

RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT

THE CENTRE FOR
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Mind the Gap: Understanding the Indigenous education gap and how to close it



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- By school-leaving age, the average Indigenous Australian student is around two and a half years behind the average non-Indigenous one — with achievement levels more comparable to developing nation school systems than those of the wider Australian population.
- Indigenous students, on average, attract around 38 per cent more public funding per student than non-Indigenous students. But this doesn't appear to be contributing to greater outcomes.
- The drivers of student achievement are already well-known, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike. But the drivers of the educational gap are less clear, masking which factors could have the greatest impact in closing the gap.
- This report identifies how closing relevant related gaps — such as parents' education, attendance, and other school factors — can contribute to closing the student achievement gap.

Rather than bolstering them, recent changes to Closing the Gap targets water down education objectives

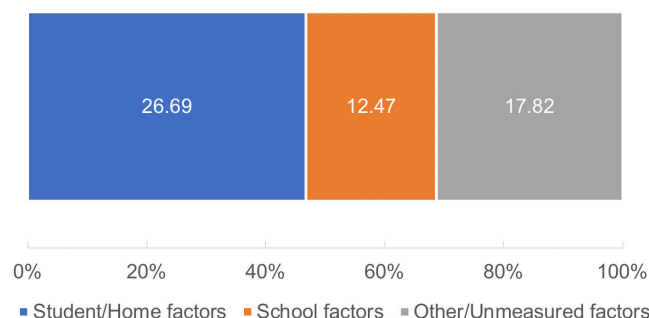
- In 2020, new Closing the Gap targets were announced. These new targets no longer include closing student achievement and attendance gaps.
- Progress against previous targets — reducing the proportion of low achieving students, lifting Year 12 completion, and reducing student attendance gaps — has been mixed, with most relevant education objectives not met.

Differences in school attendance rates and parental background explain much of the achievement gap

Of the observed 57-point achievement gap in NAPLAN by Year 3, around 39 points can be attributed to the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' measured factors. In other words, compared to otherwise similar students in terms of measured factors, Indigenous students achieve around 18 points lower than non-Indigenous students, on average.

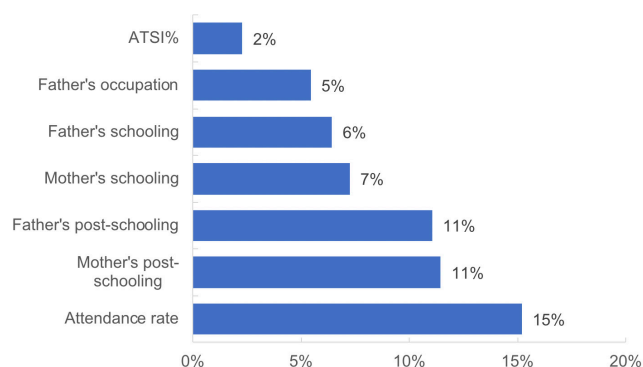
Around 47 per cent of the student achievement gap by Year 3 is explained by differences in student and home factors — with around 22 per cent accounted for by differences in school factors, and around 31 per cent that is unexplained (that is, differences in unmeasured factors).

Year 3 student achievement gap (primary schools, 2019).



- If the average Indigenous parent had similar post-schooling attainment as the average non-Indigenous parent, this would result in around a 13 NAPLAN point reduction in the gap by Year 3.
- If parents recorded the same school attainment, this would further result in around an 8-point reduction in the achievement gap.
- If the average Indigenous student attended school with a similar attendance rate as the average non-Indigenous student (and no other factors changed), this would reduce the achievement gap at Year 3 by around 9 NAPLAN score points alone.
- Other factors, such as differences in terms of school remoteness, size, sector, funding, and staffing levels have negligible impact on the achievement gap.

Proportion of decomposed measures explaining the primary school student achievement gap, Year 3.

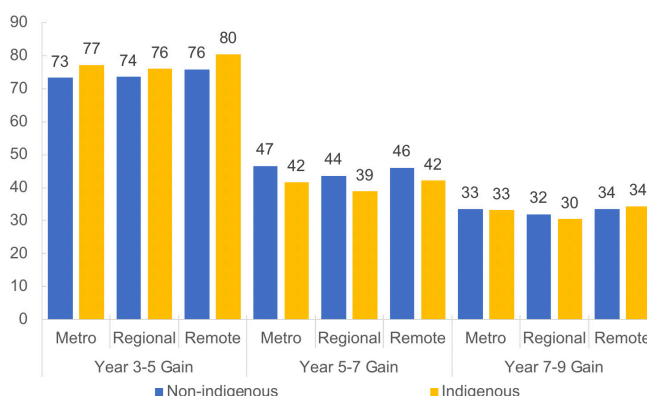


Despite a clear achievement gap, students progress at similar pace

- Despite the clear gap in *achievement*, average *progress* — that is, the gain from one test to the next — is effectively the same between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (excluding Indigenous students in very remote locations, who unfortunately make very little progress at all).

- This means there is little evidence that Indigenous students, by and large, are making any significant catch-up to reduce the initial achievement gap that exists at Year 3.
- There are some isolated examples of schools demonstrating significantly faster progress than comparable schools. However, there's little evidence that similar outcomes are being replicated systematically and that successful practices and policies are being scaled up.

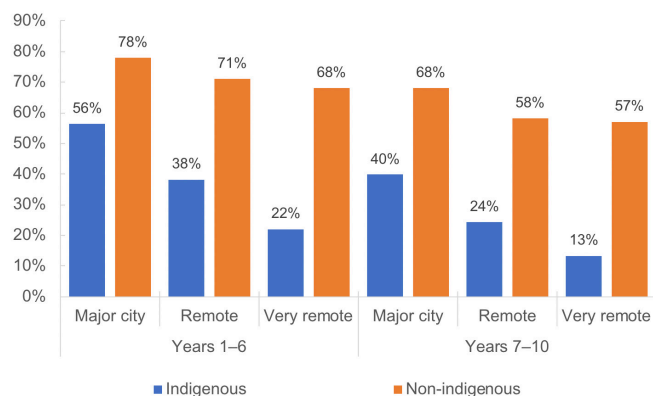
Student gain in NAPLAN, 2017-2019, by remoteness.



The school attendance gap

- While attendance alone isn't sufficient to improve education outcomes, differences in Indigenous students' attendance is the greatest single factor driving the achievement gap.
- Children who frequently miss more than half a day of school a week (less than 90% attendance) suffer an academic penalty, especially in literacy. For this reason, policymakers should monitor the attendance level — the proportion of students attending 9 out of 10 school days.
- Research has estimated a range of factors responsible for the low attendance of Northern Territory Indigenous students.
 - Overcrowded housing contributes to attending 35 fewer days at school per year, coming from a non-English speaking household contributes to 11 fewer days, and attending more than one school in a year contributes to around nine fewer days.
 - On the other hand, previously attending 30 or more days of preschool contributes to around 18 more days at school per year, having an employed parent or carer to around 11 more days, and having a parent or carer who completed year ten (or higher) at school contributes to around 10 more days at school per year.

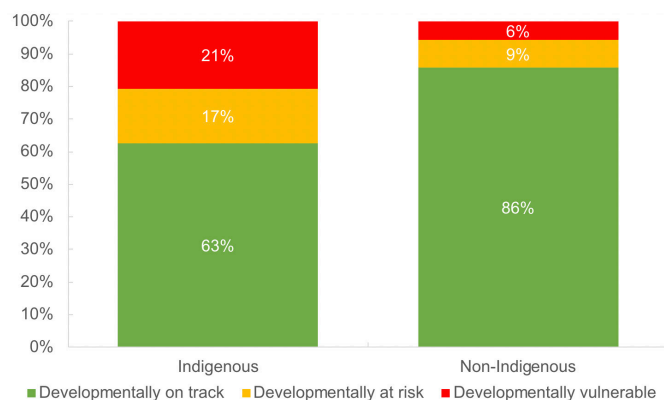
Attendance level, government schools 2019.



The early learning gap

- Early development measures — especially language acquisition — are important indicators of school readiness and are effective signals of potential future developmental vulnerability.
- 5-year-old Indigenous children are around 2.5 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable or at risk in the language and cognitive domain, compared to non-Indigenous children.
- Children who suffer from an early developmental vulnerability record significantly lower achievement in NAPLAN.
- From 2009 to 2018, the prevalence of overall developmental vulnerability of Indigenous children reduced from 47 per cent to 41 per cent.
- Increased enrolments in childcare alone are unlikely to significantly reduce student achievement gaps. However, there is a strong case that educationally vulnerable children can benefit most from structured preschool programmes that mediate pre-literacy skill deficits.

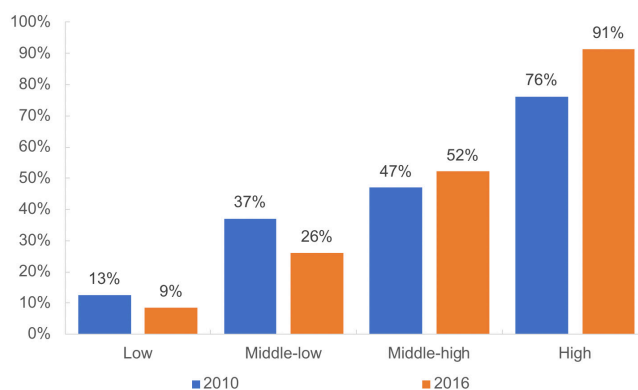
The language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain, 2018.



The school and post-school attainment gap

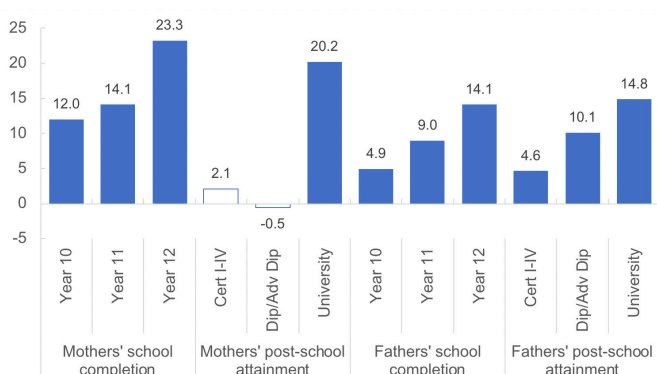
- Over recent years, increased proportions of Indigenous children have remained in, and completed, school.
- However, it's not clear that greater numbers are necessarily gaining the literacy and numeracy capabilities needed to succeed in further study and work. Research suggests school completion alone does not guarantee reaching relevant standards for literacy and numeracy in adulthood.
- There do not appear to be considerable access barriers to further study remaining for high-achieving Indigenous students. Around 91 per cent of top quartile achieving Indigenous students are enrolled or completed university by the age of 22.

Indigenous student university attendance by age 22 years, by PISA 2015 literacy and numeracy quartile.



- The level of parental education and their employment status are strong predictors of Indigenous students' achievement level.
 - Compared to a mother not completing Year 10, completing Year 12 is associated with a 23-point higher Year 3 NAPLAN achievement. There's a corresponding association with paternal school attainment — with a 14-point higher Year 3 NAPLAN score associated with Year 12 completion (compared to leaving school before completing Year 10).
- Post-schooling attainment is also a predictor of Indigenous students' achievement level.
 - A students' mother holding a university degree (compared to no post-school attainment) is associated with a 20-point higher NAPLAN score (for primary schools) and, for fathers with a university degree, around 15 points higher.

Statistical association between parental school and post-school educational attainment and Year 3 NAPLAN, Indigenous primary school students only; reference group is non-completion of Year 10 and no post-school attainment respectively.



Implications for policymakers

- Closing the Gap targets should directly measure and target student achievement, attendance, and test participation.
- Catch-up targets should be set by school systems to accelerate progress of Indigenous students.
- A suite of measures should help inform progress against catch-up targets, particularly in majority-Indigenous schools.
- Effective school attendance strategies should be shared and replicated.
- Support the sharing of successful instructional practice and scale up effective initiatives.
- Appoint an Indigenous Education Commissioner.
- Improved collection and use of data can help with workforce planning, monitoring effects of early childhood interventions, student attendance, and adult competences.
- Fully closing student achievement gaps will require long term improvements in adult education and employment.
- Review the suitability of the national school funding formula in meeting Indigenous students' needs.

Author

Glenn Fahey is education research fellow and author of several CIS research papers. His most recent Research Report is *Dollars and Sense: Time for Smart Reform of Australian School Funding*. He is a former consultant in education governance at the OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.