State School in 2000[40] showed that the average child was falling around nine months behind in literacy for every year of primary school. That works out as four years for an average child to achieve the improvement in reading that might normally be expected in one year.

In the Torres Strait six of the sixteen schools reported at least one year group in which not a single child achieved the literacy benchmark in 2005

LITERACY: HOW THE JURISDICTIONS FARE

Northern Territory

- In 2005, 39% of all indigenous students achieved the literacy benchmarks in Year 3 and 5, and 36% did so in Year 7.[41]
- But in remote communities in 2004, only 20% of indigenous students achieved the benchmark in Year 3, and 21% in Year 5.[42]
- In 2001, no child in the Thamarrur region (of which Wadeye is part) achieved the Year 3 or Year 5 reading benchmarks.[43]

Queensland

- In 2004, 94.6% of indigenous children achieved the national reading benchmark in Year 3 and 65% did so in Year 5. However 85.5% of indigenous children went on to achieve the benchmark in Year 7, which may be explained by fewer students sitting the exam.[44]
- At Coen State School on Cape York, over 75% of students in Years 3, 5 and 7 performed in the bottom 15% of Queensland's literacy results in 2005.[45]
- In the Torres Strait alone, six of the sixteen schools reported at least one year group in which not a single child achieved the literacy benchmark in 2005.[46]
- Research conducted in Coen State School in 2005 and Kowanyama State School in 2000 showed that the average child was falling around nine months behind in literacy for every year of primary school.[47]

South Australia

- In 2004, 73.3% of indigenous students in Year 3, 60.3% in Year 5 and 69.2% in Year 7 achieved the reading benchmarks.[48]
- On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, where there has been significant improvement in recent years, 30.1% of children in Year 3, 36.2% in Year 5 and 40% in Year 7 now achieve the literacy benchmark.[49]

Western Australia

- In 2006, the Western Australian Department of Education released literacy results for each school, but did not report results for grade cohorts of fewer than ten children.[50]
- In 2004, 84.1% of indigenous children achieved the reading benchmarks in Year 3, 74.2% did so in Year 5, and 57.6% in Year 7.[51]

- Research in the late 1990s found that 'estimations of 20% performing at grade level is a massive exaggeration'. 80% of school students in the Pilbara, 65% in the Kimberley and 29% in the south west were classified as 'non-readers'. Only 6% of school students in the Pilbara, 10% in the Kimberley and 8% in the south west were reading at Year 4–7 levels.[52]

Overall, even fewer indigenous children are achieving the minimum level of numeracy than are attaining the minimum level of literacy. More than nine out of ten children across Australia achieve the numeracy benchmarks in Years 3 and 5, and more than eight out of ten do so in Year 7.[53] But out of every ten indigenous children in Year 7, six in Queensland and South Australia, five in Western Australia, and fewer than three in the Northern Territory achieve the benchmark.[54]

Again the numeracy levels in remote communities are worse. On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in central Australia, fewer than four out of ten children achieve the numeracy benchmark in Year 3, while just more than four out of ten do so in Years 5 and 7.[55] In Queensland's Torres Strait, seven of the sixteen schools reported at least one year group in which not a single child achieved the numeracy benchmark in 2005.[56] In Northern Territory remote communities, nearly one in two Year 3 students achieve the numeracy benchmark but fewer than one out of five Year 5 students do so.[57]

Even fewer indigenous children are achieving the minimum level of numeracy than are attaining the minimum level of literacy

NUMERACY: HOW THE JURISDICTIONS FARE

Northern Territory

- In 2005, 66% of indigenous students achieved the numeracy benchmarks in Year 3, dropping to 35% in Year 5, and falling even lower to 24% in Year 7.[58]
- But in remote communities in 2004, only 48% of Year 3 students achieved the national benchmark and only 16% did so in Year 5. The figures were likely lower for Year 7.[59]

Queensland

- In 2004, 74.3% of indigenous children in Year 3, 71.7% in Year 5 and 60.6% in Year 7 achieved the numeracy benchmarks.[60]
- In the Torres Strait alone, seven of the sixteen schools reported at least one year group in which not a single child achieved the numeracy benchmark in 2005.[61]

South Australia

- In 2004, 68% of indigenous children achieved the numeracy benchmark in Year 3 but only 62.4% did so in Year 5 and 60.6% in Year 7.[62]
- On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, 37.9% of children achieve the numeracy benchmark for Years 3, 44.4% for Year 5 and 46.6% for Year 7.[63]

Western Australia

- In 2006, the Western Australian Department of Education released numeracy results for each school, but did not report results for grade cohorts of fewer than ten children.[64]
- In 2004, 68.1% of indigenous children achieved the numeracy benchmark in Year 3, 56.6% did so in Year 5, and 47.8% did so in Year 7.[65]

Retention and completion

By law, in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia, children must stay at school until they are 15 years old. In South Australia, the minimum school leaving age is 16 years. But many children from remote communities are leaving earlier—often much earlier.

How many children stay at school beyond the compulsory years is referred to as the 'retention rate'. Most often cited is the 'apparent retention rate', which is the number of children in Year 12 as a percentage of the number of children in Year 10 two years earlier. This rate does not indicate how many of the *same* children continue on and may conceal a large student turnover. Because it is based on mid-year enrolment figures, it also does not reveal whether children completed that year. How many children begin Year 12 and go on to complete it to the standard required to receive a certificate is referred to as the 'completion rate'.

It was not until 2003 that the first indigenous students schooled in their Northern Territory community achieved a university entrance score

That said, in the context of remote community children it is often useful to look at the concept of retention more broadly. Since many children do not continue to Year 10 or even start secondary school, more appropriate measures are the retention rate in the early secondary school years (such as from Year 8 to Year 10) and the retention rate from primary school to secondary school.

Perhaps one out of five remote community children continue through to Year 12 and many—perhaps as many as half—do not even make the transition from primary to secondary school. On Queensland's Cape York in 2001, only two out of five indigenous students made the transition from primary to secondary school and only one in two children who started secondary school continued through to Year 12.[66] On the western Cape alone, it was estimated that only one in ten indigenous students continued through to Year 12.[67] In the Northern Territory in 1999, at least one out of five secondary-aged indigenous children was never enrolled in secondary school.[68] Over half the adults in the remote Thamarrurr region reported that their highest level of schooling was Year 8 or below.[69]

Completion rates too are very low. Only a handful of children complete Year 12 and obtain the end-of-year certificate. On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in central Australia, only 20 indigenous students completed the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) in the four years from 2002 to 2005.[70]

Local secondary schooling has not been up to standard in remote communities. In the Northern Territory, a 2003 review found that secondary schools largely had 'watered down or ungraded curricula with examples of busy-work and low expectations of young people due to their poor attendance and "lack" of English literacy and numeracy skills'.[71] It was not until 2003 that the first indigenous students schooled in their Northern Territory community achieved a university entrance score.[72] On Queensland's Cape York, Noel Pearson noted in 2004 that no indigenous tertiary graduate had come from local public secondary schools.[73] (Indeed, Pearson argued that—with the possible exception of regional centres like Cooktown and Weipa—there is simply 'not sufficient scale and the teachers and specialisations required to provide a proper secondary school education are impossible with small student populations'.)

SCHOOL RETENTION: HOW THE JURISDICTIONS FARE

Northern Territory

- In 2005, the apparent retention rate from Year 8 to Year 12 of indigenous students in public schools was 30.8% (up from 22.9% in 2001). The apparent retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 was 60.2% (up from 45.7%

in 2001).[74]

- In 2001, only 4% of adults in the Thamarrurr region—which includes Wadeye—reported that they had completed Year 11 or Year 12 schooling. 56% of the adult population reported their highest level of schooling as Year 8 or below.[75]
- In 1999, the *Secondary Education Review* reported that at least 20% of secondary-aged indigenous children—or around 3,500 children—were never enrolled in secondary school at all.[76]

Queensland

- In 2001, it was found that only 40% of indigenous children were making the transition from primary to secondary state schools. Only 48% of indigenous children who made it to Year 8 were continuing on to Year 12. Only 12% of indigenous students from the western Cape proceeded to Year 12.[77]

South Australia

- In 2002, the apparent retention rate of indigenous students from Year 10 to Year 12 was 43.3%.[78]
- On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands between 2000 and 2006, the retention rate from Year 8 to 10 increased by 45% and the retention rate from Year 10 to 12 increased by 35%.[79]

Western Australia

- In recent years, the school participation rates of indigenous students have been similar to the overall average up until the last few years of compulsory schooling. 78.2% of indigenous children continue to Year 10, 53.8% continue to Year 11, but only 24% continue to Year 12.[80]
- In 2002, the apparent retention rate, from Year 10 to Year 12, of indigenous students was 29%.[81]

SCHOOL COMPLETION: HOW THE JURISDICTIONS FARE

Northern Territory

- In 2003, three Year 12 students in the remote community of Kalkaringi, 500 kilometres south of Darwin, became the first indigenous students across northern Australia to be schooled in their home communities and get a university entrance score.[82]

Queensland

- In 2000, about 25% of Queensland's Year 12 indigenous students achieved an OP (Overall Position) score, the necessary prerequisite for university study.[83]
- In 2000, not a single indigenous student from the western Cape achieved an education to Year 12 standard.[84]

South Australia

- Very few students from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands achieve the SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education), the basic requirement for entry into higher education. In the four years from 2002 to 2005, only 20 Anangu students completed the SACE.[85]

In 2000, not a single indigenous student from the western Cape achieved an education to Year 12 standard

Western Australia

- Of those indigenous students who commenced Year 11 in government or Catholic schools in 2000, only 22.2% achieved a Western Australian Certificate of Education in 2001.[86]

Remote community school report card

This picture of the average remote community school is deeply troubling. Overall, reported average attendance rates are often around 70 to 80%. Generally only 20 to 40% of children achieve the minimum national literacy benchmark for their year. At least half do not achieve the minimum numeracy benchmark for their year. Only around 10 to 20% of children continue through to Year 12 and many—perhaps as many as half—do not make the transition to secondary school at all. Only a handful of children go on to complete Year 12 and obtain the end-of-year certificate.

But anecdotal[87] and case study[88] evidence suggests that many remote schools may be far from the reported mean. Average attendance in individual communities can be closer to 50% or lower. Many children—indeed, even the vast majority—do not read at higher than a Year 3 level. In the Northern Territory, less than half the indigenous student population achieve the numeracy benchmarks.

Increasing the quality of education supplied to remote community children can make a real difference

4. What is working on the school side?

School performance matters. Increasing the quality of education supplied to remote community children can make a real difference. Evidence-based remedial skills programmes, secondary school readiness programmes, and secondary boarding schools are some initiatives that have shown the potential to achieve results. The successful supply-side initiatives described here are largely remedial—called upon only once remote community children are already facing a vast achievement gap. Support for such programmes is needed until proper literacy and numeracy instruction are embedded and the remote community school is achieving mainstream results.

Evidence-based remedial skills programmes

'Scaffolding literacy' is the instruction method most commonly nominated as best practice by those in the field. Low-achieving children are taught using books that fit as closely as possible to normal expectations for their age level. For example ten-year-old children at an Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands school had been reading simple sentences and dialogue in Kindergarten texts, like *Grandpa's New Car*, if they were reading books at all. Through scaffolding, the children quickly started to read Year 4 texts like Roald Dahl's *The Fantastic Mr Fox*.[89] Classroom teachers are given ongoing extensive professional development in the method, developed by Professor Wendy Cowey and Dr Brian Gray.

The first pilot in South Australia and Western Australia started in 1999 and had impressive results after just one year. The percentage of non-readers halved in the Pilbara (from 80 to 40%), Kimberley (from 65 to 29%) and south west (from 29 to 16%). The percentage of children reading at Year 4 to 7 levels also more than tripled in the Pilbara (from 6 to 27%), Kimberley (from 10 to 33%) and south west (from 8 to 31%).[90] An independent review of the pilot in 2002 concluded that the results were not uniform, but 'the changes are always solid, always upward, and often spectacular'.[91]

A second pilot, called 'Accelerated Literacy', was run in six Northern Territory schools from 2001 to 2003. It is now funded in expanded form as the National Accelerated Literacy Programme (NALP). NALP reports that all pilot schools demonstrated 'major

gains in literacy competence' and the average reading level for the pilot students increased 'by more than four times the pre-intervention rate, from an average reading rate of 0.42 levels per year to 1.78 levels'.[92]

'Making Up Lost Time in Literacy' (MULTILIT) has also been achieving results on Cape York in Queensland. The method, developed by Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Beaman from Macquarie University, is an integrated literacy approach involving phonics instruction, whole language techniques and teaching kids to value reading. It was piloted at Coen State School in 2005 and 2006 as part of Cape York Partnerships' 'Every Child is Special' project. Professionals from the MULTILIT Centre, together with local tutors, provided the instruction at Coen.

The results were excellent—even with attendance rates of 75% and lower for the two pilot intakes. Students began the trial, on average, 39 months behind in reading accuracy and 45 months behind in reading comprehension. After 17 to 18 weeks of instruction, students had gained 21.4 months in reading accuracy, 19 months in word recognition, 10.7 months in reading comprehension and correctly read 75% more words per minute.[93] In just half a school year, the average student progressed from more than three years behind to one and a half years behind the age-appropriate reading accuracy level and from nearly four years behind to less than three years behind the age-appropriate reading comprehension level. This is a significant feat for children who, before MULTILIT, would have fallen even further behind their mainstream peers.

In just half a school year, the average student progressed from more than three years behind to one and a half years behind the age-appropriate reading accuracy level

What characterises programmes like Scaffolding Literacy and MULTILIT is that quantitative evaluation had extensive input into their development. This is in line with the underlying conviction of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy that 'effective literacy teaching, and of reading in particular, should be grounded in findings from rigorous evidence-based research'.[94] Good teaching techniques can go a long way towards helping indigenous children, just as they can other Australian children. As the secondary school review in the Northern Territory in 2003 put it:

> We believe an 'all stops out' approach to raising the skills levels of young Indigenous people in these practices should be embraced. Separate or special measures for Indigenous young people have not been supported by this review. Instead we recommend that teaching and learning strategies currently reporting excellent results, such as the Accelerated Literacy programme, be supported.[95]

Dr Ken Rowe of the Australian Council for Educational Research is now co-authoring an evaluation of literacy methods in Northern Territory schools.[96] Rowe and his colleagues are comparing an experiment group of 35 schools where teachers have undertaken training in explicit instruction with a control group of 21 schools where teachers continued with their usual classroom practices. His conclusion could not be simpler: 'If you give kids basic skills via explicit instruction', he says, 'they take off like rockets.'

There has been good progress towards rolling out Scaffolding Literacy in South Australia and the Northern Territory, and the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands are reporting significant improvement against the national literacy benchmarks. Unfortunately, numeracy is not receiving the same spotlight as literacy. There is no numeracy programme that has reached the same degree of penetration and success as Scaffolding Literacy. There is a clear gap in the market for a strong numeracy programme to be trialled and, if successful, implemented in remote community schools.

The 'QuickSmart' programme, designed by researchers at the University of New England, is one programme that will be worth watching. It aims to increase 'automaticity' in basic academic skills for middle school students and thus free up the students for 'higher order mental processing'.[97] The initial pilot in rural New South Wales schools, with students receiving five 30-minute sessions per fortnight over 20 weeks, reportedly closed the gap in accuracy and response time between trial students and their peers.[98]

Remote community students too often find themselves socially and materially unprepared for secondary school

Another pilot has now followed in eight schools in the Northern Territory to determine its effectiveness with indigenous students.

Secondary school readiness projects

Remote community students too often enter secondary school without the literacy and numeracy skills to enable them to participate in, or even follow, their classes. To make matters worse, they can also find themselves socially and materially unprepared for secondary school.

Thursday Island State High School, the only secondary school in Queensland's Torres Strait, is one school that has been getting results in addressing the literacy deficit and has been singled out for its successful reforms both by Noel Pearson[99] and *The Australian*'s Best Schools Series.[100] A new principal and his staff identified Year 8 and 9 students as at greatest risk of leaving school and established a new literacy centre to teach them reading skills and grammar explicitly. The results in 2002 were clear: 15 out of 25 students in Year 12 qualified for tertiary studies (compared with only three in 1999), and the Year 12 completion rates were above the Queensland average (compared with half the average in 2000).

Badu Island State School, also in the Torres Strait, has sought to ease the transition to secondary school. All students have to leave the community if they are to attend secondary school but many were choosing not to go. In 2000, a Year 8 programme was run for 20 students who were struggling with literacy, numeracy and 'general readiness for secondary school', and whose parents preferred that they stay on Badu Island. The school recruited a teacher with training in English, science and technology to deliver a programme focussing on literacy, numeracy and technology. Average attendance for the year was 98% and, in August 2001, 17 of the 20 students were attending secondary school away from the community.[101]

Secondary boarding schools

Boarding schools have been a successful secondary school option for children from remote communities. St Joseph's College, a private school in the Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill, has operated an indigenous boarding programme since 1998.[102] It started with one child and grew to around 40 boys from regional NSW in 2006. The biggest contingent is from Walgett in the state's north-west, where Father PJ refers kids who have difficult family circumstances but turn up to school and do their homework every day. The indigenous education assistant lives near the school, provides full-time case management, and even drives the boys home for the holidays and picks them up again for the return to school. By 2005, only four of the 51 starters in the programme had left prematurely and five of the six boys who commenced Year 12 had obtained their Higher School Certificate.[103]

In Queensland, Cape York Institute's 'Higher Expectations Programme' (HEP) has been providing scholarships and support for indigenous students normally resident in a Cape York community to attend private boarding schools in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Townsville and Cairns. Following some initial teething problems with children leaving the programme, HEP now has a rigorous selection process to ensure that the students chosen have the best chance to succeed. The selection process considers family factors (such as parental commitment and community support for children moving away for study), academic factors (such as the child's results) and personal factors (such as the child's emotional maturity and educational goals). Selected students receive financial assistance, weekly private tutoring, and personal support from HEP staff. In 2006, 25 students were attending six boarding schools.

The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA) has also been running some good projects. Following an approach by families from the Bulman and Weemol communities, the 'Family Group Homes' project started with 14 students in 2000 and grew to 90 students in 2004. Groups of ten remote community children live in the care

of a married couple in a suburban house in Darwin while they attend secondary school at Marrara Christian College. Attendance rates have consistently been over 85%.[104] Over the period from 2001 to 2004, 72 of the 288 students who enrolled stayed for only one term, but 276 of the 320 students who completed a grade returned the following year after the Christmas break, a real retention rate of 86%.[105]

NTCSA also helps to run the Woolanging Homeland Christian College, a community-initiated school. Jack Mechielsen, Chief Executive of NTCSA, has said that students generally start at age 13 to 15 with the literacy level of Year 1 or 2.[106] Average reading age improves at the rate of about one and a half years per school year.[107] What makes this achievement particularly impressive is that the average attendance rate is still only around four days per week (81%).[108]

Fixing supply without boosting demand is like 'piloting a 747 on manual'

These successful boarding schools demonstrate the importance of highly personalised support. But boarding schools experiences must be administered carefully. Craig Ashby from Walgett in regional New South Wales successfully completed his final four years of schooling at St Joseph's College and is now studying at university to be a teacher. In a recent public lecture, he told of his earlier boarding experiences in the regional centre of Dubbo:

> When I was in Year 9 I went to live in an Aboriginal Hostel in Dubbo. I lived with about 20 or 30 Aboriginal kids with supervision from two 'house parents' and another two that would come in on the weekend. We also had two chefs that would look after us sometimes. But none of them could really keep us under control. It was like living in a gang. The gang would be involved in all sorts of stuff that we wouldn't have dreamed of in Walgett.[109]

5. What is working on the community side?

In remote community schools, the supply of education certainly needs attention. But engaging parents and communities in school education is better than willing schools to achieve against the odds. As Noel Pearson has put it, fixing supply without boosting demand is like 'piloting a 747 on manual'.[110]

School readiness and attendance initiatives have shown promise. But without improving the quality of education supplied, these initiatives can only boost demand in the short term. What is needed to boost demand sustainably is to change students' and families' perceptions of the value of education and to align their expectations and behaviour. The key is not to 'dictate' but to 'educate'.[111] This change will only occur in the long term if the remote community school provides a high quality, high expectation education.

School readiness initiatives

Not only do remote community children generally start their school years far less 'school ready' than other Australian children, but they often start each school day less 'school ready'. Many remote community schools therefore have basic 'school readiness' initiatives that involve providing the children with food, transport or other material goods that the child needs for the school day.

Of course, children find it difficult to learn on an empty stomach and the welfare of neglected children must come first. However it can be problematic for remote community schools—already pressed enough to provide for the educational needs of the children—to take over parents' responsibility to have their child school ready. It also removes parents from the consequences of failing to meeting their parental responsibilities. (In some cases, requiring parents to contribute financially through Centrepay stops parents from completely opting out of their responsibility.)

At a more sophisticated level, school readiness initiatives seek to develop positive parenting behaviours, rather than to substitute for a good home environment. In some cases, parents do not see a good reason to value their child's education. In many cases,

qualitative research suggests that there has simply been a 'disjunction … between the stated aspirations of families to have their children achieve "mainstream outcomes" and the behaviour of parents in relation to ensuring children both attended school and attended school ready and able to learn'.[112] Sophisticated school readiness initiatives can help families align their aspirations and behaviours.

On Queensland's Cape York, Kuranda District State School embarked on its 'Families as First Teachers' (FAFT) project in 2005. The new school principal, Stan Shepherd, and home liaison officer had visited the five local communities. Many families, they found, believed that education started with formal school and not at home in the early childhood years. Some families did not see the value of formal schooling or preschool and children found school daunting. A team of two indigenous community workers and two non-indigenous teachers started weekly literacy and numeracy workshop activities in the homes of indigenous families who could not, or would not, come to the school. Activities ranged from making alphabet charts to finger painting to reading.

Caregivers risked having their parenting payments stopped if they failed to attend an interview with Centrelink to discuss their child's truancy

FAFT has increased the school readiness of children who become familiar with teachers and learning before beginning school. Families have also gained an understanding of what is expected at school and their own role in their child's education and now have higher expectations of the school system. Together with other changes in school practices, FAFT saw a drop in the number of Year 2 students requiring additional support. Around 20% of Year 2 children required additional literacy or numeracy support in 2006, compared with 50% and 80% respectively in 2005.

Attendance sticks and carrots

Stick approaches, while heavy handed, have had some success. The *Engaging Families* trial at Halls Creek in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia showed that stick approaches can have swift and dramatic results. The original trial of sixteen caregivers in late 2005 was simple: 'no school, no welfare'. The stick was that the school principal reported children's truancy to Centrelink and the caregivers risked having their parenting payments stopped if they failed to attend an interview with Centrelink to discuss their child's truancy.

In the original trial, attendance reportedly shot from 54 to 80%,[113] although some reports said that attendance went as high as 90%.[114] Following concerns about its legality, however, the Australian Government replaced it with a second trial of thirty caregivers from February to July 2006.[115] This time there was no stick: caregivers signed voluntary agreements to encourage their children to attend school. Half of the trial children attended school less than half of the time.

Carrot approaches, while resource intensive, have also shown promise. In 1999, the original Clontarf Football Academy was established in Perth in partnership with (but independent from) the Clontarf Aboriginal College operated by the Catholic Education Office. By 2006, the Clontarf Foundation was operating six football academies across Western Australia in partnership with mainstream high schools to cater to indigenous male students between the ages of 13 and 18. The academies provide 'high quality coaching, specialist physical conditioning, health education and mentoring in life skills', while the schools cater to their educational needs. In return, the students 'must consistently endeavour to attend school regularly, apply themselves to the study of appropriate courses and embrace the Academy's requirements for behaviour and self discipline.'[116]

At Clontarf Aboriginal College, open to Years 10 to 12, the average attendance rate rose from 60% before 2000 to 80% in 2002. The football carrot has boosted retention as well as attendance. The average length of stay rose from less than half a school year (15 weeks) in 2000 to two school years (80 weeks) in 2002.[117] Similarly at the Mid West Academy, the apparent retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 was a relatively high 57% in 2005.[118] (It is not reported whether increased attendance and retention translates into higher achievement or completion rates.)

The difficulty with carrots is that efforts to increase attendance should not diminish the quality of education offered. As the secondary school review in the Northern Territory in 2003 observed:

> We … saw examples where bush tucker excursions and football were so prominent that the young people, although attending well, were engaging in little formal learning. These were the contexts where 'culture' was so much the focus of schools that mainstream educational outcomes were increasingly diluted. That Indigenous peoples have a right to practise and maintain their traditions and languages is not in question. The role school should play in this task is a matter that requires further examination.[119]

There were contexts where 'culture' was so much the focus of schools that mainstream educational outcomes were increasingly diluted

6. Case studies

It is rewarding to see school- and community-side initiatives achieving results. While many of these initiatives operate on a single dimension, it is worth considering two multi-dimensional initiatives in more detail.

'Every Child is Special'

In Coen in far north Queensland, Noel Pearson's Cape York Partnerships has set its sights on long-term improvements in school education. The 'Every Child is Special' (ECIS) trial sees itself as 'a comprehensive agenda for tackling both supply and demand'. The trial site is Coen State School, which has around 40 students, two teachers and a principal. ECIS seeks to boost both the supply of quality education by Coen State School and the demand for quality education by the Coen students, families and community.[120] ECIS reports to an advisory committee and, while it is only in the early stages and results data are not available, the thinking is impressive and comprehensive. The results will be worth watching.

On the community side, ECIS has a strong case management focus to achieve long-term behavioural change. ECIS sees the demand problem as two fold: 'parents do not participate in education activities; and they do not always meet their basic obligations in relation to their child's education and welfare.'[121] ECIS seeks to align expectations of good education (which may already exist as research on attendance on Cape York has shown[122]) and behaviours that support good education (which often do not). Families are encouraged and supported to take responsibility for their child's education by:

- ensuring their child attends school regularly;
- ensuring their child is 'school ready'—fed, clean, refreshed and ready to learn;
- ensuring the health of their child is their first priority;
- ensuring that the home is conducive to the child's development needs;
- setting aside money for the child's education expenses;
- discussing school events and education issues with their child;
- participating in homework activities with their child;
- being involved in the transmission of culture with their child;
- making long term plans for their child's ongoing education;
- active participation in parent education groups and the parent/school partnership; and
- meeting with the child's teacher to discuss his or her educational progress.[123]

On the school side, ECIS is looking to facilitate the delivery of high quality, high expectation education at Coen State School. Besides coordinating the involvement of stakeholders, ECIS develops partnerships with experienced professionals and organisations. So far, the project has been instrumental in the recruitment of the new principal Ken Crowther and the successful trial of the remedial literacy programme

Warrego Primary School has been the only school in the Northern Territory with 100% attendance

MULTILIT under Professor Kevin Wheldall and Dr Robyn Beaman from Macquarie University in Sydney.

ECIS consists of nine programmes to be delivered concurrently for five years. After five years, ECIS anticipates that 'the school will then be performing on par with other "mainstream" schools and project activity will either be embedded in the school or no longer required'.[124] The programmes are a student attendance and school ready programme, student education accounts programme, literacy programme (with a numeracy programme anticipated), classroom support programme, homework club programme, secondary school preparation programme, education facilitators programme, cultural transmission programme and partnership programme.

Warrego Primary School

Warrego is a former mining town 50 kilometres outside of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory. Colin and Sandra Baker were the newly appointed school principal and administrator when mining ended in 1999. For six months, they faced the task of getting the children from the Mungalawurru community to attend or closing the school. Then Colin Freddie, a community elder and former stockman, saw Colin Baker riding his horse and approached him with a deal: if the Bakers agreed to teach the kids to ride their horses, he would make sure the kids went to school. Warrego Primary School has become an excellent example of a demand- and supply-driven educational initiative.[125]

On the school side, good teaching practices and good school management have made a difference. Patience, plain hard work, high expectations, creativity, team work and vision paid off for the husband-and-wife team and for Ian Hopwood, the Head of Group Schools for the Barkly area who supported them. Colin Baker began by designing a horsemanship programme similar to that at New England Girls School in the New South Wales regional centre of Armidale and then used horsemanship to teach subjects as diverse as health, oral language and mathematics. When confronted with driving the school bus for the 80 kilometre round trip from Warrego to Mungalawurra twice a day, the Bakers turned adversity into advantage with educational cassette tapes that included classics from former *Play School* presenter Don Spencer.

The Mungalawurra children are not spared the usual health problems in remote communities. In 2005, for example, 80% had moderate to severe hearing loss, most had perforated or damaged ear drums, and five had been fitted with bone conduction hearing aids. The health and nutrition programme, run with guidance from the Anyininginyi Congress Medical Service in Tennant Creek, included morning showers and first aid at school, together with a hot lunch programme funded by the community. The 'learn to swim' programme has had particular success and the children now swim, and win, at four away swimming carnivals each year thanks to sponsorship.

On the community side, the Bakers and children received constant support from community elders. Colin Freddie used to drive the original eleven students to school and two carers, Marie Rennie and Eva Kelly, attended school with the children each day and were helpful with discipline and a 'stabilising influence' in the playground. The elders were also clear about roles. 'The carers and the traditional owners hold the view that indigenous issues should be dealt with by them in the community,' said Colin Baker, 'and the school's role is to teach the children the skills they need to be able to operate in the broader Australian context.'

As a result, Warrego Primary School has been the only school in the Northern Territory with 100% attendance. In 2005, all the students achieved the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks. But even a good remote community school like Warrego Primary School is still looking for ways to translate good school attendance and achievement into successful transitions to secondary education.

Parents did not want children attending Tennant Creek High School during their vulnerable teenage years and the Bakers tried boarding schools in the Territory and

Queensland without success. Then in 2004, the Bakers placed one girl at New England Girls School in the hope that her horseriding skills would smooth the social and academic transition. In 2006, she was on the way to completing Year 9. Two girls followed at Melbourne Girls Grammar in 2006 and two boys at St Stanislaus' College in Bathurst in 2007. 'Probably in the end,' Colin Baker said, 'it is a question of looking for individual solutions for individual students.'

Conclusion

To be sure, many of the school-side initiatives at good schools are remedial and many of the community-side initiatives only boost demand in the short term. But what can we learn from what is working in good schools in remote indigenous communities?

The best results come from a combination of good teaching and management on the school side, teamed with support and determination on the community side. Engaging parents and communities in school education is better than willing schools to achieve against the odds.

Good schools can and do make a difference. We need to stop making excuses for poor school education in communities and to start learning from what is working, inside and outside communities.

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Endnotes

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[123] Cape York Partnerships, *'Every Child is Special' Project Plan: A 'No Excuses!' approach to developing demand for better supply of education to indigenous children in Cape York Peninsula*.

[124] As above.

[125] Brian Duffy, 'Bush School', *Storyline Australia* (28 September 2006). See also the web forum at http://www20.sbs.com.au/storylineaustralia/index.php?pg=doc&id=50.

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