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AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION

Foreword

This report, *Obstacles to success*, is the result of the latest research sponsored by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) investigating issues at play in the nation's primary schools. It focuses specifically on the challenges faced by schools providing an education for Australia's most disadvantaged students, its Indigenous children.

It revisits a complex, even intractable, issue that APPA investigated more than a decade ago. In 2000 APPA produced *Partnering a better future*, a national Indigenous education review for the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The review canvassed the views of over 1,000 primary principals from all sectors and gathered information on a range of issues that remain with us today.

This study, co-sponsored by the Stronger Smarter Institute, has sought the views of principals, teachers, Indigenous education workers and Indigenous community members. The study has been funded by the Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and conducted by a research team from Edith Cowan University.

Information was collected from schools in Queensland, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia from government, Catholic and independent sectors. Almost half of the respondents were Indigenous. The information from schools was contextualised within the current national Indigenous policy framework as well as informed by data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

It will surprise few who are familiar with primary schools that issues such as attendance, provision of services to support Indigenous children and their families and the retention of quality staff members remain major issues. While it is easy to generalise about these issues each school and each principal is dealing with a set of layered and interacting challenges that makes their situation unique. Attempting to impose a 'one size fits all' solution here is unlikely to be successful.

It is clear, however, that schools will need additional support if they are to address the challenges – not just episodically but within a framework that will provide sustained support over time.

This study provides an observant description and thoughtful analysis of the complex issues at play in this most challenging aspect of Australian school education. Given the low levels of achievement of many Indigenous children and the youthfulness of the Indigenous population it is an aspect that requires urgent and sustained attention and the support of all Australian governments.

NORM HART, PRESIDENT, APPA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose and design of the study

The purpose of the Responsive School Support Study was to learn about the support needs of schools with Indigenous students. This inquiry is based on an assumption that earlier programs to reduce the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students have not been successful because they have not enabled schools to remove the obstacles impeding the achievement of Indigenous students.

The study draws on the data gathered from: policy and research documents, a national ACARA database of demographic and individual school performance data, visits to 17 schools with high Indigenous enrolments, extended interviews with 98 participants including principals, teachers, non-teaching staff members and Indigenous parents and community leaders, and meetings with principals and system officials.

A problem-solving perspective has guided the development of the research methods.

Demographic factors

Indigenous people are widely dispersed through major cities, regional areas and remote and very remote areas and form a small minority of the Australian population (2.5 per cent). By contrast, the non-Indigenous population is predominantly city dwelling.

The Indigenous population in each of the states and territories has distinct characteristics. The Northern Territory's Indigenous population is more concentrated, more remote and has a higher proportion of Indigenous language speakers than any other jurisdiction. Queensland has a large, rapidly growing and relatively concentrated Indigenous population. New South Wales has a large population of Indigenous people who are a small minority in the state. Western Australia's Indigenous population is relatively concentrated and remote and has a relatively high proportion of Indigenous language speakers. Other jurisdictions have smaller, less concentrated and less remote Indigenous populations relative to national averages.

High mobility among Indigenous families has been widely reported. This is associated with seasonal and relationship-related circular movements between remote areas and towns and more permanent movement towards population centres. The combination of high rates of temporary mobility and long-term migration among young adults with school-aged children places pressure on schools.

Five per cent of enrolments in primary and combined schools are Indigenous students. This reflects the youthful demographics of the Indigenous population.

Eighty-three per cent of Indigenous primary students attend schools with an ICSEA score below the median for all primary and combined schools.

There are no Indigenous students in one-fifth of Australian primary and combined schools. The median number of Indigenous students in

a school is six. In 3 per cent of all primary and combined schools Indigenous students compose 91-100 per cent of enrolments.

Achievement gap

The gap between the average achievement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has persisted since it was first documented in 1977. The achievement gap widens as remoteness increases and is associated with a gap in attendance rates.

Successive governments have sought to close the achievement gap. Since 1999, literacy and numeracy achievement has been measured in Years 3 and 5 and the results of Indigenous students reported nationally. With the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008 assessments have been extended and standardised. Although the gap has narrowed in some domains in some years, a consistent improvement trend sufficient to halve the gap has not been established.

There are divergent views on strategies to close the achievement gap. One group of experts maintains that improvements in teacher quality are the key to lifting the achievement of Indigenous children. Other experts draw attention to the influence of out-of-school factors when explaining the variation in student achievement. They therefore maintain that programs that deliver extended services from school sites, and initiatives that support local communities by improving housing, employment and other factors should be central to the reforms. Each of these approaches is evident in aspects of the Closing the Gap reforms.

While other developed countries with a similar socio-economic demographic to Australia confront similar challenges in narrowing the achievement gap between students from advantaged and disadvantaged home backgrounds, none has been able to convincingly demonstrate what needs to be done.

Closing the Gap

The current strategy, known as 'Closing the Gap', began in 2008 and has built on earlier work by the Council of Australian Governments. The framework for the strategy is provided through the National Indigenous Reform Agreement. This national strategy is specific to Indigenous people and is supported by six National Partnerships.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 is described within the wider Indigenous reform framework but is supported by three National Partnerships under the auspices of the National Education Agreement that cover Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

The national direction in Indigenous affairs is underpinned by a premise that improvements in Indigenous outcomes in one area will be contingent on improved outcomes in other areas. In this context schooling is one of seven areas or 'building blocks', including health, housing and employment.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement and the related National Partnerships have been designed to implement a whole of government approach to Indigenous service delivery. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 is focused on schools and the education National Partnerships have been designed to support a wider group of disadvantaged students that includes, but is not limited to, Indigenous students.

Therefore, the framework through which support is delivered to schools is not effectively integrated with the framework for delivering support to Indigenous families.

Obstacles to Indigenous learning

The categories of obstacles reported most frequently were 'student absences from school' and 'an insufficiency of out-of-school support'. Nearly half of participants reported both these obstacles. All the Indigenous participants reported that either one or both these obstacles were limiting student progress. Other categories of obstacles summarised in the report are: 'inadequate school programs', 'difficulty attracting and retaining staff' and 'poor student health'.

A class of obstacles referred to as 'meta-obstacles' reduced the capability of staff members in schools to engage in effective problem solving to remove obstacles. In some cases, staff members knew what was needed but were prevented by these meta-obstacles from taking action. 'An absence of trust', 'a lack of awareness of what was not understood' and 'a lack of political capital or leverage' are examples of meta-obstacles that were evident to some degree in some schools. Where meta-obstacles were evident, they had the capacity to lock obstacles to learning in place.

The Responsive School Support Study found that obstacles to Indigenous students' success were not systematically related to a school's location or enrolment profile.

The obstacles found in each school were multifaceted and deeply rooted in the circumstances of the school's history and location. This made it difficult to focus on one problem at a time or alternatively to solve all the problems at once.

Matching support to obstacles

The problem-solving capabilities of schools were dependent on the experience and continuity of the staff members in the school.

Teachers were generally non-Indigenous, city educated and suffered cognitive overload while they adjusted to teaching Indigenous children in unfamiliar circumstances. A common complaint was that the process of supporting beginning teachers who left soon after they became competent had a debilitating effect on the staff members who remained in the school and made it difficult to embed effective practice.

Non-teaching Indigenous staff members compensated for the transient teaching workforce. They were more likely to live permanently in the local area, to participate in the community and to demonstrate cultural savvy. They needed opportunities and support to undertake leadership roles and further study.

Generally, the need for support for Indigenous families outstripped a school's capacity to deliver it or find other agencies able to assist. Some of the need for support related to aspects of Indigenous families' lifestyles, for example high mobility and overcrowded housing, but needs also resulted from societal changes that have an impact on families regardless of their Indigenous status. Unless the circumstances of these families improve it seems unlikely that schools will be able to produce the gains in student achievement that are expected of them.

It is important that the kinds of support provided to schools take account of the particular features of the problems that they face. A standard issue of support, though suitable for schools in general, may be of marginal use if it takes only minimal account of the prior history and idiosyncratic circumstances of the school. Therefore, systems to deliver support need to have a capacity to customise the support to the school.

There was little evidence of a whole of government approach except in a small number of schools associated with the National Partnership for Remote Service Delivery.

Recommendations

The recommendations have been divided into two groups to reflect the division between support delived to families through Indigenous affairs policies and support delivered to Indigenous students through school systems.

Recommendations intended to better connect schools to Indigenous reform

1. Synchronise timelines contained in the National Partnerships and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.

2. Establish local linkages so resources delivered under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement are more visible to primary schools.

3. Establish a small number of whole of government service delivery trials in which primary schools are encouraged to participate.

Recommendations specific to support delivered through school systems

4. Conduct a survey to ascertain the support needs of all primary schools in regard to Indigenous students including schools where they are a small minority.

5. Introduce an Indigenous perspective into mainstream education policy and programs.

6. Expand the body of research related to the education of Indigenous children.

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Introduction

Closing the Gap

Over the past two decades the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has attempted to compile comprehensive and comparable data on Indigenous disadvantage. Progressive improvements in the definition of key indicators, and in the capacity to collect data, have enabled more comprehensive and compelling reporting of Indigenous disadvantage.

The term 'Closing the Gap' was first used by the Rudd government in 2008 to signal its commitment to eliminate the disparity in the life expectancy of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It built on earlier COAG work and since then the focus has been broadened to include other factors associated with Indigenous disadvantage such as early childhood development, education, housing, public safety and employment.

The government's plan to redress Indigenous disadvantage has been formalised in an agreement with the states and territories whereby Commonwealth funding is provided to enable the jurisdictions to narrow the gaps in clearly specified target areas. Progress is independently measured by COAG's Reform Council.

Targets for education have been set for literacy and numeracy performance, access to early childhood education and completion of Year 12 or equivalent. For primary schools the main target is to halve the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy attainments by 2018.

The literacy and numeracy gap

In 1975, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) conducted the first national survey of literacy and numeracy in Australia. Its aim was to provide a broad overview of literacy and numeracy achievement in Australian schools. The report of the survey, *Australian studies of school performance*, contains a chapter comparing the results of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It showed exceptionally large differences (Bourke & Parkin, 1977). These findings prompted expressions of concern and led to various initiatives intended to reduce the disparity.

Three decades later, results from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) 2008-2010 reveal that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student performance in literacy and numeracy has not narrowed

even though states and territories have introduced a succession of programs designed to reduce the disparity since 1977.

The problem facing education policy makers is that there is no single factor explaining why Indigenous students achieve, on average, at lower levels than other Australian students; the explanation is most likely found in a complex array of factors, some of which apply to some students in some situations but not generally. Further, some of the key determinants lie outside the school and the responsibility for addressing them belongs elsewhere. This complexity hampers the design and implementation of school improvement programs.

On the face of it, the way in which school systems have gone about improving the achievement of Indigenous students would seem to be deficient, even flawed. However, over the last thirty years, schools have become more welcoming, flexible and focused institutions so, for many educators, this failure is counter intuitive.

Service providers, including education agencies, are urged to adopt evidence-based strategies; that is, employ programs that have been shown to be effective under rigorously controlled conditions. Unfortunately, the available evidence on the efficacy of initiatives is neither sufficiently robust nor specific to suggest programs that have a high probability of success.

Several assumptions can therefore be made about the current paradigm of programs that are reticulated to schools with Indigenous students.

First, it can be assumed that schools have faced intractable obstacles that have proven too hard to remove even when additional support has been provided.

Second, schools do not control all the levers that would enable staff members to address student need.

Third, schools will need better targeted support if they are to achieve the ambitious goals set for them by COAG.

But the question remains: Why can't schools be provided with the support they need to remove intractable obstacles? This question prompted the line of thinking behind the Responsive School Support Study.

APPA's interest in Indigenous education

As a national organisation representing primary school principals from all states and territories and all sectors, APPA has a long-standing interest in improving the educational achievement of Indigenous children. In 2000, in conjunction with the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, APPA published a report of a survey of its members that reviewed Indigenous school policies in place at that time. A list of issues identified by members was presented and the policy implications discussed. Much of what was suggested can be recognised in the current national policy framework; many of the issues raised continue to resonate (APPA, 2000).

Responsive School Support Study

This study began with an invitation from the federal Minister for Education to the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) to generate proposals that might succeed in lifting the achievement of Indigenous students.

Initially, the APPA working group sought to design a consortium structure within which a group of member schools might acquire the mix of support that matched their particular needs. It was proposed that the nature of the support, and the timing with which it was made available, could be tailored in such a way that it provided each school with the capability to remove the key obstacles that were impeding the achievement of its Indigenous students. Instead of general programs of support for broad categories of schools, the schools in the consortium would be provided with support that was site-specific: hence the term 'responsive' in the title of the study.

However, on reflection it became apparent that not enough was known about the nature and scope of the obstacles that prevent school staff members from putting in place what is needed. It was considered necessary to undertake a research project that detailed the obstacles in a selection of schools in locations ranging from metropolitan to very remote. The study, therefore, has the following objectives:

1. Identify the major obstacles limiting the progress of Indigenous students and the extent to which these obstacles are common across schools or site-specific;

2. Find out what is limiting the capability of staff members to remove the obstacles;

3. Examine the match between the obstacles that schools report are impeding their students' progress and the support that is currently provided to remove or ameliorate them; and

4. Identify the kinds of support that schools need to solve problems concerning student academic progress but which they cannot currently acquire.

This report

The Responsive School Support Study was undertaken against a backdrop of a wide-reaching, national program intended to significantly reduce Indigenous disadvantage. The reforms have been driven on a number of fronts, and improvement in student achievement in literacy and numeracy is one of several key target areas. Underpinning the national strategy is the premise that *improvements in one area are contingent on improvements in other areas*. This report therefore provides a summary of the national reforms and explains how primary schools fit into these strategies.

The primary source of data in this study is the information collected from 17 schools. Ninety-eight interviews were conducted with school staff members and Indigenous community members. The interviews focused on the obstacles that were impeding the progress of students, why the obstacles had not been previously removed, the strategies the school had been able to implement and whether these strategies had led to improvement.

Secondary sources included national statistical collections. A national database compiled by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has provided information about primary and combined schools in Australia and Australian Bureau of Statistics publications give population reference points.

The main body of the report contains the results and analyses derived from these primary and secondary data sources.

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Where Indigenous students live

Introduction

This chapter describes the geographic dispersion of the Indigenous population and considers the implications for the provision of schooling.

The statistics reported in this chapter are drawn from the national census and a survey of Indigenous communities, both conducted during 2006 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and data on primary and combined schools compiled by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in relation to the 2010 school year.

Demography of Indigenous Australia

Overall trends

The Indigenous population is younger and growing at a faster rate than the Australian population.

The median age of the Indigenous population is 21 years. The comparable figure for the Australian population is 37 years. As a result, the proportion of Indigenous primary school students (5 per cent) is greater than the proportion of Indigenous people in the Australian population (2.5 per cent).

The ABS estimated the Indigenous population increased 2.6 per cent per year on average during the 15 years prior to 2006, compared to 1.2 per cent per year for the Australian population. The

higher population growth rate was achieved despite the gap in the life expectancies of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

In 2010, the median age at which Indigenous mothers had babies was 6 years younger (25 years) than for all mothers in Australia (31 years). The median age of Indigenous fathers was 5 years younger (28 years) than for all fathers (33 years). Teenage mothers accounted for 20 per cent of all births to Indigenous mothers. This is a high proportion when compared to the Australian population where teenage mothers accounted for only 4 per cent of all births (ABS, 2011).

Table 2.1: Population, Indigenous status, geographic location, Australia 2006

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous
	%	%
Major cities	32	69
Regional areas	43	29
Remote and very remote	25	2
All	100	100

(ABS, 2008, Table 2.4). Totals: Indigenous people = 517,174, non-Indigenous people = 20,174,314.

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Table 2.2: National Indigenous population,
jurisdiction 2006

	%
NSW	29
Qld	28
WA	15
NT	13
Vic	6
SA	5
Tas	3
ACT	1
All	100

(ABS, 2008, Table 2.1).

The Indigenous population is distributed differently from Australia's predominantly city-dwelling population. As shown in Table 2.1, sizable proportions of Indigenous people live in each of the broad geographic areas: major cities, regional areas and remote and very remote locations.

One-quarter of Indigenous people live in remote and very remote areas. The concentration of Indigenous people increases with geographic remoteness, so in very remote locations, Indigenous people constitute 48 per cent of the population. By comparison, in major cities, Indigenous people are a small minority of 1 per cent.

A general caution about Indigenous statistics is required. For example, a greater proportion of Australians (6 per cent) did not respond to the question about Indigenous status in the 2006 census than constituted the total Indigenous population.

State and territory differences

In 2006, New South Wales had the largest share of Indigenous people as shown in Table 2.2. Victoria, the second most populated state, ranked fifth with fewer Indigenous people than less populated states, Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The Indigenous population of Queensland is projected to overtake that of New South Wales by 2016.

The proportion of each jurisdiction's population that is Indigenous is reported in Table 2.3. This shows that the population profile of the Northern Territory is unique with nearly a third (32 per cent) of its population Indigenous. This is eight times as concentrated as Western Australia and Queensland, each with 4 per cent of their population Indigenous.

Table 2.4 further explicates the variability across jurisdictions. Despite the small population overall in the Northern Territory, 46 per cent of Indigenous people in very remote locations lived in the Northern Territory. Nearly one-quarter (24 per cent) of Indigenous people in very remote locations lived in Queensland with a similar proportion in Western Australia.

Over 92 per cent of Indigenous people living in very remote locations lived in three jurisdictions: the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. South Australia had the next greatest share of Indigenous people living in very remote locations.

The unique situation in the Northern Territory was again evident in regard to the frequency with which Indigenous languages were spoken. Table 2.5 shows that 59 per cent of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory spoke an Indigenous language. This means it was estimated that in 2006 nearly one-fifth (19 per cent) of all Territorians spoke an Indigenous language.

Differences between Western Australia and Queensland were evident. Although these states had similar proportions of Indigenous people, and the number of Indigenous people living in very remote locations was similar, Western Australia had a greater proportion of Indigenous language speakers: 14 per cent compared to 9 per cent in Queensland. South Australia also has a greater proportion (12 per cent) than Queensland.

Table 2.3: Proportion of population that is Indigenous, jurisdiction 2006

	NT	WA	Qld	Tas	NSW	SA	ACT	Vic	Australia
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Indigenous	32	4	4	3	2	2	1	1	2.5
Non-Indigenous	68	96	96	97	98	98	99	99	97.5

(ABS, 2008, Table 2.1).

Table 2.4: Indigenous people living in very remote locations, jurisdiction 2006

	%
NT	46
Qld	24
WA	24
SA	5
NSW	1
All	100

(ABS, 2008, Table 2.4). Number of Indigenous people living in very remote locations = 81,914.

Queensland is characterised by a large number of Indigenous people, a high proportion of Indigenous people and a high rate of population growth. The lower rate at which Indigenous languages were spoken in Queensland differentiates it from the other jurisdictions actively participating in national Indigenous policy formulation.

Geography of Indigenous disadvantage

Location factors

Taylor (2006) points out that the statistical divisions used to describe the spatial distribution of the Indigenous population for census purposes are of limited use in understanding Indigenous disadvantage or in aiding policy formulation.

State aggregates hide regional differences. For example, areas of northern Australia like the Kimberley, Arnhem Land and Cape York have similar patterns of Indigenous occupation while low-income suburbs of cities such as Sydney, Brisbane, Perth and Darwin also have similarities.

Taylor (2006) suggests that a more useful way of approaching the geography of Indigenous disadvantage is to consider separately outstations, town camps, growing remote Indigenous towns, regional centres and disadvantaged city neighbourhoods. In each case, it is likely that distinctive structural and behavioural factors contribute to the disadvantage.

Outstations and remote Indigenous communities

An outstation (also known as a homeland) is defined by the ABS as a discrete Indigenous community with a population of less than 50 usual residents. The outstation is linked to a larger parent Indigenous community or a resource agency for the provision and maintenance of power, water and sewage services.

Outstations are usually located on ancestral land of cultural and spiritual significance to the Indigenous people who live there. Associated with such ties to the land are obligations, for example the obligation to protect sacred sites.

The ABS defines a *discrete* Indigenous community as a geographic location, bounded by physical or legal boundaries, and inhabited or intended to be inhabited predominantly (>50 per cent) by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, with housing or infrastructure that is managed on a community basis. Approximately one-fifth of all Indigenous people are usually resident in discrete communities according to this definition.

The most recent Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey conducted by the ABS revealed that there were 1,187 discrete Indigenous communities in 2006 occupied by 92,960 usual residents.

Table 2.6 shows 865 (73 per cent) were outstations, predominantly located in very remote areas (ABS, 2007). Most were in northern and central Australia. By way of contrast to the large number of small settlements, only 17 discrete Indigenous communities had a usual population of 1,000 or more people.

The ABS survey reports that one-fifth (21 per cent) of the discrete Indigenous communities had a primary school within their community. Seventy-three per cent of the total usual population of all discrete Indigenous communities lived in these communities with primary schools.

In many communities the number of residents ebb and flow, hence the term 'usual population'. Community members leave settlements to access

Table 2.5: Indigenous people speaking an Indigenous language, jurisdiction 2006

Indigenous language	NT	WA	SA	Qld	ACT	Vic	NSW	Tas	Australia
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Speaking	59	14	12	9	2	1	<1	0	12
Not	41	86	88	91	98	99	>99	100	88

(ABS, 2008, Table 5.5).

Table 2.6: Number of discrete Indigenous communities, usual population, geographic location 2006

	Usual population						Total
	<50	50-99	100-199	200-499	500-999	>999	
Australia	865	123	92	71	19	17	1,187
Capital cities	2	0	2	0	0	0	4
Regional areas	25	14	24	5	0	3	71
Remote and very remote	838	109	66	66	19	14	1,112

(ABS, 2007, Table 3.1). Total usual population in all discrete communities = 92,960.

services, family members visit for indeterminate periods and, in some seasons, people camp away from the settlement.

Movement is also associated with a drift of Indigenous people from outstations and small remote towns to reside in regional towns and urban areas. ABS reported a small decline (2.4 per cent) in the number of discrete Indigenous communities 2001-2006 with the usual population declining by more than 15,000 people. This represented 16 per cent of the usual population reported in 2001 (ABS, 2007).

Town camps

Some rural towns are becoming increasingly Indigenous as a result of Indigenous people moving into town and the drift of non-Indigenous people to large population centres. The growth is due to movement to urban areas, increased Indigenous identification and a higher Indigenous birth rate.

In addition to the general drift from remote to regional and urban centres there are circular flows of population into more populated service centres and out again to surrounding communities.

Taylor (1998) reports the results of a survey of the Bagot Community in Darwin that showed that, because of visitors, the base population had grown by 41 per cent producing acute over-crowding. The occupancy rate grew from 7.5 persons per dwelling to approximately 13 persons. Subsequent studies reported by Taylor (2006) indicate that this degree of over-crowding was replicated in other town camps and outstations. For example, Alice Springs provided services to about 260 small communities with a combined population of approximately 15,000 people.

Such mobility greatly amplifies the difficulty in planning infrastructure and service delivery, particularly where the long-term intentions of individuals are unclear.

Although there has been movement from the remote regions to cities and towns some remote discrete Indigenous settlements continue to grow with populations exceeding 1,000 persons. The remote town of Wadeye, for example, had an Indigenous population exceeding 2,000 when it was surveyed in 2006 and, over a period of a decade, is expected to become the fourth largest town in the Northern Territory (Taylor, 2006).

Urban and regional locations

Indigenous people are over-represented in the poorest neighbourhoods and on socio-economic measures display the worst outcomes. About one-quarter of Indigenous people living in major urban centres falls into the lowest decile on measures of socio-economic status. Less than 2 per cent fall into the highest decile (Taylor, 2006).

Comparisons across recent census collections suggest this is an entrenched pattern of disadvantage.

Using 2001 and 2006 census data, Biddle (2009) identified 235 metropolitan and regional locations with substantial Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. He then examined differences between the two groups within each location on nine indicators of socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage pertaining to employment, education and housing.

Biddle (2009) found considerable variation within the 235 areas. The most extreme case was in the Coconut Grove-Ludmilla area of Darwin where the Indigenous population ranked at the 99th percentile while the non-Indigenous population ranked at the 9th percentile on a measure of disadvantage. Variations of a similar magnitude were found in other locations, for example Kalgoorlie-Boulder. In other cases, there were only small differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Both populations ranked near the bottom in Western Sydney and near the top on Sydney's North Shore.

There was not a single town, suburb or city area in Biddle's sample where the Indigenous population had more favourable outcomes than the non-Indigenous population.

Biddle concluded:

> Indigenous disadvantage cannot be explained by the fact that Indigenous Australians are more likely to live in remote towns or outstations, as, even within the same suburb or large town, Indigenous Australians fare relatively poorly in terms of employment, income and housing (pp. 59-60).

The level of urban disadvantage for Indigenous people was not uniform across Australia. Biddle reported that urban areas in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia had worse outcomes on average than was the case in the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and Victoria.

Mobility

Mobility is a feature of the lives of many Indigenous people. Seasonal and relationship-related circular movements between remote areas and towns combined with trends towards urbanisation make it difficult to satisfactorily describe the geographic dispersion of Indigenous populations. Temporary mobility combined with long-term migration are difficult issues for school systems and individual schools to address (Fordham & Schwab, 2007).

A sub-regional study of Aboriginal people resident within the Fitzroy Valley identified core and non-core residents in an effort to produce a more useful population profile than was possible using other sources.

Children under 10 years were more frequently found on country in small family-based communities than in towns. On Thursdays and Fridays, however, families travelled to town to collect mail and welfare payments, sometimes staying for the

Table 2.7: Indigenous students, ICSEA quintile 2010

ICSEA quintile	Indigenous students
	%
Q1 (most disadvantaged)	61
Q2	17
Q3	10
Q4	8
Q5 (most advantaged)	4
All	100

Source: ACARA database 2010. n = 6,925 primary and combined schools. 716 schools (9.4 per cent) did not provide data on Indigenous enrolment.

weekend. Mobility was highest among teenagers and young adults and tapered off with age (Morphy, 2010).

Young adults are the parents of primary school-aged children. This suggests that school-aged children may be more adversely affected by mobility than other age groups. Highly mobile parents either take children out of school or leave them in the care of other residents.

The resource intensity of tasks associated with registering the arrivals and departures of highly mobile students is expected to be associated with under reporting of movements (Prout & Yap, 2012).

A Queensland study of mobility in four clusters of primary schools found that Indigenous students moved more frequently than non-Indigenous students (Hill et al., 2010). 'Family circumstances' was the most common reason for moving between schools for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents. 'Housing' was the next most common reason given. In recognition of this context and the practicalities facing classroom teachers, the appointment of specialist teachers in mobility support roles in schools with student mobility rates greater than 20 per cent has been recommended (Hill et al., 2012).

Table 2.8: Proportion of students in ICSEA quintile, Indigenous status 2010

	ICSEA quintile					Australia
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Indigenous	23	5	3	2	<1	5
Non-Indigenous	77	95	97	98	>99	95

Source: ACARA database 2010. n = 6,925 primary and combined schools. 716 schools (9.4 per cent) did not provide data on Indigenous enrolment.

Figure 2.1: Proportion of Indigenous students in primary and combined schools 2010
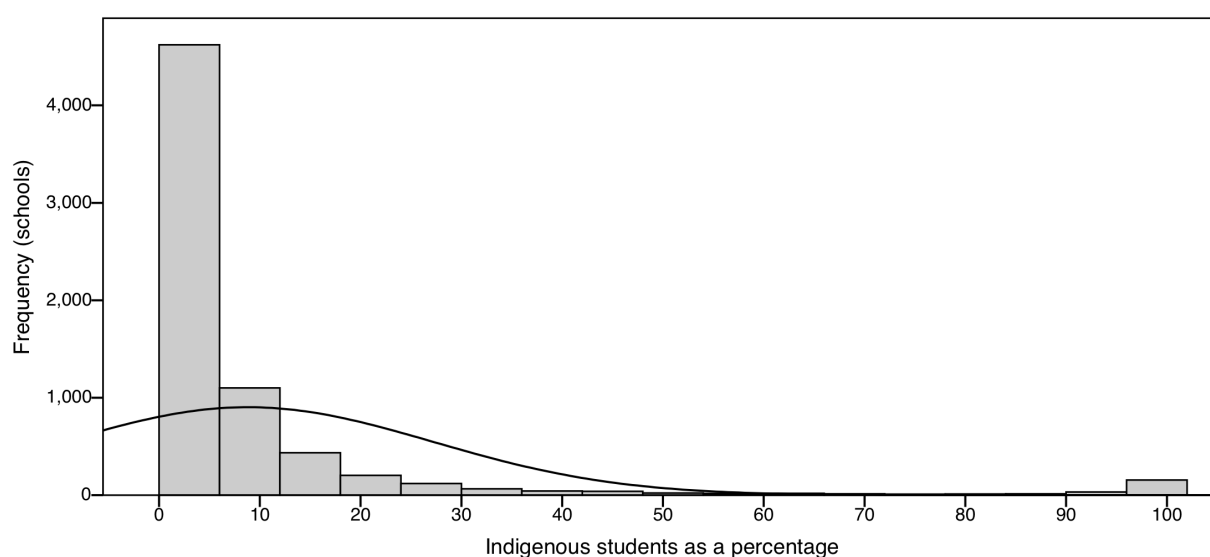
Source: ACARA database 2010. Schools include all primary and combined schools that reported Indigenous enrolments as a percentage.

The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children reported one-fifth (21 per cent) of the 1,687 families participating in the study moved house between 2008 and 2009. One-half (50 per cent) of primary carers said a 'housing reason' caused the move. 'Family reason' was the second most common category of reason given for moving. The families in the study had at least one child who was a baby or below the age for compulsory schooling (FaHCSIA, 2011).

Schools and Indigenous students

Educational disadvantage

ACARA measures educational advantage and disadvantage with the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The index used in this study was derived from ABS data for census collection districts and data collected from parents when they enrol their children at school as reported by My School 2.0. In addition to the census data on home background, the index takes account of remoteness and the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled in the school. Each of the measures is weighted so the combined ICSEA scale predicts most accurately the educational outcomes for literacy and numeracy.

In order to examine the relationship between Indigenous student enrolment and educational disadvantage the ICSEA scores for each school were grouped into quintiles. The proportion of Indigenous students that attend schools within each ICSEA quintile is reported in Table 2.7.

More than one-half (61 per cent) of Indigenous students were enrolled in the one-fifth of schools that were most disadvantaged. Among the schools with the highest one-fifth of ICSEA scores, the most advantaged schools, only 4 per cent of Indigenous students were enrolled. Moreover, only 17 per cent of Indigenous students were in schools with an ICSEA score above the median for all primary and combined schools. The corollary of this is that 83 per cent of Indigenous primary students attend schools below the median.

Table 2.9: Schools with Indigenous enrolments, school categories 2010

Percentage of a school's enrolment that is Indigenous	School frequencies
	%
0	20
1-5	46
6-10	14
11-20	10
21-50	5
51-90	1
91-100	3
All	100

Source: ACARA database 2010. Primary and combined schools = 6,929. Percentages have been rounded.

Table 2.10: Median Indigenous students per school, jurisdiction 2010

	Number	%
Australia	6	3
NT	51	94
Tas	14	7
Qld	11	5
WA	10	4
ACT	9	2
NSW	6	3
SA	5	2
Vic	2	1

Source: ACARA database 2010. Primary and combined schools = 6,929.

Table 2.8 shows the implications of this distribution for the schools in each of the ICSEA quintiles. Schools in the most disadvantaged group have the highest concentration of Indigenous students (23 per cent). The concentration of Indigenous students in schools in each of the ICSEA quintiles declines as socio-economic status increases. In the one-fifth of schools with the highest socio-economic status, the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled was less than 1 per cent.

Concentrations of Indigenous enrolments

Most Australian primary and combined schools enrol only a handful of Indigenous students.

Figure 2.1 shows that the concentration of Indigenous students in schools is bimodal. Most common are schools where Indigenous students form a low proportion, however, the distribution shows a second, much smaller peak of schools with approximately 100 per cent Indigenous enrolment.

Only a small proportion of schools have Indigenous enrolments that range between 21 and 90 per cent.

Table 2.9 shows that one-fifth of primary and combined schools do not have any Indigenous students enrolled and for nearly one-half of schools (46 per cent), only 1-5 per cent of enrolments were Indigenous. The distribution is skewed such that Indigenous students form a majority in only 4 per cent of all Australian primary and combined schools. This pattern applies generally except in the Northern Territory.

Although Indigenous students are a minority group in the general population they are dis-

persed across the vast majority of primary schools. Concentrations vary by jurisdiction and within jurisdictions.

Table 2.10 reports median Indigenous enrolment data for each jurisdiction rank-ordered by the number of Indigenous students per school. The median number for Australia was 6 students. As the median total school enrolment was 246 students it is evident that in most primary schools Indigenous students were a small minority.

The Northern Territory was exceptional with one-half its schools enrolling 51 or more Indigenous students. The median percentage of Indigenous enrolments per school was 94 per cent. By way of contrast, in Victoria the median number of Indigenous students was 2 students and the median percentage of Indigenous students enrolled in a Victorian school was 1 per cent.

Table 2.11 shows the number and proportion of schools with primary students in each jurisdiction in which Indigenous students exceed 50 per cent of all enrolments in a school. Altogether fewer than 300 primary and combined schools have such a concentration of Indigenous enrolments, more than one-half of them are in the Northern Territory and Western Australia combined.

Summary and discussion

The Indigenous population was younger and growing at a faster rate than the Australian population so the proportion of Indigenous children in

Table 2.11: Schools with more than half students Indigenous, jurisdiction 2010

	Number of schools	As percentage of schools in jurisdiction
Australia	287	4
NT	96	60
WA	74	10
Qld	48	4
NSW	43	2
SA	24	4
ACT	1	1
Vic	1	0
Tas	0	0

Source: ACARA database 2010. Primary and combined schools = 6,929.

primary schools was greater than the proportion of Indigenous people in the Australian population.

The Indigenous teenage pregnancy rate was five times the rate for the Australian population. This exacerbates the disadvantage already present and diminishes the capacity of schools to draw support from children's parents.

The Indigenous population was more widely dispersed and more disadvantaged than the Australian population.

Most Indigenous people lived in locations where disadvantage is concentrated and their children were enrolled in local schools that were also disadvantaged.

Most Indigenous children were enrolled in a school in a major city or regional centre and form a small minority of the students at the school.

One-quarter of all Indigenous people lived in remote and very remote areas compared to only 2 per cent of the Australian population. Further, Indigenous people are more likely to form a majority of the residents in geographically isolated locations.

Mobility was a characteristic of the Indigenous population. This was associated with a declining number of usual residents in discrete Indigenous communities, circular flows between remote locations and over-crowded housing in service centres. There were many drivers of mobility but in general it can be assumed that high mobility has negative consequences for school attendance and limits the capacity of schools to address student needs.

Population differences within and among jurisdictions were a feature.

The largest number of Indigenous people lived in New South Wales and Queensland but the highest proportions were found in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland. Most Indigenous people in very remote locations also lived in these three jurisdictions. Queensland has an Indigenous population growing at a faster rate than found in New South Wales so is expected to become the jurisdiction with the largest population of Indigenous people.

The Indigenous population in the Northern Territory differed from other jurisdictions because it was more concentrated and more remote and a greater proportion of Indigenous people spoke an Indigenous language.

The median number of Indigenous students in a primary or combined school is six. Most Indigenous children attend a school in which they constitute a small minority. Given the small numbers of Indigenous children in the vast majority of Australian schools, it is possible that the differences in Indigenous students' lifestyles when compared to their non-Indigenous peers are largely unknown to the staff members in the schools they attend.

Of the 6,929 schools with enrolment data available fewer than 300 schools enrolled a majority of Indigenous students.

Eighty-three per cent of Indigenous students in primary and combined schools attended a school with an ICSEA score below the median. Sixty-one per cent attended a school with an ICSEA score in the lowest quintile.

School system officials are faced with a rapidly growing population of Indigenous children enrolled in widely dispersed but generally disadvantaged schools.

3

Achievement gap

Introduction

This chapter outlines methods used to identify, monitor and reduce the disparity in educational achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia since 1977.

The disparity in achievement, or gap, reflects the standards in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of students. To reduce the disparity, the performance of Indigenous students on achievement tests must increase at a *faster* rate than any increase by non-Indigenous students. This is based on an assumption that improved Indigenous achievement on its own will not be sufficient to ameliorate disadvantage.

Evidence of disparity

ACER surveys

The first reliable estimates of the size of the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in literacy and numeracy appeared in the 1977 report of the performance of national samples of Australian 10-year-old and 14-year-old students (Bourke & Parkin, 1977).

The survey was designed to map the literacy and numeracy achievement of Australian students and was controversial because of fears about comparisons. Adjustments to the sampling frame and reporting protocols were made in response to these fears.

The study sampled two groups of Indigenous students. Group 1 comprised schools where the students enrolled were predominantly Indigenous with few non-Indigenous children enrolled. These schools were selected from the Northern Territory. In Group 2 were schools where the Indigenous students were a minority. These schools were selected from throughout Australia, including the Northern Territory.

The results showed that both groups of Indigenous students performed well below the Australian average and that the students in Group 1 schools performed at a much lower level on most assessments. Based on reading comprehension assessments, the gap was 57 percentage points for students in the Group 1 schools and 18 percentage points for students in the Group 2 schools. The pattern of results for the numeracy assessments was similar.

The researchers concluded that this level of achievement would preclude many Indigenous students from living without severe disadvantage.

Over the next two decades, follow-up studies, conducted mainly by the ACER, consistently showed an achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on literacy and numeracy assessments. In longitudinal studies the achievement of Indigenous students declined over time on some measures (Rothman, 2002).

In a further survey of literacy achievement conducted by ACER in 1996, Indigenous students again performed well below average with the bottom 20 per cent of Indigenous students appearing to make no progress from Year 3 to Year 5. The authors of the report noted:

> For over a decade, the disparity in literacy achievement between various subgroups of students has concerned education authorities. All State and Territory education systems and most non-government school authorities have introduced major new and in many cases resource intensive programs to address the needs of those students who appear to be falling behind. Evidence about the long-term effectiveness of these programs is inconclusive and longitudinal data would be required to make use of the data collected on these programs in the 1996 Survey (Masters & Forster, 1997, p. vii).

The publication of these results prompted education ministers to establish a national assessment program, the forerunner to NAPLAN.

National benchmark assessment

In 1997, the council of education ministers proclaimed that 'every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years' (MCEETYA, 1997, p. 1). They agreed to establish national benchmarks for Years 3 and 5, assess students against the benchmarks and publicly report the results.

In 1999, the first set of results was published in the *National Report on Schooling in Australia*. In subsequent years results were published either in the *National Report* or in a supplement to it and included results for Indigenous students.

Jurisdictions conducted their own assessments. The individual student scores in each jurisdiction were then calibrated against a common standard and integrated in a single scale. This procedure allowed the results of students in one state to be compared with the results of students in other states even though the students sat different tests. This was an imperfect system made necessary by apprehension about adopting a common assessment instrument.

Table 3.1 shows the results for Reading for all students in Australia and Indigenous students. While there has been improvement in some years, an established improvement trend was not evident. The results in Numeracy were similar.

Table 3.1: Students above national Reading benchmark, Indigenous students, Australia 1999-2007

Students above benchmark	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Year 3									
Australia	87	93	90	92	92	93	93	94	93
Indigenous students	66	77	72	77	75	83	74	80	81
Gap*	*21*	*16*	*18*	*16*	*17*	*10*	*19*	*14*	*13*
Year 5									
Australia	86	87	90	89	89	89	88	88	89
Indigenous students	59	62	67	68	68	69	63	66	68
Gap*	*27*	*25*	*23*	*21*	*21*	*19*	*25*	*22*	*22*
Year 7									
Australia	–	–	88	89	89	91	90	89	89
Indigenous students	–	–	60	65	66	71	64	63	65
Gap*	*–*	*–*	*28*	*24*	*23*	*20*	*26*	*26*	*25*

(*MCEETYA*, 1999, MCEETYA, 2000-2007). **The gap reported is the percentage point difference calculated prior to rounding.*

Table 3.2: Students achieving national minimum standard, learning domain, Indigenous status 2008-2011

Students above minimum standard	Reading				Writing				Numeracy			
	2008 %	2009 %	2010 %	2011 %	2008 %	2009 %	2010 %	2011 %	2008 %	2009 %	2010 %	2011 %
Year 3												
Indigenous	68	75	75	76	79	80	79	80	79	74	77	84
Non-Indigenous	93	95	95	95	96	97	97	96	96	95	95	96
*Gap**	*25*	*20*	*20*	*19*	*18*	*17*	*18*	*16*	*17*	*21*	*19*	*13*
Year 5												
Indigenous	63	67	66	66	70	70	70	69	69	74	71	75
Non-Indigenous	93	93	93	93	94	94	94	94	94	95	95	95
*Gap**	*29*	*26*	*26*	*26*	*24*	*24*	*24*	*25*	*25*	*21*	*24*	*20*
Year 7												
Indigenous	72	73	77	77	68	70	70	67	79	76	77	76
Non-Indigenous	95	95	96	96	93	94	94	93	96	96	96	95
*Gap**	*23*	*22*	*19*	*19*	*25*	*24*	*24*	*26*	*18*	*20*	*19*	*19*
Year 9												
Indigenous	71	67	64	72	60	59	59	55	72	75	70	72
Non-Indigenous	94	93	92	93	89	89	89	86	95	96	94	94
*Gap**	*23*	*26*	*28*	*22*	*29*	*30*	*30*	*31*	*22*	*21*	*24*	*22*

(ACARA, 2010 & 2011, multiple figures). *The gap reported is the percentage point difference calculated prior to rounding.*

The *National Report* also published reports from systems and independent associations about the programs introduced to improve literacy and numeracy. Commonwealth targeted programs supplemented state resources to enable these initiatives.

It soon became clear that the target of every child reaching the national minimum standard within four years would not be met. The trend lines for jurisdictions and categories of students were remarkably flat. While there were occasional anomalies, for example Year 3 Indigenous students' results improved in 2004, explanations were speculative and the improvement may have been an artifact of assessment and scaling processes.

NAPLAN

In the federal election campaign of 2007 the Labor opposition promised to introduce common assessment instruments developed and administered by a new national body, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). This would reduce measurement error and strengthen the hand of the Commonwealth government when drawing on test results to set new policy directions. After the election, these promises were put into effect.

NAPLAN results are used as performance indicators by COAG to ascertain the progress made by schools.

The 1999-2007 national literacy and numeracy benchmark reports compared Indigenous students' results with the results of *all* students. NAPLAN reports, however, compare Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students and as a result the reported gap is wider.

Synopsis of NAPLAN achievement gaps

Table 3.2 shows the proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students performing in 2008-2011 at or above the national minimum standard on the NAPLAN Reading, Writing and Numeracy assessments. The 'gap' is therefore illustrated in these data by the percentage point difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who achieved at the national minimum standard.

It is evident in Table 3.2 that the magnitude of the gap varies from domain to domain and from year

Table 3.3: Year 3 NAPLAN Reading, students below minimum standard, geographic location 2010

	Students below minimum standard
	%
Australia	6
Major cities	5
Regional areas	7
Remote	14
Very remote	41

(ACARA, 2010, Figures 3.R1 & 3.R5).

to year. The gap reported as the percentage point average of the three domains in the four year levels was 23.3 in 2008, 22.7 in 2009, 22.9 in 2010 and 21.5 in 2011.

While the magnitude of the average gap 2008-2011 has declined slightly, the margin is less than 2 percentage points and it will take several more years to collect sufficient data to establish definitive trends.

PISA assessments

Carefully drawn samples of Australian 15-year-old students have participated in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) at three-year intervals, 2003, 2006 and 2009. The purpose of PISA is to make international comparisons of student performance in reading and mathematical and scientific literacy.

The 2009 report of Australia's results showed the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was on average the equivalent of two years of schooling and there was no statistically significant improvement in the performance of Indigenous students over the three occasions PISA was administered (Thomson et al., 2011).

Teacher judgments

A study of resourcing for primary schools asked teachers about students who were struggling to meet national minimum standards in literacy and numeracy (Angus & Olney, 2011). One-fifth of the failing students identified by teachers in 33 schools in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia were Indigenous. When data was analysed by Indigenous status, teachers had attributed obstacles from out-of-school factors more frequently for Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students and these differences were evident in both 2009 and 2010. Indigenous male students were reported to have the highest concentration of factors limiting their progress of all the subgroups considered.

Geography of achievement

The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision concluded that as remoteness increases, learning outcomes for Indigenous students decline and the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens (SCRGSP, 2011). This is illustrated by the percentage of all students below the national minimum standard in Year 3 NAPLAN Reading by geographic location as shown in Table 3.3. Over 41 per cent of all students attending schools in very remote locations did not reach the minimum standard.

Table 3.4 shows the gap for each jurisdiction for Year 3 NAPLAN Reading. More than half of Indigenous students in the Northern Territory who sat the test performed below the minimum standard and nearly one-third were below in Western Australia. The gap is narrowest in Victoria and Tasmania.

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is widest in jurisdictions with higher proportions of students in remote and very remote locations.

Table 3.4: Year 3 NAPLAN Reading, students below minimum standard, jurisdiction, Indigenous status 2010

Students below minimum standard	NT	WA	SA	Qld	ACT	NSW	Vic	Tas	Australia
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Indigenous	57	33	25	23	17	14	13	12	25
Non-Indigenous	9	6	6	7	4	4	4	6	5
*Gap**	*48*	*27*	*19*	*16*	*13*	*10*	*9*	*7*	*20*

(ACARA, 2010. Figure 3.R3). *The gap reported is the percentage point difference calculated prior to rounding.*

Table 3.5: Year 3 NAPLAN Reading, students below minimum standard, school categories 2010

Percentage of a school's enrolment that is Indigenous	Students below minimum standard
	%
Australia	6
0	3
1-5	4
6-10	7
11-20	9
21-50	13
51-90	25
91-100	42

Source: ACARA database 2010.

To further explore the spatial determinants of literacy and numeracy achievement, Year 3 NAPLAN Reading results have been selected. The measure adopted is the percentage of students in each school below the minimum standard. This group includes students who achieved a scaled score in Band 1 and students who were exempted from sitting the test.

Table 3.5 shows the average proportion of students in a school below the minimum standard in categories related to the concentration of Indigenous enrolments. In schools where 91-100 per cent of students were Indigenous, 42 per cent of students were below the minimum standard on Year 3 NAPLAN Reading. This is 14 times the proportion of schools where no Indigenous student is enrolled.

Attendance rates show a similar pattern. Table 3.6 shows the average student attendance rates for schools according to the concentration of Indigenous enrolment. In the schools where 91-100 per cent of students were Indigenous, students attended for one day per week less on average than schools where no students were Indigenous. This is a difference in average attendance rates of 20 percentage points between the schools with the highest and lowest attendance rates.

Prout (2008) has drawn attention to problems comparing attendance data that are defined, recorded and stored differently from school to school, system to system and jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In addition, the failure to disaggre-

gate administrative data by Indigenous status in schools where Indigenous students are a small minority is expected to inflate the reported differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates.

Programs to alleviate disadvantage

Failed attempts

Governments have been aware for decades of large differences in academic achievement between disadvantaged students and other students and programs have been in place to provide extra support to schools and families on the basis of various categories of disadvantage.

In Australia, the Whitlam government launched the disadvantaged schools program that provided additional funding for schools that were located in low socio-economic neighbourhoods (Karmel, 1973). Subsequent federal and state governments made various adjustments to these programs and developed others that focused on disadvantage occurring in rural and remote locations.

No compelling evidence has emerged to show that additional funds disbursed through previous programs have had a lasting impact on student achievement. In 1985, a review of government education programs was prompted by concern that additional funding had not yielded expected improvements in student achievement. It recommended a shift from providing more inputs (resources) to producing better outcomes (Karmel,

Table 3.6: Mean attendance rates, school categories 2010

Percentage of a school's enrolment that is Indigenous	Attendance rate
	%
Australia	92.5
0	94
1-5	93.5
6-10	93
11-20	92
21-50	91
51-90	84
91-100	74

Source: ACARA database 2010. Primary and combined schools = 6,908. Standard deviation: Australia SD = 5, schools with 91-100 per cent Indigenous enrolment SD = 13.

1985). Turning this policy advice into action has eluded successive governments.

In New South Wales, the auditor-general reported that, although funding for literacy and numeracy programs had trebled over the previous decade, there was little apparent improvement that could be attributed to the additional funding (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2008). This finding applied to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

In Victoria, the auditor-general concluded that after six years of investment in literacy and numeracy programs, and funding exceeding a billion dollars, the results were 'disappointing' (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2009).

The lack of progress has led to questions about why the investments in literacy and numeracy improvement have failed to bear fruit.

Both auditors-general were critical of the weak information systems that prevented accurate targeting of support. Information sharing across school systems and government agencies with a stake in student achievement was also seen as a weakness in both jurisdictions. Neither jurisdiction had compiled robust evidence that the large, costly programs had produced the intended results.

Recent changes in US policy

In the United States, the commitment to close the gap has achieved international prominence with the passing of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. In 2002, states were required to set the same performance targets for children irrespective of their ethnic or racial heritage, socio-economic background or language spoken at home. The NCLB legislation required all schools to administer reading and mathematics tests annually to all students, and to increase the proportion of students passing the tests until 2014 when all students were required to be above the standard. Highly prescriptive reporting requirements were set in place. Sanctions, including school closure, were imposed on schools that failed to progress as measured by standardised achievement tests.

In recent years, it has been recognised that many US schools would not meet the standard of 100 per cent student proficiency by 2014 and that tougher sanctions would not produce the desired result. Facing the prospect of failure in 2014, the Obama administration has responded by waiving some of the provisions of the NCLB legislation (Dillon, 2011). While retaining the federal role of setting standards, the US government has ceded to the states responsibility for designing improvement measures.

Researchers in the US have been able to monitor progress through access to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) which has provided student performance data since 1964. In addition, state tests and tests administered for research purposes have been used. While there is a consensus that in recent years the achievement gap between ethnic and racial minority groups has remained steady (though there was a period when it seemed to be closing) there is much less agreement about what needs to be done.

UK trend lines

The situation in the United Kingdom is similar to that in Australia. The trend lines for achievement in literacy and numeracy are flat and in some cases may have dipped. Governments under these circumstances are caught in a bind. There is intense pressure to demonstrate progress on the monitoring regimes that have been put in place yet there is no clear avenue along which to proceed that guarantees success.

Not surprisingly, there is a multiplicity of viewpoints about what needs to be done. A recent British review concluded that although the link between poverty and educational attainment has been established, much less is known about the strategies and interventions that will raise attainment (Sharples et al., 2011).

Contemporary approaches

Three conceptual frameworks evident in responses to current challenges are outlined.

Teacher quality

The prevailing view among policy analysts in Australia and many developed countries is that the best way to proceed is to improve teacher quality.

One approach espoused is to enable schools with the most disadvantaged students to attract and retain the most able and expert teachers thereby changing the usual pattern of teacher distribution. This approach is based largely on the work of economists who have calculated the student gains in test scores of the highest and lowest groups of students and attributed these to their teachers. Hanushek (2011) argued that if the bottom 5-10 per cent of teachers in the US were replaced with the average for teachers found in contemporary US

classrooms, then the achievement of US students would rise from below the developed country average to near the top of the country rankings. Influential consulting firms have analysed international surveys of student achievement to develop and promote similar conclusions (McKinsey & Company, 2010).

The focus on improving teacher quality has led to a cascade of new procedures: documents setting standards for teachers at different levels have been drafted, entry requirements to the profession are invigilated through teacher registration and the appraisal of teacher performance has been increasingly formalised. In some jurisdictions, financial and other incentives have been included in packages to attract teachers to the schools that historically have been most difficult to staff.

An approach allied to the quality of teaching promotes the use of more effective pedagogies. There has been development of effective literacy teaching strategies; for example, the contemporary, dominant view is that synthetic phonics programs lead to sustained improvements in reading programs (Johnston & Watson, 2005). Other educators maintain that more direct instructional methods that focus student effort on what must be learned, coupled with thoughtful feedback on progress, will pay dividends (Hattie, 2008).

These perspectives are strongly reflected in the approaches promoted through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan and the education National Partnerships, particularly the National Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality (COAGa, 2009).

The Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations has commissioned two surveys, titled *Staff in Australian Schools*, to inform policy about the workforce of teachers and school leaders. The most recent survey was conducted during 2010 and did not disaggregate data by the proportion of Indigenous enrolments in the schools where teachers were surveyed. It does however report that the proportion of primary school teachers who were Indigenous was 1 per cent and the proportion of Indigenous primary school leaders was 0.1 per cent (McKenzie et al., 2011).

In recognition of the need to increase the representation of Indigenous people among teachers and school leaders, the 'More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Inititiative' (MATSITI) program commenced in 2011. The purpose of this program is to increase the number of Indigenous teacher education graduates and develop the professional capacity of Indigenous teachers working in schools (Garrett, 2011).

Extended services

A second approach is based on the principle that the key barriers to student improvement lie outside the school. Therefore other agencies must provide support so that there is an increased likelihood that disadvantaged students will attend school and engage with their schoolwork. This approach is described by various terms such as 'wrap-around services', 'extended service schooling' or 'full-service schooling'. The additional services, often based on a school site, typically include: parenting education, childcare, preschool, respite care, health services and ancillary health services. It is assumed that proximity to, and familiarity with, a school will improve access for families and assist with coordination so student needs can be met on a more holistic basis.

Because of costs, not every school with disadvantaged students can be provided a full range of services. Therefore, in Australia, it is proposed various models will be supported by the Low-SES National Partnership to explore the options (Black et al., 2011).

Evaluations of programs that deliver these services have tended to show weak or mixed effects. While individual students benefit, the effects wash out when programs are evaluated (Whitehurst & Croft, 2010). The disappointing results may have less to do with the value of the services and more to do with delivery. Rebell (2011) summed up the evidence regarding out-of-school services.

> If all of these resources were provided on a regular basis to disadvantaged students, in a coherent, integrated manner, as they regularly are to more advantaged students, there is no doubt that the overall impact on student learning would be even more powerful (p. 9).

This suggests that connecting disadvantaged students to support services may be difficult even when a service is brought physically closer to students who need it.

Place-based reform

The third broad approach is to strike at the causes of disadvantage. Its adherents maintain that it is not sufficient to rely on service providers such as nurses, psychologists and social workers to ameliorate out-of-school problems since the

determinants of disadvantage are fundamentally structural, for example inter-generational welfare dependence. It is argued that instead of concentrating effort on the school, the wellbeing of families will be improved through community development and neighbourhood renewal. Government and non-government agencies should work with communities to provide better housing, access to health services, safer communities and employment opportunities. This approach, known as place-based reform, underpins support to 29 remote Indigenous communities provided through the National Partnership for Remote Service Delivery.

State governments have also initiated place-based reform programs.

In 2001, Victoria began a program aimed at addressing the spatial concentration of poverty in particular neighbourhoods (Klein, 2004). A review found improvements had resulted from 'strong joined-up social investment by government, coordinated by place managers, responsive to community aspirations' (Victorian Department of Human Services, 2008).

In 2009, the New South Wales government established a similar initiative known as the Two Way Together Partnership Community Program. It targets 40 communities that include urban as well as regional and remote locations. A review in 2011 by the Office of the New South Wales Auditor General was cautiously optimistic about the program but critical of bureaucratic constraints encountered in the delivery of services to Indigenous people (Audit Office of New South Wales, 2011).

Relative merits of the approaches

The relative merits of each of these three approaches – improving the quality of teaching, extending the range of services provided in association with a school and building the capacity of a local community – continue to be vigorously contested although each has a contribution to make. Research has consistently shown that while teacher quality explains a proportion of the variation in student achievement, non-school factors are also important (Hattie, 2003).

The Australian versions of the extended services approach and the place-based reform approach have some features in common; however, from the perspective of the school there is an important difference. With the extended services approach

the school is the focal point of the reform and the services are expected to assist the school to achieve better outcomes. In place-based reform, *the community* is the focal point of the reform and the school is one of a number of institutions that contribute to the community's development.

Approaches adopted need not be mutually exclusive and reliance on one approach may be counterproductive. This view is supported by Rothstein (2010) and Ladd (2012).

Rothstein explained the interdependencies.

> In addition to teacher quality, they [policy makers] should pay attention to school leadership, curriculum improvement, and school organization. They should consider what initiatives they can take, either themselves or in partnership with other community organisations, to improve children's opportunities to come to school in good health and with enriched experiences in early childhood and out-of-school time. But they will have to embed all of this work in an insistence on broader efforts of economic and social reform if they hope their school improvements [are] to make any difference (p. 4).

Rothstein's point is that success depends not only on school support but also on wider structural reforms that reduce endemic socio-economic disadvantage. Translating such intentions into successful action requires exceptional orchestration.

Conclusion

After several decades of tracking the disparity in achievement of Indigenous students relative to non-Indigenous students it is unclear why attempts to remove the gap have been, for the most part, unsuccessful.

Since 1999, literacy and numeracy achievement has been measured in Years 3 and 5 and the results disaggregated by Indigenous status have been reported nationally. With the introduction of NAPLAN in 2008 assessments have been extended and standardised. There is a growing national database of student assessment results that can be used to map trends. While analyses have shown that the achievement gap widens as remoteness increases and is associated with low attendance rates by Indigenous students, the test results on their own provide little guidance on what needs to be done.

Experts do not agree on what strategies will work to close the achievement gap. Some maintain that efforts should focus on improving teacher quality. Others draw attention to out-of-school factors when explaining the variation in student achievement. They recommend programs that deliver extended services from school sites and initiatives that support community development.

In order to close the gap Indigenous students need to raise their levels of achievement at a faster rate than non-Indigenous students. The national strategy to remove Indigenous disadvantage has been designed to do this and is outlined in the next chapter.

4

Architecture of Indigenous reform

Introduction

The overarching framework for the funding, strategies and targets for services specific to Indigenous people is the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA). Primary schools are connected to this through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 (COAG, 2008b).

This chapter outlines the background to national Indigenous policies and explains the implications of these policies for primary schools.

Indigenous reform

Nature and scale of Indigenous disadvantage

In 2002, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) requested that the Standing Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) report regularly on specified indicators of Indigenous disadvantage. In the foreword to the first of these reports, *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage*, the Chairman of this committee stated:

> Notwithstanding many years of policy attention, this Report confirms that Indigenous Australians continue to experience marked and widespread disadvantage. This

is shown most fundamentally by the 20-year gap in average life expectancy between Indigenous and other Australians (SCRGSP, 2003, p. v).

Since then, methods for collecting data about Indigenous populations have improved and the gap in life expectancy has been assessed as considerably less than 20 years. The volatility of the statistics has been part of the terrain; however, on nearly all the key indicators of disadvantage, Indigenous people fared worse than other Australians.

Indigenous people had higher suicide rates, proportionally more homicides, higher rates of domestic violence, higher rates of imprisonment, higher rates of child abuse and neglect, higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes, lower rates of home ownership, more overcrowding in households, lower school participation rates, lower literacy and numeracy achievement and lower Year 12 completion rates (SCRGSP, 2003).

Nine years after the first report titled *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage* was published, with the available data showing improvement in 13 of 45 quantitative indicators, the most recent report in this series noted that 'there is still a considerable way to go' (SCRGSP, 2011, p. 4).

COAG trials

In 2002, eight trials, one in each jurisdiction, were set up to explore place-based, flexible approaches that drew on shared responsibility from state and Commonwealth government agencies. The purpose of this work was to achieve improvements in Indigenous health, education and economic and community wellbeing and, as a consequence, reduce the incidence of crime and domestic violence in Indigenous communities. These trials served as precursors to the approach adopted in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.

The trial conducted in western New South Wales, the Murdi Paaki COAG trial, has been put forward as the most successful of the eight trials conducted. Jarvie and Stewart (2011) argue that one of the aspects of this particular trial that proved successful was a model of 'good enough' governance that aligned with flexibility rather than control. The success in individual communities also depended on the quality of the facilitation provided. A characteristic that differentiated this trial from the other seven was the fact that the lead organisations were the state education department and the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training.

Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children

In 2008, following extensive consultation and pilot testing, data gathering for the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children began (FaHCSIA, 2011). 'Footprints in Time' was designed to collect information in four consecutive years about two groups of Indigenous children: babies and children who would enter compulsory schooling during the life of the study.

In the first year, the sample consisted of 1,687 children from 11 sites across Australia. The mixed methods research design has enabled both quantitative and qualitative information to be gathered. The proportion of children continuing from Wave 1 in 2008 to Wave 2 in 2009 was 86 per cent. Data sources included, but were not limited to, structured interviews with a child's primary carer, developmental tests and data linkage to Medicare records.

The main emphases in the early stages of this study have been a child's family, household, housing, health and development. As the children have matured, questions about engagement with school have been added.

'Footprints in time' has provided evidence regarding progress on some of COAG's Closing the Gap targets; for example mothers smoking during pregnancy rates have been reported.

National Indigenous Reform Agreement

The newly elected Rudd government announced that it would address Indigenous disadvantage via a whole of government set of initiatives known as 'Closing the Gap'. Funding agreements were reached between the Commonwealth and the states and territories in the form of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and six National Partnerships that specified on a bilateral basis what the Commonwealth and each state or territory were to achieve.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement has specified seven 'building blocks' where action is required to reduce Indigenous disadvantage. The building blocks or platforms are:

1. Early childhood;
2. Schooling;
3. Health;
4. Economic participation;
5. Healthy homes;
6. Safe communities; and
7. Governance and leadership.

The Agreement specifies objectives, outcomes, outputs, performance indicators and performance benchmarks that jurisdictions must meet as a condition of Commonwealth funding.

It is recognised that improvement in the area of one building block is dependent on improvements across other building blocks.

The following six targets have been linked to a timeline:

1. Close the life expectancy gap within a generation;
2. Halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade;
3. Ensure that all four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;
4. Halve the gap for Indigenous students in Reading, Writing and Numeracy within a decade;
5. Halve the gap for Indigenous people aged 20-24 in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and

6. Halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

Of the six targets, one is confined to Indigenous people living in remote locations and the other five apply to all Indigenous people.

The strategies share several common principles relevant to school education. One key principle stipulates that the design and delivery of programs and services should occur with a high level of engagement with the Indigenous community and promote and support Indigenous identity and culture.

Another key principle states that 'place-based' approaches should be adopted in the design and delivery of services as opposed to a general roll out of initiatives that are insensitive to the particularities of locations and communities.

A third key principle is that government agencies at all levels should work collaboratively.

In total, $4.6 billion over ten years has been allocated for the Indigenous National Partnerships. This funding is reticulated through various government and non-government agencies that do not include schools. Schools have been funded separately.

Indigenous National Partnerships

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement is supported by six National Partnerships, three of which are focused on remote locations: the provision of housing, public internet access and remote service delivery. The other three National Partnership agreements are: health, economic participation and early childhood development.

Though none pertains directly to schooling, the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery is relevant (COAG, 2009b). Allocated $291 million over 6 years, this National Partnership was designed to deliver services to 29 designated remote communities. Three of the schools that participated in the Responsive School Support Study were located within one of these communities.

The National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery has several innovative features (COAG, 2009b).

First, a separate Office of the Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services (OCGRIS) was created through legislation. The Coordinator General has the authority, for five years, to work across agencies. The focus is on building the capacity of government agencies and communities to work through issues themselves and achieve sustainable outcomes.

Second, the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership has a community development orientation. The program aims to work with Indigenous communities to decide what service improvements are of the highest priority and find the best way of providing the services. Each of the communities participating in the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership has produced a local implementation plan. Generally, schools have not been included in this although a number of communities in the Northern Territory plan to develop a coordinated and integrated child and family approach to schooling (OCGRIS, 2011).

Third, in order to expedite the delivery of support and cut through bureaucratic impediments each community has a 'one-stop shop' through which services are to be delivered to Indigenous people. A senior official is located in each community and all government service delivery business is expected to pass through this office. The viability of the program relies on a suitable person continuing in this role in each location.

Fourth, progress is monitored and the Coordinator General is required to publish six-monthly reports of progress.

Few of the developments that have so far occurred and been reported bear directly on the operation of schools although the importance of school attendance is emphasised.

Reporting

The Office of the Coordinator General has published reports on the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership every six months since 2008. The Reform Council monitors the implementation of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and has reported annually since 2009. The Standing Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision has published five reports, titled *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage*, every second year 2003-2011.

Reporting on the actions designated in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 is annual.

The Northern Territory has bilateral agreements with the Commonwealth and separate reports related to these agreements are published.

Contribution of schools to Indigenous reform

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement endorses a plan for schools, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 (MCEECDYA, 2011). This plan has drawn on Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 (MCEETYA, 2006).

The plan has identified six domains relevant to Indigenous students:

1. Readiness for school;

2. Engagement and connections with families and the community;

3. Attendance;

4. Literacy and numeracy;

5. Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development; and

6. Pathways to post-school options.

Jurisdictions have published state education action plans and identified focus schools.

For each of the six areas, outcomes, targets, performance indicators and required actions are listed. The plan specifies 55 actions divided into three categories: actions requiring national collaboration, actions that are the responsibility of systemic authorities (referred to in the plan as education providers), and actions to be implemented by schools. Nearly half (27) of the actions have been directed at national bodies, mainly MCEECDYA (since renamed SCSEEC in 2011). Of the remainder, equal proportions are directed at system authorities and schools. Most of the actions directed at schools apply specifically to the focus schools.

The actions intended for systems and schools are presented as mandates. Examples of local level actions are: 'Each education system will have an evidence-based attendance strategy in place in 2011' (p. 18), 'Every principal of a focus school will within two years participate in a leadership program to assist them to lead improvement in the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' and 'School principals will have the flexibility to tailor operations to meet the needs of the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community' (p. 25).

Some of the performance indicators that will be used to judge the success of the education action plan measure activity rather than progress; for example, the proportion of Indigenous students with personalised learning strategies, or the number of hours of professional development and training undertaken by principals and teachers.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan does not explain how the initiatives being undertaken under its auspices are to be coordinated with the initiatives of other government and non-government agencies being conducted through the Indigenous National Partnerships. The plan focuses on what should happen in school systems and schools. It does not suggest how schools might address factors outside their control but on which success depends.

Two features of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 should be noted.

First, the education National Partnerships were underway before COAG formally adopted the amended plan in 2011. The achievement of Indigenous students was one priority among several associated with the National Partnerships. Staff members in schools were likely to have planned the use of resources prior to finding their school had been selected as an Indigenous focus school.

Second, the plan directs focus schools to engage in specified activities with little room for discretion by principals. It is assumed that the general mandates were intended to give the plan some force.

Education National Partnerships

The COAG strategies to be implemented by schools have been funded through three education National Partnerships that relate to the National Education Agreement: Literacy and Numeracy, Low-SES School Communities and Improving Teacher Quality.

The education National Partnerships were designed to provide additional support to any students struggling to reach acceptable standards in literacy and numeracy; they do not focus exclusively on Indigenous students. The Low-SES National Partnership is the main source of additional funding to support Indigenous students as most attend schools eligible for this support (COAG, 2008d). In total, $1.5 billion has been allocated for 1,700 schools participating for up to four years within the 7-year timeframe of this particular National Partnership. On average, funding amounts to $220,000 per school per year of participation.

The first tranche of schools began to receive support in 2009.

The Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership provided support valued at $150 million to 930 schools over two years (COAG, 2008c). This amounts to about $80,000 per school per year on average. An additional $350 million was set aside for jurisdictions that met their performance targets. Among the targets in each jurisdiction, some related specifically to the performance of Indigenous students on NAPLAN.

In some jurisdictions, the funding was held centrally and used to develop programs of various kinds to which the schools later had access. In others, the funds allocated to individual schools were posted on the internet and schools had a large measure of control over the spending.

Focus schools

Altogether, state and territory authorities have identified nearly 900 focus schools. Indigenous enrolment was one criterion. The performance of Indigenous students on NAPLAN was a second criterion. Finally, system authorities could exercise discretion by adding or removing schools from the list.

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of 783 primary and combined focus schools by jurisdiction. The median number of Indigenous students in each focus school was 46 students, representing a median concentration of 17 per cent of the school enrolment.

Differences in profile cannot be fully explained by the different populations of Indigenous students in each jurisdiction. Queensland has more than twice as many focus schools as the next jurisdiction (248 compared to 118 Victorian schools). Queensland also has more than twice as many Indigenous students enrolled in its focus schools as the next jurisdiction (22,000 compared to 9,100 in the Northern Territory).

About 600 focus schools have been supported by an education National Partnership.

Next Steps

Since 2005, the Stronger Smarter Institute, led by Chris Sarra, has run programs for principals, teachers and school community members to help Indigenous students to achieve academic success (smart) and develop a sense of the value of their Indigenous identity (strong).

The stronger and smarter philosophy recommends that school leaders:

1. Embrace a positive Indigenous identity;

2. Embrace positive Indigenous leadership in the school;

3. Communicate high expectations of students;

4. Utilise innovative and flexible models of schooling; and

5. Apply innovative and flexible approaches to school staffing.

The stronger smarter philosophy provides a means to deliver services *with* and *for* Indigenous people rather than foisting services upon them.

Table 4.1: Primary and combined focus schools, selected statistics, jurisdiction 2010

	Schools	ICSEA	Median Indigenous students per focus school	
	Sum	Median	Number	%
Australia	783	898	46	17
Qld	248	914	53	14
Vic	118	955	17	6
WA	94	687	68	90
NSW	92	854	64	27
SA	82	900	44	16
NT	59	582	136	97
Tas	60	918	34	11
ACT	30	1,053	15	3

(MCEECDYA, 2011). My School website 2010. Schools not reported on My School have been excluded.

In 2011, $30 million was allocated to the Stronger Smarter Institute to assist 100 focus schools through the Next Steps program.

'Schools will receive between $210,000 and $625,000 over two years, depending on student numbers and school remoteness' so they can work collaboratively within the national policy framework of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (Garrett and McLucas, 2011, p. 1).

The schools participating in Next Steps have undertaken to: develop a school and community partnership agreement designed to improve attendance and engagement; create a personalised learning plan for each Indigenous student; and, adopt a whole-school literacy and numeracy strategy.

Mainstream initiatives

The major reform in school education introduced during the life of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement has been concerned with all students. Within this framework, Indigenous students are one group associated with a larger population of disadvantaged students.

The publication of individual school data including NAPLAN results on the My School website has been the predominant school education reform introduced since 2008. This framework is designed to improve the literacy and numeracy standards of students in general. The focus on overcoming Indigenous disadvantage is associated with an effort to improve educational opportunities for all disadvantaged students.

NAPLAN allows standardised national test results in literacy and numeracy to be disaggregated by Indigenous status and reported in annual national reports by jurisdiction and sector (ACARA, 2011). The My School website reports the Indigenous enrolments as a percentage for individual schools but, in general, only aggregated school data is published.

NAPLAN data disaggregated by Indigenous status is used by the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision to report on Closing the Gap performance indicators (SCRGSP, 2011). NAPLAN is a unique reporting tool because it measures the entire national population of four age cohorts at two-year intervals.

Issues for primary schools

Fulcrum for change

The main thrust of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement is to build stronger communities with the capabilities required to assume responsibility for the wellbeing of Indigenous community members. Implicit in this is the belief that after improvements in dysfunctional communities have begun, they need ongoing support to be sustained. Empowering local Indigenous communities is a key slogan in the campaign to redress disadvantage; community development is proposed as the fulcrum for change.

The reform strategies construe schooling as one of seven building blocks. In the context of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement, schooling is a *means* to building stronger communities. This creates a problem for primary schools because it is unlikely that literacy and numeracy targets can be met *before* the other six building blocks are set in place (Henry, 2007).

Whole of government approach

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement refers to a 'national integrated strategy' and 'whole of government approach' through which there will be effective coordination among the various agencies involved, extending across national, state, regional and local levels of government. These terms are meant to indicate that governments will do all they can to resist the pattern of service delivery in which each agency operates in isolation from other agencies. This is an ambitious goal as delivering services to Indigenous people within the parameters of a single agency has proven difficult.

In recognition of the fact that single agencies working in isolation have not delivered outcomes for Indigenous people, inter-departmental committees have been put in place at various levels of government.

Place-based approaches

One of the key principles underlying the National Indigenous Reform Agreement is that reforms should be 'place-based' so that support can be tailored to the needs of each location. This principle is good in theory but hard to implement in practice.

First, it is easier to design and implement programs that aim to address needs that people or

Figure 4.1: Timeline of key events related to Indigenous education policy 1989-2020

Indigenous affairs		School education
	1989 ▶	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy established 21 goals.
National commitment to improved outcomes in the delivery of programs and services for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples endorsed by COAG.	◀ 1992	
	1995 ▶	National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002 published by MCEETYA.
	1997 ▶	Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) funded by Commonwealth to demonstrate improvements can be achieved in short time frame.
	1999 ▶	National Report on Schooling in Australia reported achievement against national benchmarks for the first time.
	2000 ▶	Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act introduced programs such as Indigenous Tutor Assistance Scheme and ASSPA.
COAG pilots employed 'whole of government' service delivery principles in conjunction with community engagement.	◀ 2002	
First report of the Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage,* established key indicators of Indigenous disadvantage.	◀ 2003	
Responsibilities for Indigenous service delivery transferred from ATSIC and ATSIS to mainstream government departments.	◀ 2004	
FaCSIA given federal Indigenous policy coordination role. Indigenous Coordination Centres created to introduce 'whole of government' approach.	◀ 2005	
	2006 ▶	Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 endorsed by MCEETYA.
Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) introduced.	◀ 2007	
National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) signed. In December, three National Partnership agreements signed: Remote Service Delivery, Remote Indigenous Housing and Indigenous Economic Participation. Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children begun by FaHCSIA.	◀ 2008 ▶	National Education Agreement signed by all Australian governments (COAG, 2008a). ACARA created and made responsible for national testing and reporting of school achievement data.
In July, four National Partnership agreements signed: Indigenous Health Outcomes, Indigenous Early Childhood Development, Indigenous Public Internet Access and Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory.	◀ 2009 ▶	Funding and support provided to nominated schools through the education National Partnerships with the performance of Indigenous students one of the targets. Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE) program introduced (DEEWR, 2010).
	2011 ▶	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 approved by COAG. Focus schools nominated. Final year for Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership.
Final year of Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership agreement. Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children to report.	◀ 2012 ▶	Final year of Parental and Community Engagement program (PaCE).
Final year of three National Partnerships: Closing the Gap in Indigenous Health Outcomes, Indigenous Economic Partnerships and Indigenous Public Internet Access.	◀ 2013 ▶	All Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities to have access to early childhood education. Final year for first tranche of Low-SES National Partnership schools.
Final year of Remote Service Delivery National Partnership.	◀ 2014	
	2016 ▶	Final year of final tranche of Low-SES National Partnership schools.
Final year of Remote Indigenous Housing National Partnership.	◀ 2018 ▶	The gap in literacy and numeracy to be halved.
	2020 ▶	The gap in Year 12 attainments or equivalent to be halved.

institutions have in common; needs that are idiosyncratic are much harder to support.

Second, place-based approaches are efficient ways of delivering support when the people in need of support are concentrated in a local area. However, most Indigenous families live interspersed with non-Indigenous people and the majority of Indigenous students form a small minority in the schools they attend.

Third, agencies tend to tailor their services to suit their own agency-specific processes for managing, funding and accounting for their work rather than problem solving around the most effective way of responding to need.

Primary schools have the potential to make a contribution to place-based reform. Schools have substantial infrastructure and staff members live nearby for most of the year. Also, schools are stable institutions in regular contact with the children of disadvantaged Indigenous families.

Concept of 'community'

The term 'community' occurs frequently in regard to both Indigenous people and schools and can have either a particular or general meaning.

An 'Indigenous community' can refer to a network of extended families that may or may not share a cultural identity or historical connections to locations or events. A 'discrete Indigenous community' is a place where Indigenous people live and may be remote or very remote but not necessarily.

The general meaning of community is a group of people with a shared interest; however, the word is often used loosely to mean people in general. This can be confusing because the word implies cooperative relationships but these may not be present and, in fact, a 'community' may be characterised by inter-family conflict or general indifference. The implication of this is that schools can struggle to establish formal partnerships and respond to local needs.

Coordination

Coordinating the delivery of support through the various agencies poses a major challenge.

The chairman of the inter-governmental steering committee put it this way:

> … poor educational performance cannot be wholly laid at the door of education authorities. Responsibility for doing better needs

to be spread across portfolios and at least partly borne by Indigenous people themselves. In this sense, the Report [*Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage*] does not promote a 'blame game'. It suggests that answers cannot be left to particular service providers to find on their own. A whole of government approach is needed (Banks, 2005, p. 10).

The relationship between schools and Indigenous reform is managed through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan. The plan is concerned with schools and contains only nominal references to reforms in other areas. There is no explication about *how* schools might participate in community development under the Indigenous National Partnerships or *how* community development might benefit schools.

The absence of such explication implies that the whole of government service delivery model allows that schools will operate outside the sphere of Indigenous reform.

Timing and synchronisation

At first glance, the timelines set for achieving the targets seem reasonable. Most timelines allow a decade for targets to be reached. The shortest timeline is five years before all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education and the longest is 'a generation' to close the life expectancy gap. Figure 4.1 shows selected events from Indigenous affairs and school education that include the antecedents to the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.

There is an acknowledgement that it may be some years before improvements to the seven building blocks produce a measureable impact on targets. Insofar as improvements in Indigenous student achievement are contingent upon improvements in housing and health it may take several years for the schooling performance indicators to show improvement.

The education National Partnerships, however, imply that once funding has been allocated to schools measurable improvements should immediately follow. They take no account of the prior and concurrent initiatives being undertaken by other agencies or the need for these initiatives. The sense that the gap should begin to quickly close once educational resources become available to schools is evident in the schedule of reward funding associated with the Literacy and Nu-

meracy National Partnership; jurisdictions were required to reach their targets within two years to become eligible for reward payments.

Further, the scheduling of some initiatives can have a serious impact on the progress of others. The Coordinator General for Remote Indigenous Services noted that the roll out of vocational education infrastructure was not due until 2018 yet schools were expected to halve the gap in Year 12 attainment by 2020 (OCGRIS, 2010).

Conclusion

Since 2008, the Australian government, in collaboration with the governments of the states and territories, has proposed ambitious reforms aimed at undoing the consequences of entrenched disadvantage through the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and the National Partnerships that support it. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014 sits under this framework but is funded through the National Education Agreement and the National Partnerships that support it.

Fundamental to national Indigenous policy is the idea that improvements in one area of service delivery are dependent on improvements in other areas of service delivery. Therefore, improvements in schools will be dependent on improvements in health, housing, employment, child welfare and so on. Likewise, improvements in educational achievement are intended to provide a general benefit with flow-on effects in other aspects of the lives of Indigenous people.

In this policy context, the extent to which schools accept shared responsibility for community development, and the extent to which they have the capabilities required to meet that responsibility, is a key issue. Conversely, the extent to which community development results in benefits for school-aged children sufficient to increase their engagement in the formal school curriculum is also an issue.

5

Research design

Introduction

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework and the methods used to gather qualitative data from school staff and community members. The chapter also describes the key features of the 17 schools that took part in the study and the background of the 98 participants who were interviewed.

Conceptual framework

Problem-solving approach

Measures of academic achievement have consistently shown that on average Indigenous students perform well below other students, even though over past decades there have been many concerted attempts to narrow the gap. It is unclear why earlier programs showed such weak effects though it can be inferred that the support that was provided did not enable schools to remove the obstacles impeding the achievement of their students.

This suggests that more needs to be known about the nature of the obstacles and why overcoming them has previously been beyond the capability of schools. It is possible that a deeper understanding of the obstacles schools face could shed light on weaknesses in the arrangements used to provide schools with support.

Adopting this perspective, some common terms have been given specific meanings. An 'obstacle' is any impediment to a school taking action to assist an Indigenous student achieve at a satisfactory standard. A 'problem' is a perceived obstacle. 'Support' is a form of assistance required to remove an obstacle and includes the full range of resources that can be helpful to a school. 'Capability' is the ability to draw on resources to solve problems and put the solutions into effect.

An obstacle may be hidden from view, defined in vague or approximate terms, or linked to a series of related, though unspecified, obstacles. Under such conditions, when the framing is loose or incomplete, it is difficult for a school to accurately target its effort or identify the support needed to remove the obstacle.

Even when an obstacle has been well framed, the principal and teachers may identify an obstacle, agree on its nature, and know what needs to be done to remove it, but make little headway in dealing with it. In this study, these obstacles to schools removing the obstacles are defined as meta-obstacles.

Sometimes the meta-obstacles may be found in the school. The school staff members may have the power to fix the problem and the resources to do so but elect to focus effort elsewhere; they feel

Table 5.1: RSS Study schools, sector, geographic location

| | Location categories | | | | All locations |
	Metropolitan	Regional	Remote	Very remote	
All schools	4	6	3	4	17
Government	3	5	1	3	12
Catholic	1	1	1	0	3
Independent	0	0	1	1	2

Source: My School website. 2010 data was downloaded during 2011.

unable or unready to come to grips with the problem. In other instances, the meta-obstacles may be situated in the wider community or in other agencies beyond the immediate control of the school.

Hence, the persistence of the achievement gap could be explained by the framing of the problem in terms that divert school effort away from addressing the underlying causes. Even when school staff members have a deep understanding of the nature of the obstacles restricting student achievement, for various reasons they cannot remove these obstacles.

Premises

The adoption of a problem-solving approach led to the formulation of six premises:

1. An intervention in a school to improve Indigenous achievement is the result of an act of problem solving;

2. The way in which a problem is framed will privilege some courses of action ahead of others;

3. Schools may have made little progress in closing the gap because they have been unable to remove obstacles;

4. The obstacles faced by schools may vary from site to site;

5. The capabilities of school staff members to remove obstacles may vary from site to site; and

6. Schools may be reliant on other actors and agencies to remove obstacles.

This problem-solving perspective has guided the development of the survey and interview protocols, the activities associated with the fieldwork and data collection.

RSS Study schools

System involvement in selection

System officials were approached in four jurisdictions: the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. Seven systems were represented: four in the government school sector and three in the Catholic school sector. System officials were asked to nominate a set of suitable schools. A researcher contacted a subset of these schools and the majority of schools approached agreed to participate. There were 15 systemic schools.

There were two non-systemic schools: one was nominated by a state Association of Independent Schools officer and the other by a state independent school principals' representative.

Geographic location

Table 5.1 shows the participating schools by sector and geographic location. The majority of schools were stand-alone primary schools. In the seven combined schools the majority of students were in the primary years.

The sample of 17 schools was drawn so that both remote and non-remote schools were located in each of the states. Three 'pairs' consisted of a government and a Catholic school, each pair drawing students from a single local area. These pairs spanned three states and three location categories. Of the remaining 11 schools, 5 were geographically isolated from the other schools participating in the study.

Included were schools providing for children from town camps, remote growth towns, regional centres and disadvantaged suburbs in large cities.

Characteristics of schools

Enrolments were roughly comparable to Australian schools. There were 2 schools with less than 100 students and 4 schools with more

than 500 students. Among the 17 schools, more than 5,000 students were enrolled in 2010 and nearly 3,000 of these were Indigenous students.

The schools were selected because they enrolled Indigenous students. The proportion of Indigenous students enrolled in all participating schools was higher than the median. There were, however, four schools with less than 50 Indigenous students and two schools where the proportion of Indigenous students was less than 10 per cent.

The ICSEA score for each of the schools was below the median except in the case of one school with a score close to the median.

Generally, the attendance rate of the participating schools was below the Australian median. There were two schools with attendance rates close to the median. The lowest attendance rate among the participating schools was reported on My School as 41 per cent.

Characteristics of the participating schools are reported as bar graphs in Appendix A.

Access to services

Most of the schools in the study had access to basic services.

Two locations lacked mobile phone coverage and a post office. There were three locations where two-way radios were in use. School staff members relied on fresh food to be delivered by truck or barge in three locations.

The support service reported most difficult to obtain was relief teachers: 9 principals could not employ casual teachers locally when they were needed. The maintenance of facilities was a difficulty for some but not all of the remote schools. Subsidised housing was provided to staff in 8 of the 17 schools.

Health services were generally reported to be available and high quality but nearly half the participating school principals reported difficulty accessing these services for their students.

In summary, some of the schools participating in the study were isolated from, and others in close proximity to, service providers.

Relation to national strategy

Fifteen of the 17 schools in the study were listed as focus schools under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan. Of these, 14 schools received funding through the Low-SES National Partnership. The remaining three schools received funding through the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership.

Three of the schools in the study were located within a designated remote community associated with the National Partnership for Remote Service Delivery.

Background of participants

Selection

Principals were asked to identify four participants, preferably two teachers, an Indigenous education worker and a local Indigenous community representative or parent. It was expected that they would provide a range of viewpoints within any one school. Some principals chose to nominate additional participants: in total, 98 participants were nominated.

Table 5.2 shows participants in each of the roles they were nominated to represent by Indigenous status and gender.

Principals nominated participants they considered able to speak about the issues each school faced; they were not intended to be representative or

Table 5.2: Role of participants, Indigenous status, gender

	Role of participant				All roles
	Principal	Teacher	Other staff role	Community member	
All participants	17	43	20	18	98
Indigenous	2	8	18	16	44
Non-Indigenous	15	35	2	2	54
Women	6	34	17	14	71
Men	11	9	3	4	27

Information provided by participants on the survey form or during interview.

typical of all the staff or all community members. Rather, the participants had relevant experience of the school and its context and a willingness to present their points of view. Most participants had been in their current role for a period of years and been associated with the school prior to commencing in this role. This applied to participants in all roles not only community representatives.

Personal characteristics

The proportion of participants who were Indigenous was 45 per cent. Although Indigenous participants clustered among the non-teaching staff members and community members, Indigenous participants were represented in each of the roles.

Among the participants, women outnumbered men by more than 3 to 1. The only role in which women were not a majority was that of the school's principal.

The Indigenous participants had been in their current role more than twice as long as non-Indigenous participants (7 years compared to 3 years) and had been associated with the school more than three times longer than non-Indigenous participants (18 years compared to 5 years).

Among Indigenous participants, more than three-quarters grew up in the local area, compared to 13 per cent of non-Indigenous participants. Among the Indigenous community members nominated, eight held elected positions on a school board or parents' association committee. The profile of the participants reflects the continuity provided to many schools by local people and the relatively transient nature of education professionals.

The average age of all participants was 42 years and they had been in their current roles for an average of 5 years.

The participating teachers were similar to the population of all teachers in Australia. Teachers participating in the RSS Study had an average age of 41 years and the average period in their current school was 6 years. By comparison, all teachers in Australia had an estimated average age of 42 years and a period in their current school of 7 years (McKenzie et al., 2011). The teacher participants in the RSS Study were chosen because they were experienced and knowledgeable suggesting they were not representative of teachers in their school.

Views of participants

Participants were asked to rate five statements regarding their expectations about and contribu-

tion to school improvement. This task enabled individual participants to quantify their viewpoints on a small set of Likert scales. Participants' ratings suggest they were a confident group of individuals. Most were confident they had 'sufficient knowledge of this community to understand local issues' (89 per cent) and that their 'analysis of what is holding students back is correct' (90 per cent). They were less confident that the 'school's current strategies will be effective over time', however, almost four-fifths (78 per cent) were confident.

The high level of confidence can be explained by the selection process. System officials identified schools because they respected incumbent principals and principals selected participants because they respected the knowledge and experience of the individuals concerned.

Data collection and analysis

School visits

The 17 schools were visited March-June 2011. Two members of the research team visited each school. One team member, an Indigenous education researcher, visited all 17 schools and met with almost all participants.

Prior to visits researchers reviewed the descriptions of the schools on the My School website as well as other documents available online.

Typically, three days per school were set aside for contact between the researchers and participants. In some schools, interviews were concluded in less time and in others they were conducted over additional days. While most interviews were conducted with two researchers present, with each taking notes, on four occasions only one researcher was present.

Attention was given to ensuring the Indigenous participants contributed to the research freely, actively and with full knowledge of its purpose.

Services checklist

The services checklist was devised as a means of quantifying the services available to each school and whether the services available were provided locally or from a distance. Additional questions asked whether schools could obtain services when they were needed and the principal's estimation of the quality of the provision.

The principal in each of the RSS Study schools completed the checklist. Principals were encour-

aged to explain the issues around the extent and quality of provision of services either by annotating the checklist document or during the interview with the researchers.

Survey forms and interview protocols

An invitation to participate, information about the study and a survey form were individually packaged for each participant.

Participants were asked to provide *either* written responses to the survey questions on the form *or* to respond verbally when the researchers visited the school. Some participants chose to submit both written and verbal responses. The survey form was sent to all participants through the principal prior to the researchers visiting school sites.

The main questions contained in the survey form were used to guide the interviews. Where participants had completed the written sections the interviewers invited participants to clarify or elaborate their responses. In other cases the questions were presented to the participants during the course of the interviews. The key questions are summarised.

> Please outline up to three obstacles you believe have limited student learning. In regard to each of these obstacles, have they become more or less of a problem during the period you have been involved with the school?

> What strategies to remove these obstacles are you aware of? These strategies may involve the school, the community or outside agencies. In your opinion, have the strategies been effective?

> What needs to change before students in your school can reach or exceed the academic standards of mainstream Australian children of the same age?

While these questions provided the structure for interviews, participants were encouraged to say anything they considered relevant or felt strongly about. Most participants became engaged by the questions discussed. Prior to the interview participants and researchers had signed a statement that their responses would be treated confidentially and that neither their name nor the school's name would be disclosed in the report of the study. Nearly all interviews extended over an hour and, in some cases, over several hours. Because the researchers were on site over several days, some

participants resumed discussions after reflection. Also, the researchers had opportunities to meet casually with other staff and community members who were able to contribute additional contextual information.

In many interviews the researchers proposed analyses or solutions that had been put to them during earlier school visits. Some of these were rejected outright – a case of a solution being seen to be the problem – others were developed further in the new context.

An additional question was added after several school visits had been completed. As the question evolved from the experience of conducting the interviews it was asked, not written. The question had several parts as follows:

> Can you think of a child in the school you worry about? Can you tell us about this child and the basis for your concern? What is required for this child to exceed the minimum standards for literacy and function in society?

This question served to anchor discussion to actions participants expected would benefit a particular child with high support needs.

Analysis of interview data

Because the interviews were not recorded each of the two interviewers present completed extensive, handwritten notes. At the end of each day, interviewers compared notes. Inconsistencies were noted so that they could, as far as possible, be reconciled prior to departure from the school. When the researchers drew different conclusions from information presented, there was sufficient time available to discuss these matters further with participants.

On three occasions during the schedule of school visits researchers met to share observations regarding the obstacles and support that participants had reported.

At the end of the school visits the field notes of each researcher were de-identified, compiled, copied and shared among the three interviewers. Researchers used this repository to independently compile statements describing salient issues concerning the obstacles facing the schools and the support that was available to address them. These were shared and discussed.

Throughout the process of analysis, participant codes were used to enable re-identification of data sources for the purpose of checking.

School-level quantitative data

An attempt was made to collate NAPLAN and attendance data disaggregated by Indigenous status for each of the participating schools. The purpose of the request was to report descriptive data similar to that shown in Appendix A.

Comparability between schools proved to be a problem. The non-government schools in three states did not have electronic attendance records. In one jurisdiction, the only attendance data for the preceding year that could be electronically retrieved related to semester 1. Further, it was difficult to validate the aggregated attendance rate for 2010 published on the My School website with rates produced by electronic systems in schools. ACARA has not published the methods for calculating school attendance rates other than to explain that the methods used were not uniform across jurisdictions.

The variations in methods for calculating attendance rates create small differences in large populations because most children attend school regularly. However, attendance rates for low-attending and transient students are sensitive to the method of measurement adopted, particularly the period of absence before a child is taken off a school's roll.

A similar situation exists with students absent from NAPLAN tests. While absent students are a small proportion of the whole population of children in a year level, they are a greater proportion of subgroups such as Indigenous and transient students. By not automatically including absent students in reports of students below the minimum standard in the manner applied to exempted students, these children are hidden.

Quantitative data disaggregated by Indigenous status has not been reported in regard to the study schools because of the problems of data quality that have been explained. School-level data was useful for anchoring discussions in individual schools, however.

Validation

Principals' workshop

Participating principals attended a two-day workshop in Darwin in September 2011. Fifteen of the principals attended both days.

A summary of the analysis of the interview data was sent to principals as pre-reading. This summary included descriptive data about the participating schools and participants and an outline of the obstacles to learning and attempts to remove them reported by the participants.

The workshop provided an opportunity to discuss the range of responses from all schools and to validate the researchers' synthesis of the survey data. This discussion of the preliminary results has informed chapters 6 and 7 of this report. During the workshop, the context was broadened. Principals provided extended accounts of the obstacles they were facing and commented on the kind of support that in their view would enhance their capacity to address them.

Case studies

Five case studies were drafted. Each account was submitted to the relevant principal for corrections and comment.

The case study of an out-of-school support program was selected because one of the researchers had found it valuable in a previous role as a senior education bureaucrat.

Systems officials' input

A meeting of officials from the school systems represented in the study was held in Brisbane in December 2011. In most cases, these officials had recommended the participating schools so were aware of the purposes of the study. A draft report was circulated prior to the meeting and individuals were asked to comment on the research based on their knowledge of Closing the Gap initiatives in their system.

Summary

The schools were selected from lists provided by system authorities. The principals selected the school personnel and community representatives. The resulting samples may not be typical of schools with Indigenous students in a statistical sense though they were generally representative of the range of schools where Indigenous students were concentrated.

The site visits to 17 schools provided accounts from 98 participants, 45 per cent of whom were Indigenous people, about the obstacles to learning experienced by Indigenous children failing to reach minimum standards in literacy and numeracy. This has provided a robust qualitative dataset. Further, the analysis of this data has been supported by validation exercises involving the principals and officials from the systems associated with the participating schools.

6

Obstacles

Introduction

Participants were asked about the obstacles they believed to have limited student learning at their school with particular reference to Indigenous students. The responses were both written and spoken and the most common of these responses are explained in this chapter.

Student absences from school and the insufficiency of out-of-school support dominated discussions about the obstacles. Participants across schools also raised concerns about the adequacy of school programs, difficulty attracting and retaining suitable school staff members and poor student health.

Although the obstacles have been grouped so they can be tallied, this chapter also presents views expressed by survey participants and the way they saw the issues they raised playing out in their school. Similarities and differences between subgroups are reported.

Student absences

Absence from school, including low rates of daily attendance, lateness and high mobility, was reported to be an obstacle to learning by 72 per cent of participants. Participants reported different aspects of student absences depending on the issues at their school; however, it was generally agreed that all forms of non-attendance posed a substantial problem.

Absence from school was identified as an obstacle by the majority of participants overall, the majority of participants in each of the roles, the majority of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and the majority of teaching and non-teaching participants. There were only three schools where less than half of participants reported student absences as an obstacle.

Although participants said that 'teasing', 'bullying', 'no food', 'no clothes', 'no shoes', 'no bus', 'too cold' and 'too wet' were given as reasons for not attending school, there was also evidence that such reasons did not fully explain student absences. A principal summarised the situation in his remote school as follows:

> There are a range of reasons why children are absent; one of them is some children don't want to attend school [A1].

There were many reports of Indigenous parents directing their children to attend school but not ensuring that they did attend.

> The parents in our community don't see the importance of attending school. Parents will say, 'I want you to go to school' but if the

child says, 'I don't want to' the parent won't make them [B1].

In a context in which attendance was a focus there were reports of more children arriving at school late and a view expressed that some of these students purposefully arrived late to avoid the literacy block. Classroom teachers in particular found this frustrating; late arrivals were not reflected in the child's daily attendance rate yet students who were late were not present during literacy instruction. (Two schools had adjusted their timetables to take account of this problem).

Indigenous students were reported to have higher mobility rates and also to take longer to enrol in a school after re-locating. Extended periods of absence is just one of the problems associated with high mobility. There were also problems for a child new to a school who is not known to staff or the other children.

A non-Indigenous teacher was struggling to establish a core group of children in his class. He had had some success but felt discouraged by the daily changes in class membership.

> Where do these children come from? They get off the bus [A2].

The teacher laughed about the idea that children 'come from' a bus but this described his experience. Buses, driven by trusted local Indigenous drivers, travelled to widely dispersed camps. Any child who got on one of these buses was welcomed into the school.

Much was made of departures associated with children being taken out of a school for sorry business, family obligations or to access medical services. However, children also arrived at schools as a result of family mobility. A principal at a school in a regional centre said transient children were welcomed into the school.

> Kids from outlying Communities come into town and can't return so they attend school here without going on the roll [C1].

Many of these children had low achievement levels so needed academic support. Referring to transient children, one of the principals said: 'You can't put a child in a classroom and leave them' [D1]. Getting support in place was difficult if only because the child may not return or, if they did, a period of time may elapse before they returned. Some chronically absent children came to school 'shopping', that is, they were curious and wanted

to look around. Others wanted air conditioning when it was hot or somewhere to sleep when families were drinking.

Children with very low daily attendance rates were 'not school ready'.

An experienced Year 7 teacher who was a local and mixed out of school with the Indigenous children in her class explained how the classroom has been volatile on occasions.

> The children in my class are nice when it's going their way but they are generally opinionated and have strong views and poor manners. The attitudes they bring from home conflict with school: language, swearing, disrespect for a person in a responsible role. The minute you try to get them to do something that they don't want to do, it becomes a war zone. An accidental bump can lead to: boom, boom! [E1].

Children who are unfamiliar with classrooms can find them socially demanding places to be. As a result, problem behaviour was associated with children who have low attendance rates. A teacher in a remote school made the connection.

> Attendance and behaviour are inter-related. Poor and inconsistent attendance is associated with poor literacy and numeracy and poor behaviour. This is an ongoing cycle. It is difficult to balance the need for high behaviour standards with the need to encourage poor attendees to come to school as these goals can act against each other [C2].

This teacher's principal explained the problem more succinctly:

> When you put too much pressure on, the students take off [C1].

This issue was evident in the other school in the same remote town, also participating in the RSS Study.

> We are very persistent about attendance. Some parents have taken their children out of the school to avoid the pressure [F1].

In summary, student absences from school were a major obstacle to learning but so was school attendance by students who were not enmeshed in the relationships and routines of a school.

Insufficient out-of-school support

After student absences from school, the next most frequently reported group of obstacles were all related to a lack of home support available to students. An insufficiency of support from families was reported to be an obstacle to learning by 58 per cent of participants.

Lack of home support was identified as an obstacle by the majority of participants overall, the majority of participants in each of the roles, the majority of Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants and the majority of teaching and non-teaching participants. There were twelve schools in the study where a majority of participants reported a lack of home support was an obstacle. There was only one school where no participants expressed a concern about the adequacy of the home support available.

Participants often commented on the gender imbalance among family members caring for children. They reported that women accepted most of the responsibility for child rearing with some children having little or no contact with responsible male adults other than at school.

Children rely on adults for the support they need to function at school. Their needs range from basics like food and shelter through to the need for assistance with reading and homework. It is difficult for a child to learn in a classroom unless the full range of these needs is met.

The lack of home support was a difficult issue for the schools in the study and a proportion of participants reported that some children lacked even the most basic forms of support.

An Indigenous education worker in a regional school reported his concern:

> Where our Indigenous students live is not a safe environment. There are drunks, house parties and violence [G1].

Strong words of this kind were not uncommon. Alcohol and drug abuse, parents neglecting to feed their children and children witnessing acts of violence were reported. In some schools, such reports applied to a small minority of students, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, in others it affected a wider group of students. Some participants said they considered parents who condoned truancy to be negligent because the impact on the children could be as serious as other forms of neglect.

Such problems were not restricted to Indigenous students. In some schools participants reported

neglect was less of a problem for Indigenous students who benefited from extended family support. In other schools, participants reported that Indigenous children suffered more severe neglect than non-Indigenous children and that the demands placed on overcrowded households from large extended family networks was one of the reasons for this.

Some participants argued that the diminution of parental influence was linked to the failure of families to care for children.

One school's parents' association president, an Indigenous woman, was critical of some parents:

> Parents want the money for their kids but someone else to grow them up [C3].

The problem of child neglect, often associated with chronic absences from school, was widely reported by participants with many details about how this played out in local contexts.

One implication of child neglect is that it places a heavy burden on the child. An Indigenous parent speaking about her own childhood experience of an alcoholic mother said: 'You get blamed because your parents are shit' [H1].

An Indigenous principal relayed the words of a 15-year-old student enrolled in his school who was not attending school but accepted responsibility for two younger siblings:

> 'When my family can get themselves organised to look after me, I'll get myself organised to go to school' [C1].

Among all the obstacles that described an out-of-school factor, the second most frequent was families who did not value education. Some participants argued families did not value education because employment was not a goal or, if it was, it was not linked to educational achievement. Others drew attention to the negative school experiences of older family members.

A teacher in a regional school explained the way the children in her class and their parents looked at school and work.

> A lot of parents think kids only come to school because they have to. The parents don't work. The children don't expect to get a job. The children appear to be affluent; they have everything they want [E1] .

This was a general observation; it didn't relate specifically to the Indigenous students.

A principal explained the situation in the families whose children attended his very remote school.

> Education is not seen as a ticket to the future. You get jobs working on stations, in the school and through family connections [I1].

When all the obstacles that related to out-of-school factors were tallied, at least one, either child neglect or parents not valuing education, was reported by nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of participants.

Inadequate school programs

A majority of the participants reported that an aspect of the way the school delivered its programs was an obstacle to learning. These obstacles varied from school to school and generally indicated that the strategies in place were not adequate to meet the needs of the students, particularly the Indigenous students, in the school.

Among the teachers, 30 per cent reported that a language background other than Standard Australian English was an obstacle for some students. Many also expressed concern about their own knowledge and skills for teaching these children.

An experienced Indigenous teacher spoke with eloquence when she offered this criticism of some of her colleagues:

> They're not giving the students the full grunt of the sentence [D2].

Some of the participants discussed 'code switching' or 'two-way learning' and were well aware of issues that confront children who speak a language or dialect other than Standard Australian English outside school. Other participants were not familiar with the terminology or concept of code switching.

Feedback on the preliminary results suggested language issues had not been given sufficient weight. The difficulty for the researchers was the variability of views expressed on this topic. For example, there was one school where community members argued too much English was spoken in the school and this was the main obstacle to the learning for their children. There may also have been an issue with teachers not knowing what they didn't know.

Generally, non-Indigenous participants tended to emphasise the importance and value of Standard Australian English. Sometimes this was associated with devaluing home languages but not necessarily. The researchers gained an impression from informal discussion that some teachers did not understand that Indigenous people *chose* to speak Aboriginal English, that they purposefully taught it to their children because it was a significant marker of Indigenous identity. Some Indigenous participants emphasised the value of code switching to Aboriginal English when talking with children's family members. They saw Aboriginal English as friendlier than 'flash' English and so better suited to enlisting support for the school.

Among Indigenous education workers, nearly a third (30 per cent) reported that student behaviour at school was an obstacle to learning. This was raised by 14 per cent of participants overall and the same proportion of teachers but was not reported as frequently by principals or community members (6 per cent each).

With both issues, the language background of students and student behaviour issues, the researchers interviewed beginning teachers who said they were unprepared to deal with these matters and they had not found whole-school approaches in place to support them as they developed their knowledge and skills.

Teachers and principals reported that the prerequisite knowledge of students entering school was an obstacle. This was not a concern of any of the Indigenous education workers or community members but was reported to be an obstacle by 16 per cent of teachers and 12 per cent of principals.

A small number of participants identified the school's lack of capacity to respond to students' learning needs as an obstacle.

The failure of a school to be purposefully and consistently welcoming to Indigenous families was an obstacle reported by community members in two schools.

The emphasis participants placed on factors outside the school's control drew criticism from some readers of the preliminary results. It was suggested this implied a lack of reflective practice on the part of educators. However, 57 per cent of participants chose to draw attention to an aspect of their school's program that could be improved. Also, the variability of programs among the schools, and the different viewpoints obtained from within each school, has made it difficult to summarise these perspectives. The failure may have been on the part of the researchers to represent these issues coherently rather than a lack of insight on the part of the participants.

Difficulty attracting and retaining staff

An aspect of staff recruitment, retention or quality was reported to be an obstacle to learning by less than one-quarter of participants. Principals reported staffing to be an obstacle more frequently (47 per cent) than participants in other roles. Very remote schools had the highest frequency of participants who reported staffing obstacles (50 per cent) and regional schools the lowest frequency (6 per cent). In seven schools no participant reported staffing as an obstacle.

This synopsis by a metropolitan principal is representative of the views expressed by principals.

> At a school like this, you can't have weak staff. You need the best or the ones who are willing to learn to be the best. All the staff know they have to work hard. If I could ask for one thing it would be to keep the teachers who are in the school [H2].

The retention of teachers was reported to be an obstacle more frequently than recruitment. This principal contended that if she could retain teaching staff it would be the single most effective strategy for improving student learning.

A former teacher and principal interviewed as a community member in a very remote community said that when she was appointed to the school in the late 1960s the principal had said to her:

> You're no value to the school until you've been teaching here for two years [B1].

Most of the systemic schools provided incentives to attract teachers that led them to move on after one or two years of service. The incentives were created through a process of central bargaining that took account of the need to place teachers in hard-to-staff schools but were not adequate to motivate teachers to continue after they had benefited from the incentive, usually becoming a permanent employee of the school system.

Many schools provided substantial professional development to new teachers and lost them at the point when students would have benefitted from this investment. This is a huge cost to a school where the bulk of the teachers require substantial professional learning support.

A senior teacher in a large remote school talked about the workload involved in supporting the new graduates who only accept positions in the school so that their next job will be closer to home.

> I feel like other schools are getting the benefit of our work. Graduate teachers receive a huge amount of support which makes their time here easier and more productive. Most, however, still leave after two years when they have been given permanency [C4].

Most of the schools in the study, even those in metropolitan schools, relied on graduate teachers. Several participants who were inexperienced teachers said they had felt inadequate when first dealing with classroom management and instruction in their current school and that they had not been adequately prepared. New graduates were frequently city-educated with no previous experience of Indigenous people.

The principal of a remote independent school said he had found inexperienced teachers to be unsatisfactory.

> Initially I appointed young, cheap teachers. This didn't work. Teachers at the top of the salary range were needed to deal with the children [A1].

Other qualities sought for teachers working with Indigenous students were those that apply for all teachers. A principal in a regional school summarised the qualities needed in her school.

> Teachers need to know what they have to teach, they need to know the pedagogy and they need to know the children [G2].

There were accounts of teachers who were experienced and had been successful in other schools but had not been able to adapt to a school with high Indigenous enrolments.

> The teachers who survive are the ones who look and listen, and then act. They have to be flexible [B1].

The need for staff to work hard without grumbling was an imperative; an ability to cope with ambiguity could be helpful. An Indigenous education worker in a regional school said: 'Slack teachers and quiet teachers won't survive' [E2]. Principals were loathe to lose teachers who could adapt.

Principals reported frustration with a practice of transferring unsatisfactory teachers into schools with high Indigenous enrolments. They resented the implication that teaching in a remote school was perceived to be a punishment. The principals argued that teachers considered to be unsatisfac-

tory should be subject to performance management in the school in which problems first became evident, not subjected to forced transfers. Unsatisfactory staff members were highly visible in small or isolated towns so could undermine confidence in the school in a relatively short period of time.

Most of the obstacles in regard to teachers were about departures and arrivals. An Indigenous classroom teacher who was also a local felt that the teachers who transfer in and out could create problems without being accountable.

> The staff who are here on a permanent basis are the ones who pick up the pieces. Last year there were a lot of teachers who did not go out to meet families but they would brand them troublemakers. These teachers chose to leave [F2].

The obstacles that related to non-teaching staff members were more likely to be about training and housing.

Poor student health

Fifteen per cent of participants reported that student health was an obstacle to learning. Among the participants, principals were most concerned about student health (24 per cent) followed by community members (22 per cent) and Indigenous education workers (20 per cent). A smaller proportion of teachers reported health as an obstacle to learning (7 per cent).

Half the participants in one school reported health was an obstacle to learning; this was the highest rate for a school. There were eight schools in which no participant reported health to be an obstacle.

Among the schools with participants that reported health as an obstacle, tensions about the relative responsibilities of school and family were evident.

A classroom teacher in a remote school made this comment: 'Scabies, boils and sores are accepted. They have been normalised' [C5].

A classroom teacher in a metropolitan school made a similar statement.

> Ears are a problem. Boils are a problem. A kid who complains of a headache for two years is a problem. A girl had kidney pain for 18 months; there was no response from the parents [H3].

A principal in a regional school explained the dilemma he faced.

> It's a lot of hard work for us. The system relies on the parents taking their children to the hospital. Even though the services are in town, the parents have no idea about how to access these services [E3].

Another principal in a regional school said she has signed permission forms so children could go to the doctor. The process was for the Indigenous education worker to go to the Community seeking a parent. If a responsible family member couldn't be found, then the principal signed the form and the Indigenous education worker took the child to the doctor.

A teacher in a metropolitan school described the support school staff members had given to help parents to access health services.

> Health services are provided at a hospital outside the local area. The school makes referrals, even appointments. Parents wait 18 months. They don't think travelling that far [12 kilometres] is realistic. Getting petrol in the car is a barrier so someone at school finds out which bus they need to catch. They don't have phone credit so they can't cancel. If they miss an appointment they are taken off the list [H3].

It was in the interests of the school to keep a child on a list. Schools wanted medical assessments for children because resources were tied to diagnoses but for an Indigenous child whose family had not recognised a health or learning problem, a medical diagnosis was a road too far. The steps began with a visit to a general practitioner. This was the only route to a paediatrician who must assess a child before they become eligible for special education funding. Assessments by a psychologist, speech pathologist or occupational therapist were also needed to establish an entitlement for special education funding.

The need for medical and paramedical professionals varied considerably from school to school. A principal in a metropolitan school said that many of the children in strife suffered from problems that had a physiological basis. He had not been able to validate this.

> The boys who are sitting outside my office and will end up getting suspended are on a waiting list to see a paediatrican but we can't get anyone to see them. We've asked for a paediatrician to come to the school but without a response [J1].

Foetal alcohol syndrome was described by teachers to be 'a huge problem' but also 'just one of the factors' [C4]. For a group of children, this is the physiological basis of their learning problems. An experienced teacher in a remote school outlined his understanding of the symptoms.

> The symptoms of foetal alcohol syndrome are lack of ability to focus, over reaction to non-threatening situations and delayed development. These children are delayed academically and socially but getting into adult behaviours [C4].

Children with these symptoms were difficult to manage in a classroom particularly when there were numbers of them in a class. In none of the schools visited was there a funding provider that acknowledged the special learning needs of this group of children, a group many participants reported to be most likely to disengage from school as teenagers.

Summary

Nearly half of participants (48 per cent) reported that *both* student absences and insufficient out-of-school support were obstacles to learning. All the Indigenous education workers reported either one or both of these obstacles to be present in their schools. Only 11 per cent of all participants did not report either student absences or insufficient out-of-school support to be an obstacle.

This study has focused on the interpretations of people working with and living among Indigenous students. These people know the children they are talking about and have reached conclusions based on their own observations in and around their local school.

7

Strategies

Introduction

This chapter outlines strategies reported by survey participants in the context of the obstacles to learning discussed in chapter 6. It is likely that there were many other strategies in place across the schools; however, there were no questions asking for lists of programs, either recommended or problematic. Rather, the researchers asked participants what they believed was required to remove the obstacles they had identified.

The accounts that follow describe strategies participants believed to be needed to remove the most commonly reported obstacles to learning. Some of these strategies were in place in the schools at the time of the survey while others were recommended.

Improving attendance rates

In every school visited participants described programs in place to improve the attendance rates of their Indigenous students. Generally, the programs were tilted towards providing support to enable attendance rather than imposing sanctions in response to non-attendance. One principal's comment was representative of the attitudes underlying many of the views expressed.

> We stopped asking 'why' questions. The question I ask now is: 'What can I do to help you to get your children to school?' [B2].

The provision of help to get children to school was the norm. Help was provided through bus services, food programs, supplying school uniforms and shoes, laundry services, rewards and Indigenous education workers making regular contact with families. Effort was also focused on making the school a safe, enjoyable, welcoming and interesting place to be.

The researchers saw principals, teachers, Indigenous education workers and community members making decisions that were largely pragmatic; that is, they provided care because a school cannot function unless its students are fed and clothed.

A principal of a remote school pointed out the dilemma.

> A child who hasn't eaten in a classroom – it doesn't work [C1].

Many schools seeking to improve both attendance and learning have responded to hungry, cold and tired children by caring for them during school hours. This also applied to non-Indigenous children.

Helping children get to school went part of the way to improving attendance rates. An Indigenous education worker in a regional school expressed his sense of frustration.

Students get fed when they are hungry and I wash their uniforms for them when they are dirty but that still doesn't get them to school every day [G1].

Participants communicated a sense that they were doing all that was possible to improve attendance from within the school and were looking for support for improved attendance from outside. A principal explained a strategy designed to enlist support from families.

The attendance officer is a tall man who lives in the Community and gets on well with all the families except one. He wakes families at 6AM. He organises breakfast in the Community. At 7AM he goes around finding the stray kids, takes them to their homes and organises clothes for them. Then the bus brings the kids to school [C1].

The desire to improve student attendance among the participants in the study was palpable. There was no suggestion from any participants in any schools that improving school attendance was not a high priority. Even in a very remote school with a satisfactory Indigenous attendance rate (93 per cent) the principal said he was working hard to improve it further.

Two of the participating schools each received a reward payment through a state's Low-SES National Partnership because Indigenous daily attendance rates had improved 2009-2010 by a specified number of percentage points identified in targets. One of these schools was metropolitan and the other was regional.

In the metropolitan school, the attendance rate dropped sharply in 2011. The 2010 improved attendance rate was attributed to an attendance officer funded by a local industry. When the school's attendance rate had reached mainstream parity, the principal decided to reallocate these funds elsewhere. After the collapse in the attendance rate, the principal said she had learnt the value of an effective attendance officer.

If you take your foot off the pedal, things fall by the wayside. We've learnt the hard way [H2].

Two RSS Study schools were pilots in SEAM (Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure), a Commonwealth government welfare reform initiative. One was in a large regional centre, the other was in a very remote location [K1, L1].

These schools were different in most regards and reported contradictory experiences with the program.

In the first school, the principal was enthusiastic. Daily attendance rates improved during the initial implementation phase and parents had been in contact with the school office to get hard copies of attendance data they needed to submit to Centrelink to stave off the BasicsCard. Staff members believed this strategy was helping the school to maintain the daily attendance rate at or above 90 per cent.

In the second very remote school, attendance had not improved. Financial penalties had been imposed on families with children not enrolled or not attending and then payments reinstated when children attended for short but inconsequential periods. Poor attendance was seen as one of a number of intractable problems and, despite the penalties, the daily attendance rate declined 10 percentage points from the previous year.

Some participants referred to media claims regarding the Northern Territory Emergency Response when explaining that they believed welfare entitlements should be linked to school attendance regardless of Indigenous status. At least as many participants said they didn't believe this would be effective. Participants' different experiences regarding these policies can explain the contrasting viewpoints.

In one of the schools in the study, the BasicsCard, the instrument that quarantines a proportion of welfare payments for essentials such as food, had been in place since the introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response. At no point had the BasicsCard been connected directly to school attendance. It would be difficult to make a useful connection with this history. However, in a context where local programs to support school attendance had had some success, and following a request from local community leaders, introducing a penalty for welfare recipients whose children were absent from school may be seen as constructive.

For some schools, there was an ethos of valuing school attendance among local people living and working near the school. When there was a shared expectation that children would attend school every day, adults such as store keepers, nurses and police officers felt comfortable asking children who weren't at school why they were absent. In other places, school attendance was seen to be a school responsibility so truants were

both ignored and accommodated. School staff and community members closely associated with the school were frustrated by this attitude.

One school had identified mobility as a strategic issue so employed a full-time mobility officer. Her job was to find out where children had come from, their current circumstances, the student's academic needs and generally engage with the families coming into and departing from the school.

Classroom teachers found this a valuable form of support and expressed their gratitude, explaining that they were unable to leave a class to undertake these tasks. The role of the mobility officer was supported by the state-level school enrolment database that tracked individual children. The mobility officer said that most school transfers were caused by changes in access to housing or transport. 'Just slowing things down can stabilise the situation for a child', she said [J2].

Many schools reported that student mobility was an obstacle to learning closely linked to poor attendance but there was only one school among 17 that had a mobility officer. This school was large and had attracted funds through the Literacy and Numeracy Pilots, a program that predated the National Partnerships.

A metropolitan school with a considerable multicultural enrolment had a small proportion of Indigenous students. The principal identified the needs of the Indigenous students as different from, and possibly greater than, other high-need students in the school; for example mobility and periods of absence were more evident among the Indigenous students [D1]. The strategy was to enlist the support of children's services staff located adjacent to the school and support staff at the regional education office in fortnightly case management meetings. This enabled the Indigenous children's needs to be recognised and action taken in conjunction with other agencies.

Ameliorating out-of-school obstacles

The schools in the study sought to compensate for poor home support to enable children to attend school and function satisfactorily, hence the breakfast clubs, emergency lunches, buses, spare uniforms, liaison with other service providers and anything else that would help.

Participants' views on these practices were split. The majority wholeheartedly endorsed these forms of support. A smaller group expressed concern about the long-term effects of such 'helping' behaviour.

An Indigenous community member who had experienced high mobility and neglect in her own childhood supported programs that compensated for inadequate out-of-school care.

> Even when the family is trashed, if there is a bus then the kids get up and they think: 'School's got food'. They need to get a feed, they have no money but there's no shame in getting food at school [H1].

Participants who expressed concerns about their school compensating for a lack of family support explained this was based on a fear that the care the school provided would lead families to relinquish further their responsibility.

The concern that more school support would lead to less family responsibility was a motivating factor in schools where it had been decided not to provide services like meal programs. School leaders said hungry children could be fed without establishing a full meal program. There were several schools willing to feed individual children who said they were hungry but the school policy was not to create expectations that food would be provided regardless of need.

A Year 2 teacher said the school policy meant there was insufficient emergency food available. A child in her class had brought in an absentee note saying his mother had kept him home because they had run out of food. After this, the teacher began to routinely provide food in her class. She said she was more concerned about the wellbeing of the students in her class than compliance with the school's policy [J3].

Some teachers argued that resources should be focused on classrooms. An experienced Indigenous teacher in a regional school where the Indigenous students were a small minority expressed this view.

> The Indigenous education worker should be in the classroom not in the community. Don't waste your money on the parents. Once you've got the kids 100 per cent supported, the community will come later. Encourage the parents to come into the school. How much do we as educators take on the parenting role? Parents need to learn the skills [M1].

This teacher's point of view makes sense in her context. This school had fewer Indigenous students than neighbouring schools and enrolments

had been capped because of limited space on the site for new classrooms. In this context, many parents will be persuaded to meet expectations placed on them or, if they find the pressure uncomfortable, move to a school close by. Although Indigenous herself, this teacher didn't want the Indigenous parents to be treated as a special case. She had been teaching for many years and knew that the Indigenous children would be disadvantaged if their parents didn't insist that they attend school regularly and apply themselves to their studies.

This was a minority view among the participants from schools selected for their high Indigenous enrolments. However, most schools have small proportions of Indigenous students so this view may be held more widely than implied by the responses of the participants in this study.

Among the participating schools, the view most often expressed was that family liaison was important but sometimes difficult to achieve. Some schools made a concerted effort to support teachers so they could meet and get to know children's families. This was an important part of getting word around the Indigenous community that the school was a friendly place and that concerns about 'teasing', 'bullying' or 'too many white people' could and would be addressed.

The principal of a metropolitan school with a low proportion of Indigenous enrolments reinforced the idea of connecting with families: 'You have to get to know the students and then bring in the families' [D1].

The debate about whether resources should be directed at making connections with families or placed in classrooms is circular to some extent. Like the chicken and the egg, they lead or follow depending on where you start. Some people wanted to start with the family and others wanted to start with the child.

An Indigenous education worker in a remote school said: 'You can never have too much contact with parents' [F1]. An Indigenous teacher in her third year teaching in a metropolitan school also emphasised the importance of connecting up with children's families. 'Without that family, you are nothing', she said, explaining why good relations between home and school were so important in her school where the Indigenous children were a small minority group [N1].

Some teachers felt uncomfortable about expectations that they visit families. This was a problem for young, non-Indigenous teachers but not exclusively. An Aboriginal teacher in a regional school said she would not visit traditional Aboriginal families because she believed they would not welcome a visit from a teacher [M2].

In schools where principals or Indigenous education workers made home visits with teachers, their fears were overcome.

Partnerships and Indigenous leadership

All participants argued that Indigenous students could reach mainstream literacy and numeracy standards. Some Indigenous participants argued they would not be satisfied with students reaching mainstream standards; they wanted their children to surpass this standard.

The majority of Indigenous participants argued in favour of local Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working together to improve school attendance and achievement. Some participants argued that students' academic achievement could not improve unless Indigenous and non-Indigenous people cooperated to support this goal.

Most of the schools were engaged in a process of establishing a partnership agreement with Indigenous parents and community representatives. Some had taken advantage of funding from the Parental and Community Engagement (PaCE) program to support this (DEEWR, 2010). Others said that they were not able to meet the requirement for funds to be managed by a local incorporated Indigenous association so could not participate in this particular program.

Schools in the process of formalising partnership agreements had established open dialogue between staff members and community members. Through interactions with both staff and Indigenous community members, the researchers observed trusting relationships that were local and cemented around knowledge of and affection for the children.

A large school in a very remote location with a school-community partnership illustrates how one school embraced strong Indigenous leadership.

A local Indigenous man was employed as a mentor to the non-Indigenous principal. A local Indigenous woman was employed as a cultural advisor and in this role participated as a member of the school's leadership team. The principal said that by bringing the cultural advisor into the school's management structure she was able to warn him when he was about to unknowingly cause of-

fence [B2]. These two roles made contributions in addition to the local Indigenous input provided through the school council and Indigenous staff members employed in both teaching and support roles.

In the schools in the study that were engaged in partnerships, community members said they looked to the school to get help for Indigenous families struggling to respond to societal change. The predominant view expressed by community members was that they wanted to help the school to do its work and they expected the school to help them to do so.

A principal of a remote school with a formal partnership agreement in place was optimistic.

> A teacher can become a mother figure or father figure: one person a child knows who has expectations of them. If relationships are established then teachers can influence out-of-school behaviour [C4].

He argued that by establishing robust relationships schools and families could cooperate effectively and, furthermore, that it was the frank conversations made possible by the good relationships that were the key to establishing high expectations. A successful partnership was both a means to an end and an achievement in its own right.

Promoting positive Indigenous identification sat inside this framework.

All the Indigenous participants spoke positively about their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage and most non-Indigenous participants encouraged Indigenous students and staff members to actively identify.

There were a few schools that focused on meeting the needs of *all* students without differentiating cultural subgroups. Participants said they believed it was important for all students to be treated the same. While this view was not frequently reported, it may be more common in schools where Indigenous students are a small proportion of enrolments.

Schools that actively promoted positive Indigenous identification were well placed to remove what one Indigenous community member called the 'split between being educated and being black' [O1].

Positive Indigenous identification provided a framework for responding to negative stereotyp-

ing. An Indigenous education worker in a metropolitan school said she was determined not to be 'painted with the same brush' [D3]. She resented teachers making negative generalisations about Indigenous students and took these comments personally. Because she knew she would be supported by the school's philosophy about positive Indigenous identification, she was able to successfully argue her point of view. The statement that had caused offence had been the result of ignorance so the process was constructive for all concerned.

During the principals meeting, one of the principals, an Indigenous man living in a regional agricultural centre, said he had to deal with negative attributions to Indigenous people.

> When I'm at school I'm the principal, I'm doing an important job so everyone treats me with respect. When I walk down the street in a place where no one knows me I'm just another blackfella: there is no respect [E3].

This served as a reminder that, for many Indigenous people, dealing with negative stereotypes is a condition of life and that children need support at school to deal with this issue.

Recruiting and holding staff

The strategies schools adopted to deal with staffing problems tended to have a local flavour even though many schools were dealing with similar problems and the government schools all operated within centralised human resource systems.

The government schools recruited teachers through their systems. Almost without exception, each of the principals in government schools had found a way to navigate the bureaucracy so they could select teachers or, if someone else selected them, put prospective teachers through local hoops before making appointments. Principals with established reputations were best placed to influence appointment processes. This was achieved through good relations with line managers and the force of a principal's personality; an experienced principal could always substantiate a claim that the school needed to be treated as an exceptional case when rules got in the way.

Most of the schools were hard to staff because experienced teachers rarely listed schools with high Indigenous enrolments on transfer applications. Because of this, principals could generally get approval to appoint applicants they found through

their own networks. The use of networks – professional, social and family – served as a valuable recruitment tool. 'Eyeball-to-eyeball' approaches were valued.   A recommendation from a close colleague or friend was valued over a referee's report from a stranger, some of whom it was believed misrepresented a prospective teacher to protect their own interests. Word-of-mouth messages that a school was a good place to work could improve teacher supply particularly when a school's staff stabilised and their work gained recognition.

The non-government schools faced similar challenges to those of the government schools but without the support (or pressure) that a large employer can provide.

A very remote independent school had a relationship with a university that placed final year teaching practice students in the school. The university and the school were as far apart as it is possible for two locations in Australia to be: the very remote north-west and metropolitan Tasmania. However, this relationship had been productive over a number of years with the school meeting the travel costs of the teacher education students so both parties could check each other out before making a commitment.

The principal of this very remote independent school said prospective staff members were always interviewed on-site before an appointment was made [P1]. Although this was expensive, the consequences of appointing an unsuitable teacher was a greater problem.

A strategy that principals agreed was needed was the introduction of housing that allows single teachers to live independently. The most common form of house provided among the eight schools with subsidised housing was a multi-bedroom house with a shared kitchen, bathroom and living area. The principals said an experienced teacher who is a mature adult could not possibly live and work effectively for any extended period of time under these conditions.

> There's no privacy. Teachers do all their preparation at school because they can't fit a desk into the bedroom. There can be no work-home balance or quality of life. It would be difficult lasting two years. The fact that teachers can't establish a sustainable lifestyle under these conditions implies that no one really expects them to stay [J1].

Although houses could be bought privately in some of the school locations, this was not always possible. When private housing was available, the cost was often outside the reach of teachers.

In contexts where the supply of teachers was limited, most principals sought to 'grow' good teachers.

The principal of a remote government school came around to this view.

> I used to want to recruit good teachers and get rid of the duds. I don't think like that now. I see my job as growing good teachers. I will put the support in and then take action if the teacher doesn't want to take advantage of it [C1].

Schools that had local Indigenous people working as fully qualified teachers had a valuable asset that ameliorated some obstacles associated with the inexperience and high turnover of non-Indigenous teachers.

Some schools actively sought to support local people so they could train them to become non-teaching staff members and then qualify to become teachers.

This was often a long-term project and started with parents coming into the school as volunteers or in relatively menial paid work. Some principals mentored parents, offered a logical sequence of roles connected to formal training and eventually supported them through tertiary education to become teachers. One school paid an Indigenous education worker's salary while she completed practicum placements in other schools. Another school funded formal English literacy classes for Indigenous staff members out-of-school hours. One school funded one day per week for professional development for local Indigenous staff members to upgrade their qualifications.

These long-term strategies were observed in metropolitan and very remote locations, and schools with low and high proportions of Indigenous enrolments. Although diverse, these schools represented a small proportion of the 17 schools in the study.

> Recruiting good quality teacher assistants is a long-term investment. It is worthwhile for the school to support them until they are fully qualified and competent teachers [B3].

The cost of time taken to study was the main burden for the school. The individuals involved in

study also faced personal challenges; the researchers met mothers with young children, working at the school, studying in their own time and fulfilling leadership roles in the local Indigenous community.

Teachers and Indigenous education workers were not the only important staff roles. A number of the schools in the study could not have functioned without bi-cultural bus drivers.

The role of the bus driver was so important that some principals accepted a share of this duty. Bus drivers needed to have extensive knowledge of the children and their families and an ability to coax children to school. They provided the bridge between families and classrooms in schools where low Indigenous attendance rates were an ongoing challenge.

Support from (and to) other agencies

Most participants reported that welfare agencies failed to engage with child neglect or chronic truancy unless there was robust evidence that a child had been physically or sexually assaulted. Principals said they took their mandatory reporting obligations seriously but in most cases the response was limited to an email notification that the report had been received.

A number of principals complained because welfare officers failed to have face-to-face meetings with children in their care. Some schools facilitated meetings between welfare officers and the children on their books.

A principal with many neglected children attending his school did not expect the welfare system to improve in the immediate future.

> Aboriginal people see child protection as a process of removal. It's very difficult. There is no system [A1].

This principal has been applying for funds to build cottages on the school site so children could be cared for out-of-school hours. The dilemma the principal faced was that some children had approached a teacher directly asking if they could sleep over at the teacher's house on pension night.

Despondency regarding the parlous state of child welfare was evident in most of the RSS Study schools. However, there was one school where the principal was positive. There were no cases of children in the school having been removed from families and there was no resident welfare officer

in the town. Rather, local Indigenous families had accepted children removed in other locations.

This scenario points to possibilities.

The town was very small, very remote and most people in town were Indigenous. There was no requirement for permits to visit and significant numbers of tourists moved through, depending on roads and the season. While there were plans to increase the housing stock, overcrowding was not as severe as in some other very remote locations.

The jewel in this town's crown was the school. The principal had led the school for six years and had relevant experience before his appointment [I1]. The community supported the school and the Indigenous children attended every day unless there was a reason why they couldn't. Everyone in town understood the importance of school attendance and supported the school in this regard. The school was open to local community members and tourists passing through and it was the only place in town where people could access the internet or go for a swim.

This was a desirable context for recruiting families willing to accept children in need of care. Part of its suitability was derived from the strength of the partnership between the school and the community and the fact that a child placed in a family in this town could reasonably be expected to attend school every day regardless of his or her history.

This was the only school in the study where no participants reported any out-of-school issues to be obstacles to learning.

Many participants reported a general collapse in the legitimate authority of adults over children and attributed the problem to changes in Australian society. Societal changes have effectively compounded problems experienced by Indigenous families and made it more difficult for them to invigilate regular school attendance should the adults in the family wish to do so.

One aspect of the collapse of adult authority is the failure of men to exercise responsibility for the care of children. Older participants described a historical context in which young Indigenous women moved to the camp of the family of the man to whom they were promised. Now, it is more common for a child to live with his or her mother in the household of the child's maternal grandmother and for the father to be absent or peripheral to the child's life.

Another issue is the early age at which many young Indigenous women become mothers. There were reports of teenage mothers leaving children with grandmothers who themselves were young women with young children.

In this context, Indigenous children have mobile phones and know their rights. They take advantage of what one participant called 'soft-handed parenting' [F1].

> With the laws that are in place you can't discipline your child. Children shouldn't be telling their parents. Parents need to tell their children to go to school [F2].

Participants reported welfare officers investigating parents who smack their children. A principal provided this account.

> A 14-year-old girl wouldn't get out of bed in the morning so her mother pulled her out. The daughter phoned child protection and they sent someone around who investigated the mother [C1].

This wasn't the only account of this kind. Even if the events described never happened, participants told many local variations of this story to the researchers.

An upside-down response to child welfare was also suggested when a principal made a report regarding 84 students who were chronic truants. The principal was informed that he should not have reported these children. As the deputy principal in the school said: 'The principal got flogged' [O2].

Situations where neglected children were not supported by welfare agencies made the school's job problematic. Either the school shifted its focus away from its educational purpose or it kept teaching without regard for the reality of the world the students lived in.

The child welfare agencies were the most consistently inadequate among the outside agencies schools looked to for support. However, the contributions from other agencies were also soft. There was no category of outside agency – health, police, child welfare or an Indigenous corporation – that delivered services across all, or most, of the RSS Study schools.

Principals could get medical support for children in some of the discrete Indigenous communities through the local Indigenous health service, particularly in small communities.

In one school the principal said the nurse visited the school every morning to see if any children had problems and, if there was a need, she would visit again in the afternoon.

In another small community, the health clinic was opposite the school so children could be walked across the road where the clinic made contact with a family member.

Many principals said they had requested a school nurse, some saying it would be worthwhile for the school to trade a teacher for a nurse, but were told this was against the rules.

A remote independent school had been visited by a group of doctors who noted significant health needs among the children. Following lobbying by the doctors the school was able to obtain funds for a nurse to be based in the school for a six-month trial period. When the trial period ended the funding was withdrawn.

One school persevered. Although the health clinic was a short walk from the school, the principal had failed to establish a working relationship with the staff at the health clinic. Stonewalling was justified by privacy requirements. The principal got around this by funding one of the health clinic nurses half-time. In this way, the same person could visit the school in the morning to identify children who needed medical attention in the role of school nurse and then, at the health clinic in the afternoon, she could treat children. The school's portion of the salary was funded from its Low-SES National Partnership allocation.

A metropolitan school made extensive use of a children's services centre adjacent to the school. Staff at this centre had been helpful regarding some children where harm had been substantiated. They also attended fortnightly individual case management meetings the principal had put in place to ensure the Indigenous children, a small minority in the school, did not become invisible. However, despite the proximity of this service it lacked health services so a child with a minor injury or ailment had to be sent home [D1].

Another one-off account about collaboration with an outside agency involved an Indigenous police liaison officer based at a metropolitan school. The officer was a parent, a member of the school's parents' association committee and an Indigenous person. She said she received good quality support from her manager in the police department and from the principal in the school. The police liaison officer explained that many local crimes

were committed by family members of children at the school.

The role of the police liaison officer was to educate children about the law, support school staff members making home visits to households where criminals lived and to help children and their families to become proactive in their relations with the police. If a parent approached her at school and said they were in trouble with the police, she would arrange to meet them at the police station after school and remain present to provide support while commissioned officers dealt with them. This officer also led the school choir.

This was an example of an outside agency supporting a school and a school assisting an outside agency. The success was dependent on many factors including the personal qualities of the incumbent.

Some of the services schools were asked to provide to other agencies were unrelated to education or only connected indirectly.

One of the schools provided open access to the Menzies Child Health Institute. At the time the researchers were visiting, a medical trial for a new treatment for sores was being conducted. By finding children who were present at school and who had sores, the Institute staff could deduce which families were in need of treatment and so approach them.

The school was sometimes seen as a good source of local knowledge for outsiders. In one community, census collectors asked the principal to accompany them to every household in the community. He agreed to help because he believed it was in the community's interest that they respond. The principal said it was very time consuming and only one of many such requests [P1].

Targeting individual high-need students

Regardless of all the challenges caused by children being absent, tired, sick or hungry, the fundamental responsibility of schools is to meet students' academic needs. If and when children come to school, they need to be taught.

When participants were asked about a particular child they knew and were concerned about they all focused on what they could do within the school.

The views of this classroom teacher in a metropolitan school were indicative of strategies recommended.

> One-on-one. We need to know the student and their background [N1].

An Indigenous education worker in a remote school had similar ideas.

> One-on-one. Make them feel they are welcome in the school. Walk them through the paperwork. Try a few people to see who the child feels comfortable with. If the child is behind then the schoolwork will need to be broken down like in pre-primary [C6].

An Indigenous education worker at another school in the same remote town said what she believed was needed.

> This girl needs a lot of individual work. You'd have to start at the beginning. You'd need someone with a lot of time. That person would have to pick the girl up every day and form a relationship with her family [F1].

Some teachers said they thought that some high-need Indigenous students may learn working with a teacher and another child but most recommended one-on-one support, particularly in the initial phase. This strategy was designed to enable a teacher to engage the student sufficiently so he or she could develop basic literacy skills but also to help the child to feel safe at school.

Some schools had programs providing one-on-one instruction. One of these was MULTILIT (Making Up Lost Time in Literacy), 'an intensive, systematic and explicit approach' provided by a non-government, not-for-profit organisation (Exodus Foundation, 2012). One criterion for participation is 'regular and continuous attendance'. Such approaches were highly regarded in schools where they were available.

Concluding comments

The 17 schools in the study were selected because they had Indigenous students enrolled and because the work of the educators in the schools was valued by someone who recommended the school to the researchers. As reported in chapter 5, participants were generally confident that their efforts were making a difference. Therefore, as a group, the participating schools offered warm and welcoming environments and staff members had some capacity to confront the obstacles facing Indigenous students.

8

Case studies

Introduction

In this chapter, problem solving is described and discussed from two different vantage points.

First, narratives about five schools are presented. These outline some particularities related to five contexts each of which has a unique local dynamic.

Second, a case study of an out-of-school program that pre-dates the Closing the Gap reforms has been selected to illustrate the difficulties of putting a whole-of-government program into practice.

School case studies

School selections

When describing obstacles, school staff and community members used shorthand to describe the problems they had experienced. As a result, a key aspect of an obstacle could serve to characterise a range of difficulties. Through this process, a complex *cluster* of factors was represented *as though it were a singular dominant factor*.

Five schools have been selected as examples of the variation among the schools in the study because they had high proportions of Indigenous students enrolled. A similar breadth of particular circumstances could have been achieved if a different five schools from among the 17 participating schools had been selected.

A brief description of each of the five examples is provided to assist the reader.

1. A large, very remote school where the first language spoken by all except non-Indigenous visitors was an Indigenous language. Attendance was a particularly complicated issue in this context.

2. A small school, close to the centre of a city, was struggling as a result of instability. Many of the Indigenous children in the school lived in a large town camp that was also undergoing changes.

3. A school led by an Indigenous principal had experienced some success associated with its partnership agreement with the local community but had made no progress with other agencies in the regional centre.

4. A small independent school was founded on country excised from a pastoral lease and began with lessons in a bough shed.

5. One-fifth of students in a suburban Catholic school were Indigenous. Among this group were the children of former students who lived in a town camp some distance from a new school site.

School 1 – Large, very remote, strong language

A large school in a very remote community enrolling predominantly Indigenous students had an annualised daily attendance rate below 60 per cent.

This school differed from most of schools in the study because it was located in a discrete community that had almost no experience of excessive alcohol consumption. Cultural traditions and a single Indigenous language were strong and the school leadership and senior members of the community worked cooperatively. All agreed that children should attend school regularly.

Funding delivered to the school through National Partnerships had enabled a number of new programs designed to increase attendance and generally enhance the school.

New facilities were under construction. There were as many local Indigenous staff members in the school as non-Indigenous staff members and training for this group was actively promoted and subsidised by the school with the support of the National Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality. Non-Indigenous staff members at the school were encouraged to learn the local Indigenous language. A nurse had been appointed in conjunction with the local health centre so that school children could access services promptly. An early childhood program for children and mothers had been introduced and was delivered on a shady grassed area centrally located in the community. Secondary schooling provided opportunities to develop skills that were locally valued, for example traditional Indigenous arts and small boat building. An adult education program open to all community members was delivered through the school. Breakfast and lunch were available at school.

While the school had a sense of purpose sufficient to create momentum, its activities were conducted against a background of helplessness about problems in the community. English, the language of the school, was a minority language in the community so, from a child's point of view, it had no practical purpose. Consistently poor NAPLAN test results led to a sense of despondency about the prospect of improving academic performance in English. School achievement was not necessarily a sure route to employment as family relationships could be a more important qualification for a job.

A major problem was overcrowded houses. The population had out-grown the dwellings available

and was continuing to grow at a faster rate than new dwellings could be constructed. In the past, local workers had built houses but this industry had collapsed with the introduction of tendering procedures that judged local builders inefficient. New methods introduced new costs and the housing shortage continued. Community members said their homes were filled with mattresses laid on floors making it difficult for both staff and students to read or study effectively.

Community leaders supported school attendance but acquiesced when children chose not to attend. The reasons for children attending school or staying away were precariously balanced. A former principal who had continued to live in the community after her retirement said she had seen situations where student absences were endemic.

> If a community member works in the school and that person leaves, a whole class could stop coming to school [B1].

Funerals were held a couple of hundred yards away from the school and drew a critical mass of children. Sorry business continued for two weeks and deaths were not infrequent.

Children younger than seven years were generally dependent on a parent to get to school. Children older than seven years could get to school without parental support but were in a position to choose whether they would attend. The researchers were told that 'teasing business' explained many absences.

Some community members and Indigenous staff members said parents who failed to insist their children attend school were 'too busy doing something else'. The term used was also translated as 'lazy' but did not necessarily have a negative connotation.

One of the deputy principals had been at the school for nine years and was particularly focused on pedagogy.

> When I first started teaching in remote schools, I found that good strategies that had been effective in mainstream schools were not working in the classrooms in remote schools. Discovering this was a traumatic experience [B3].

She was aware of pressure to improve daily attendance rates but did not want to achieve this at the expense of the quality of instruction.

I have reached a stage where I am less worried about the children who don't come to school. I'm more concerned about the children who do attend and don't learn because this is something we should be able to do something about [B3].

The failure of local Indigenous children to perform well on external tests conducted in English even when they attended school regularly undermined the message that attendance was important.

The local community-based retired principal was asked what she would recommend to improve daily attendance rates.

There needs to be the development of a relationship between a teacher and a child. It needs to be almost one-on-one. The first three months is critical. Careful support, encouragement is needed. The child needs to learn how to operate in the school environment without getting upset, to learn school skills. The teacher may need to visit the child's home at 9.30AM if they haven't arrived so the child knows they have been missed [B1].

These suggestions were consistent with approaches adopted in other schools; however, the problem in this school was the number and proportion of children who were absent which made it more difficult for classroom teachers to deal with the problem.

Each class had approximately 40 children on its roll. This meant that if 55 per cent of children attended, 22 students were present. In reality only about one-quarter of children attended every day, one-half of students on the roll attended intermittently and the remaining students almost never attended. There were children on class rolls teachers had never met.

From a class teacher's point of view, although the classroom only held 22 students per day on average, teachers were in regular contact and seeking to teach at least 30 children on an ongoing basis. This left little time for knocking on doors to look for children who had never attended school.

At the time the researchers visited, the school was recruiting additional class teachers so class sizes could be reduced. The purpose was to enable teachers to establish stronger relationships with poor attending students. The plan was first to target students with a record of intermittent attendance. These students were more familiar with the

expectations of the classroom and so were more likely to adjust to the demands of regular school attendance.

After this group of children had settled into a pattern of regular school attendance, the plan was to shift the focus onto the children with the lowest attendance rates.

If these strategies were successful, additional teachers would need to be employed and new classrooms built.

School 2 – Small school near large town camp

A small regional school, only a few kilometres from the centre of a large city, had five principals in three years, three teaching staff members held acting positions and the remaining teaching staff were employed on one-year contracts.

The principal was the third individual in the role in a little over a term. There was much talk about the departure of the previous substantive principal who had been promoted to another school. By all accounts he had been dynamic and positive and the sense of loss had been exacerbated when staff clashed with an interim acting principal.

An Indigenous education worker gave his explanation of the problem:

This school is a stepping-stone. Being a small school we have a lot of principals who come through here [G1].

The new principal explained the situation in terms of low student numbers: the school had approximately 120 students enrolled. The volatility of enrolments was the reason why so many staff members were in acting roles or on short contracts.

Some teaching staff members were unhappy about their situations. The deputy principal had been acting in the role for three years while the incumbent was working in another school. When the substantive deputy principal resigned, the position was rolled over for another three years, not advertised as a permanent position.

The teacher supporting students with special education needs was acting because the substantive teacher had been released for two years leave-without-pay. Referring to the changes and uncertainty she said: 'It's avoidable, but it's the procedure' [G3].

The staff churn was associated with unstable relationships and led to a crisis of professional capital. A whole-school approach to managing student

behaviour had been initiated but then dissipated as the staff members who had participated in the initial professional learning left the school. The funds available were inadequate to provide similar professional learning when new staff members commenced.

Churn was also evident outside the school. Approximately 40 per cent of students were Indigenous, the majority living in a large Community close to the school. This Community was in transition.

The Community had approximately 40 occupied houses and about six were over-crowded. It was reported that the police visited most nights and despite the fact that the Community was notionally dry, intoxication was a chronic and significant problem. While there were strong individuals capable of providing leadership, there was a lack of coordinated governance making it difficult to enforce Community rules.

New government housing in surrounding suburbs was attracting families out of the Community. This generally resulted in children changing schools after a move and had drawn adults in leadership roles away from the school's community. Also, there was an expectation that Community projects employ Community residents. As a result, school staff could establish a collaborative relationship with a key individual only to find she had vacated her role unexpectedly.

The new principal had recently discovered that 20 programs were being delivered in the Community. She was surprised to discover the school had not been notified about new programs particularly when some were designed to improve school attendance. The commencement and maintenance of programs in the Community were as unstable as the Community itself.

An Indigenous community member explained that a new Health bus had been provided with a condition that its use be restricted. The old bus had been used to take children to basketball matches but this was now prohibited. Complaining about the change, the community member said she didn't know why the use of the new bus was restricted other than because of the vagaries of Indigenous policies. 'Indigenous policy is like a big packet of chips; someone shakes it up and puts a new name on the packet', she said [G4].

In this context, the staff at the school worked hard to make the connections needed to work cooperatively with the Community. They had used the Community's hall for staff meetings and parent-teacher meetings and so were slowly building contacts with families.

A young Indigenous teacher had been teaching in the school for four years and had grown up locally but she struggled to see a way forward.

> The academic achievement of Indigenous students is a huge problem and big things need to happen. I'm not sure what but this problem definitely isn't something that will fix itself or go away [G5].

This school participated in the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership during 2009 and 2010 but was not selected as a focus school associated with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.

School 3 – Regional, half Indigenous

The students enrolled in a small school in an agricultural centre were half Indigenous, half not. The principal was an Indigenous man, not from the immediate local area, but belonging to the same broad language group as many Indigenous children in the school [E3]. The school was scheduled to benefit from the Low-SES National Partnership in 2012 but at the time the researchers visited had not received additional funds or services.

Based on the recommendations of the Stronger Smarter Institute and supported by the Parental and Community Engagement program, a partnership between the school and the local Indigenous community was underway. The principal identified poor attendance as an obstacle requiring concerted effort but reported that most families were helpful regarding this issue. Through the partnership it had been agreed that families would restrict participation in out-of-school sports activities when children missed school. This had proved persuasive in a town where basketball and football were popular activities and as a result the school had received $7,000 as a reward payment from system authorities when the annual Indigenous attendance rate improved significantly.

The partnership had not removed other obstacles.

Centralised staffing policies were a problem. The principal said the staffing issue that 'hurt' most was unplaced permanent teachers. They were appointed to the school after classes had been allocated. Some teachers had not been prepared but rather than adjust to the needs of the school had decided to opt out. Another problem was

a central decision to award permanent status to teachers employed on fixed-term contracts. The principal said he would not have given permanency to a teacher who benefited from this policy and he was critical because this decision had placed a burden on the school.

The principal argued that the school needed greater discretion and flexibility so it could establish a staff profile that better suited local needs.

The principal wanted to introduce 'wrap-around' services for the students. He had visited a school with extended services on site in the state's capital city and believed a similar arrangement would be valuable. With this in mind, he had accepted the donation of a demountable building from a philanthropic foundation headed by a retired Indigenous footballer. The building had a large open space with a kitchen and two interview rooms and, three years earlier, the principal had offered the space for use by other agencies.

The researchers visited the demountable building with the principal. Boxes were stacked around the walls of the large room and the office doors were locked. The principal explained that the building had never been used as intended and so, over time, other uses had evolved.

In this town, a regional centre, health and ancillary services were provided through the hospital. However, the hospital and Indigenous community had a history of bad relations. Despite this, Indigenous parents were expected to access all child health services through the hospital. As a result they tended not to use any health or ancillary services unless prompted, coached and supported by staff from the school. This was a lot of work for school staff particularly when children suffering from complex problems such as foetal alcohol syndrome or mental health disorders needed to be assessed.

Because of these difficulties, the principal approached the regional Indigenous health service about using the school to improve their service delivery. He was told that Indigenous health comes under rural health and its charter explicitly excludes cooperation with schools. Rather, the service was designed to manage chronic diseases among Indigenous adults.

The principal was unaware that any local services had been strengthened as a result of the Indigenous National Partnerships or the identity of any regional coordinating body.

The principal said he hoped to make headway after the Low-SES National Partnership funds had begun to flow to the school. The school had also been nominated as a focus school associated with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.

School 4 – Very remote, independent

The homeland community was established in the early 1980s when a group decided to withdraw from the 'trouble' of a large camp near the homestead of a pastoral lease. The families involved in the move had school-aged children but, because the nearest school was 130 kilometres away, no-one under 17 years of age had attended school.

At community meetings held during the first year, it was agreed to establish a new school for 18 children who would be taught by one teacher and four community members. The community took out a loan to buy a caravan to provide accommodation for the teacher. Other items purchased included a cupboard and a filing cabinet.

The original school building was a bough shed consisting of a brush roof and cement floor. Word got around and the station managers helped out by delivering furniture and equipment that was donated. Small amounts of funding were provided by a range of Christian organisations.

When the researchers visited the school, the bough shed was still standing but not in use. The school's facilities and programs had become a source of pride and were of a standard consistent with those found in large population centres.

Tourist buses regularly pulled into the parking area to visit the art gallery built on the school site. When available, the principal took visitors on short tours of the school. They commonly expressed surprise at the high quality of the school and the way it functioned.

The school is located between regional service centres. The community has only a small store so many families drive to one or other of the nearby towns to shop. The community is dry but alcohol is sold in the nearby towns with histories of endemic alcohol abuse and dysfunction. Children are placed at risk when families stay with relatives in town for weekends.

The school and the community are interdependent; the community governs the school and the school enables families with children to live in relative isolation from the 'trouble' associated with towns.

The community has a group of elders who share leadership responsibilities. One elder chairs the school board that meets on a regular basis. He has passionately supported the school since its inception. The principal is an ex officio member and refers key policy issues affecting the school to the board.

At the time of the visit, the school had 66 students enrolled. The small school staff was stable; while relatively youthful they included individuals with wide experience and substantial expertise.

The school has benefited from the Low-SES National Partnership and has been identified as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan focus school. Over a longer period, it has also been supported through a network of independent schools similarly located on Indigenous homelands.

In many respects the school was well positioned to assist students to achieve the literacy and numeracy targets. The school exists as a long-standing partnership between the staff and community, it has excellent facilities and a well-qualified and energetic staff. Yet, a large proportion of the students at the school had not reached the NAPLAN minimum standards and the principal was unsure what more can be done. The problem was manifest in the achievement and attendance data.

Attendance rates in the early year levels were low: 55 per cent in Year 1 and 45 per cent in the year preceding Year 1. As a consequence, teachers were constantly playing catch-up as the children progressed through school. The problem of low attendance was exacerbated by the tendency of families to visit regional centres and miss substantial blocks of schooling.

While the principal has generally good relations with families and personally chased up students with home visits he was careful not to overstep his authority [P1]. He was a servant of the school board and did not want to alienate families and put at risk the school's standing in the community.

While the chairman of the school board and other board members also wanted to improve attendance, they had found some families unresponsive to calls for their children to attend school more regularly. Maintaining harmony in the community was an important priority. Some years earlier, after a violent incident, attendance fell below 25 per cent for a period of time.

Maintaining student numbers was a big issue. If some families moved to a regional centre there would be a significant enrolment drop. This could produce a domino effect: the school's funding would be reduced and it would be necessary to terminate the employment of a teacher. In such a small school this would have major ramifications, requiring re-organisation and a scaling back of programs and activities. A spiral of such events could lead to the closure of the school.

Thus the school faced a complex web of factors that impede a direct, straightforward attack on the attendance problem. There was no certainty that a more assertive approach by the school or the community leaders would result in higher attendance rates. Such an approach could, however, fracture the productive relationships and the benefits associated with them would be lost.

School 5 – Catholic, suburban

Located in an outer suburban area of a large regional city, the school had a total enrolment of slightly more than 300 students; 20 per cent were Indigenous and a similar proportion were immigrant children from Asia.

The Indigenous students were drawn from various backgrounds. The most disadvantaged children lived in a camp ten kilometres from the school.

Several town camp families had connections to the school established when it was located nearby. The relationships had continued over several decades so when the school relocated to a new site, a bus service was provided so the town camp children could continue to attend the school. Other children at the camp attend several schools on its periphery.

In general, the Indigenous children from the camp attended less regularly than other students and, on the days they did attend, were more likely to need support to enable them to participate in a full day of schooling. The school provided meals, showers, clothing and access to medical services. The school used its own funds to purchase a bus to pick up the town camp children and take them home at the end of the day. The school's Indigenous education worker served as a de facto school attendance officer but was not always able to persuade either parents or children that a child should get on the bus.

The living conditions in the camp limited the capacity of students living there to succeed at school.

From the principal's perspective, the staff members were doing all they could to welcome the town camp children to school and help them engage in the educational program [Q1]. Indigenous culture is celebrated on special occasions and the school has a tradition of an annual excursion to country. Only Indigenous students attended and this was very popular.

Indigenous family members were invited to attend school functions but had been reluctant to visit the school site. The non-Indigenous staff members felt they would be trespassing if they visited the town camp so delegated face-to-face contact to the Indigenous education worker. She enrolled children at the town camp as it was believed parents were not willing to attend the school for this purpose.

The only source of information about the town camp available to the researchers was staff at the school. From the perspective of school staff members there was no recognisable leadership or organisational framework at the town camp and staff didn't know what they could do to improve housing, roads or sanitary conditions. The principal was aware that representatives from both government and non-government agencies visited the camp and the Indigenous education worker had reported a recent meeting of agency personnel providing services at the camp.

The principal did not feel responsible for the education of the town camp children generally. This was because the majority of the children attended schools near the camp; only a small proportion travelled by bus to her school.

Hence there was an impasse. The school did its best for the town camp children who arrived at school but the principal held the view that the school did not have the licence or the resources to engage more fully with families living at the camp.

One of the consequences of the form of support provided to the town camp children was that they dressed in school uniforms and shoes when they arrived at school and then changed back into their own clothes before going home. No one thought this was an ideal situation but it was something the children and staff had become accustomed to.

This school was included as a Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership school during 2009 and 2010 but was not selected as an Indigenous focus school.

Importance of context

There were consequences that flowed from the particular circumstances of the schools represented in the case studies. Much of what was important to the locals was nuanced and participants sometimes avoided explaining the details. When they simplified their descriptions of problems there were risks of making a faulty diagnosis of the obstacles.

For bureaucrats engaged with the 'big picture', however, local concerns can sound like excuses particularly when they fail to connect to policy and the detail of individual locations can be overwhelming.

Out-of-school support program case study

Schools are principally concerned with educational outcomes and look to other agencies to respond to a range of needs facing school-aged children. As reported by the participants in this study, matching families to appropriate service providers is difficult. The following example has been chosen because it describes an established program with a record of supporting families with school-aged children.

STRONG*families*

In 2002 in Western Australia, the STRONG*families* program commenced following a coronial inquest into the death by suicide of a 15-year-old girl living in an urban but discrete Aboriginal community. The subsequent Gordon Inquiry noted that, prior to her death, thirteen agencies had provided services to the girl but there was a lack of clarity as to which of the agencies was the lead agency.

Six agencies were signatories to the partnership agreement that created the STRONG*families* program. There was a clear governance structure with high-level support by the respective directors-general and a number of regional management groups, each with a coordinator. The aim of the program was to bring dysfunctional families together with agencies that the families believed could be of assistance to them, using a case management approach.

The program commenced as a trial and was expanded gradually. There have been three evaluations of the program.

While not designed specifically for Indigenous families, nearly 60 per cent of referrals were for Indigenous families. An analysis of the issues faced by these families revealed that most were dealing

with at least five significant issues. Parenting, school attendance and school behaviour were three of the four most significant issues faced.

Despite the generally positive response of all who participated in the third evaluation – family members, agency staff and coordinators – there were continuing issues that challenged the ongoing commitment by agencies to the program (Cant, Penter and Henry, 2007). Government cutbacks, policy changes, heavy workloads, staff movements all contributed to agencies at various times failing to carry out what they had agreed to do; there was a tendency to retreat to working within the silo of individual government departments.

> Agencies still tend to view issues as the responsibility of one agency, rather than accept shared responsibility to address the problem. An example is children not attending school where there is a complex set of issues such as housing, health, parental capacity, justice and welfare. Agencies and workers may consider the responsibility primarily rests with the Department of Education and Training and be unwilling to accept shared responsibility for the problems or commit their agency to action. This unwillingness to accept shared responsibility for a problem or attempt to do things differently is often encouraged and supported by agency and regional managers who place constraints on workers to stay within agency parameters and not commit the agency to particular actions, especially in cases where the agency has had significant contact with a family (Cant, Penter and Henry, 2007, p. 37).

The example of the STRONG*families* program usefully illustrates the issues associated with whole of government approaches. The evaluation after five years explains the difficulties in the face of the relentless force of workloads and imperatives communicated by line managers.

The challenges associated with implementing whole of government strategies do not of themselves imply that they should not be pursued but that allocating financial resources alone will not necessarily over-ride the problems. Non-financial resources also have a role; for example, workplace cultures and accountability frameworks are not necessarily conducive to collaboration.

Contribution of case studies

The school case studies were selected to illustrate the range and complexity of the problems facing schools with Indigenous students. The juxtaposition of these five accounts is intended to show that positive leadership in addressing these problems is best exercised by school staff members working cooperatively with local community members, and to allow that school leaders and community representatives may come up with different strategies in different schools.

The case study of an inter-agency program designed to support children in dire circumstances is not intended to be critical but rather to demonstrate how difficult it can be to continue such demanding work over the extended time periods required.

9

Findings

Introduction

The four objectives of the study are used in this chapter to scaffold a synopsis of the findings based on analysis of documents, a national ACARA database, interviews conducted during school visits, and meetings with principals and system officials. The synopsis is followed by a discussion of the implications of the findings for the delivery of support to schools.

Research objectives

1   Identify the major obstacles limiting the progress of Indigenous students and the extent to which these obstacles are common across schools or are site-specific.

Major obstacles

The obstacles most commonly reported by survey participants can broadly be categorised as 'student absences from school', 'insufficient out-of-school support' and 'an aspect of the school's program that could be improved'. Each was reported by more than half the participants in the study.

Of all the categories of obstacle 'student absences from school' was the most commonly reported. The majority of participants in 14 of the 17 schools (72 per cent of all participants) stated that the failure of Indigenous students to attend school was a major obstacle to their success.

Absences resulted from either one, or a combination, of the following: low daily attendance rates, high mobility rates, students frequently arriving late and high levels of tolerance in a local community for children not attending school.

While student absenteeism is a key obstacle to achievement, regular attendance, of itself, does not guarantee success. Additional obstacles confronted students and teachers in the school setting. These often became evident only after the students had settled into school. Unless these were addressed it proved difficult to reinforce attendance and improvements in a student's attendance could lapse. Children who attend school but are unable to participate in learning programs with peers are deprived of purpose and satisfaction. Substantial effort by staff and students is needed to compensate for missed instruction following periods of absence.

The second most frequently reported category of obstacle was 'insufficient out-of-school support'. There was a widely held view among school staff members and community representatives that schools filled in gaps in family support that should be met by other agencies.

The third most frequently reported category of obstacle related to the inadequacy of school programs. This group of obstacles included teachers'

lack of knowledge regarding code switching and difficulties managing student behaviour.

Meta-obstacles

In chapter 5, a conceptual framework based on a problem-solving approach was explained. An 'obstacle' as described in chapter 6 was defined as something that stopped staff members in schools taking action to improve Indigenous achievement. 'Support' as described in chapter 7 was defined as any form of assistance staff members in schools needed to remove the obstacles and 'capability' was defined as the ability to draw the support or resources needed into a school and put them into effect.

In this context, it was posited that a class of obstacles, identified in this study as 'meta-obstacles', reduce the capability of staff members in schools to engage in effective problem solving; that is, that there are obstacles that interfere with the removal of obstacles. School staff members may know what is impeding the progress of students but are unable to take steps to remove the obstacles.

Five examples of meta-obstacles that were evident in the study are described.

First, the absence of trusting relationships limited the capability of staff members to problem solve. The need for trust was so important that it functioned as a pre-requisite for cooperation. Trust was generally evident in the schools in the study, nominated because they had strong leadership. If trust was absent, however, the removal of obstacles of the kind reported by participants would be almost impossible. As such, the absence of trust can be described as a meta-obstacle.

Second, a lack of awareness of what was not understood was a meta-obstacle. A tendency to limit problem-solving activity to the known and familiar is a particular problem when dealing with cultural diversity. Another way of explaining this is to say that some staff members in schools 'didn't know what they didn't know' so failed to ask questions that would help them to learn about and better understand their students. The revolving door of teaching staff appointments had the effect of locking this meta-obstacle in place in some schools.

Third, staff and community members lacked the political capital, leverage, authority or agency needed to remove obstacles. Such a deficit could be real or perceived. Uncooperative children, their families or other agencies could be seen as more powerful than the staff members in a school or a local community's leaders. There were marked differences in the way principals managed this issue; for example, some principals were in regular contact with senior officers in their system to ensure that their schools were not disadvantaged by political forces.

Fourth, sometimes there was no attempt to remove an obstacle either because no one could recognise it or because it was believed that someone else was responsible for its removal. Responsibility shifting was evident where schools were looking to outside agencies for support but the agencies responded by declining to work cooperatively with a school.

Fifth, effort was focused on removing obstacles outside the school so staff members were too exhausted to focus on the needs of students attending school. This applied when effort directed at improving attendance rates depleted the resources available to provide the remedial instruction needed by students present at school.

The construct of a 'meta-obstacle' is useful because it explains forces that may not be immediately apparent but that undermine the problem-solving capabilities of staff members in schools.

Extent to which obstacles were common

The obstacles were not systematically related to a school's location or enrolment profile. Similarly, meta-obstacles were also variable across school sites.

2 Find out what is limiting the capability of staff members to remove the obstacles.

Local knowledge and experience

For most of the schools in the study, the strategies in place were broadly framed and their implementation required staff members with a wide range of relevant capabilities and considerable local knowledge. However, the majority of teachers were not local. Most were recent arrivals to schools. Of staff members who had been employed locally, the majority were not qualified teachers.

Generally in the participating schools, staff members could not assume that their Indigenous students would arrive at school happy to sit at a desk in a classroom and function as an independent learner with the prerequisite knowledge and skills for their year level. Rather, most of a school's staff members needed to be able to coax children to school, help them to form trusting relationships with adults and other students, provide remedial

instruction after absences and teach children to code switch between the language and behaviour of home and the formality and close contact found in classrooms. Staff members needed to communicate a belief that students could be academically successful and that this was compatible with their Indigenous identity and the realities of any disadvantage they suffered. Ultimately, the goal was for students to master the knowledge and skills, and adopt the beliefs, that would enable them to function in classrooms as independent learners.

The factors limiting the capability of teachers were different from those limiting non-teaching staff members in the hard-to-staff schools with high Indigenous enrolments.

Many of the teachers in the participating schools were non-Indigenous and city-educated. They suffered from cognitive overload while they adjusted to a new professional role and needed a lot of support. The process of supporting teachers until they became competent and then losing them soon afterwards was debilitating for the staff members who remained and limited a school's capacity to consolidate successful practice over time.

On the other hand, non-teaching staff members were more likely to be Indigenous, live locally and to belong to the wider community surrounding the school. In contrast to the teachers, these staff members provided a stable workforce and had cultural savvy. When local Indigenous people were able to qualify and work as teachers, there were long-term benefits to a school. Similar benefits were observed when capable and experienced Indigenous staff members provided leadership. The capabilities of all staff members in a school were limited when Indigenous staff members were either not given, or failed to take advantage of, opportunities for leadership and further study.

The capability of staff members in schools with Indigenous students was undermined by incentives that drew novice teachers in and then automatically pushed them towards the next step in their careers after one, two or three years. Teachers reported beliefs that there would be career penalties if they continued teaching in a hard-to-staff school beyond the minimum period required of them.

Some system-level human resource management protocols that applied to schools in general were accepted as fixed; participants struggled to explain how they worked except in terms of an aspect that had an impact on the school or themselves as individuals.

Power to remove obstacles

There were obstacles experienced at a school level that staff members in schools had no formal powers to remove.

Most of the principals of the systemic schools in the study dealt with regulatory constraints by enlisting the support of more senior officers so they could bend rules on the basis that their school was an exceptional case where the usual interpretations of what was permissible or prohibited did not apply. This approach gave principals *some* scope to make local decisions; for example, most principals were involved in selecting staff but few had been permitted to vary the staffing profile to match the needs of the school.

Some principals were prepared to put their good standing on the line to adapt policies to local circumstances. Others felt more constrained by regulation therefore limiting the field of action for problem solving.

3 *Examine the match between the obstacles that schools report are impeding their students' progress and the support that is currently provided to remove or ameliorate them.*

Lack of out-of-school support

The largest discrepancy between support currently available and the support that was needed related to the obstacles that arose in home and local communities.

Generally, the need for support for families outstripped a school's capacity to deliver it or find other agencies able to assist. Some of the need for support was related to the lifestyles of Indigenous families; for example, high mobility and overcrowded households. However, much of the need for family support resulted from societal changes; for example, the decline in the legitimate authority of parents and increasing rates of alcohol and drug abuse.

The principal mechanism through which the National Indigenous Reform Agreement supports schools is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan. The plan cites the National Indigenous Reform Agreement in general terms. The following text is an example of the kind of aspirations contained in both documents.

> Governments through the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* have committed to ensuring better connections across seven strategic 'building blocks': early childhood; schooling; health; economic participation;

healthy homes; safe communities; and governance and leadership. These connections are critical as they recognise the complex interplay of factors that impact on learning and engagement (MCEECDYA, 2011, p. 12).

The intentions of the agreement and the plan are laudable but the connections were not evident. Implementation has been slow and the regular reports required have been generally silent on connections established between schools and agencies responsible for the other building blocks.

Some of the schools in the study were able to create support for families using resources acquired through the Low-SES National Partnership. This was most successful in situations where principals were able to maintain an effective partnership between their school and its community.

There were schools where principals were able to call on support for families from non-school agencies but the assistance was usually provided on a case-by-case basis rather than as part of an ongoing partnership concerning service provision for students and their families. Schools could not depend on getting students connected to the support they needed.

Among the schools in the study there was little evidence of programs funded through the Indigenous National Partnerships providing support that was visible to schools. Most complaints were about the lack of support to improve attendance from outside agencies and a sense that government authorities had determined that 'attendance' was the sole responsibility of schools.

School-based extended services

Principals held divergent views on how best to address the obstacles to school achievement that arose because of problems at home or in the community. Some preferred to situate nutritional, medical, social and parental support on the school site so that they could provide a strategic overview concerning its delivery. On the other hand, some principals wanted to locate responsibility for these forms of support with other agencies and Indigenous organisations so they could confine, as far as possible, the work of the school to teaching and learning.

The question of whether to provide services to children at school or to insist that other agencies solve children's non-educational problems needs to be answered for individual schools through a

process of discussion between school leaders and community representatives. When agreement has been reached about this, there is scope to adopt a whole of government approach that includes the school. In the meantime, it appears that the issue is being dealt with on an ad hoc basis.

4 *Identify the kinds of support that schools need to solve problems concerning student academic progress but which they cannot currently acquire.*

Customised support

A conclusion drawn from this study is that much of the support needed to remove obstacles to Indigenous student success is idiosyncratic to a particular school and tied to the features of the obstacles present. This is why centrally devised strategies may miss the mark in many schools. The challenge of tailoring and targeting support is amplified by the nature of some of the obstacles facing schools.

Consider, for example, a situation where a lack of trust between school staff members and local Indigenous families is preventing the problem solving needed to remove an obstacle. 'Trust' is not a resource that can be packaged and sent out to schools. A system-wide program of professional learning about the importance of building trust may be of some use but, for a school unable to build trusting relationships with its community, a very different form of support is needed. The support needs to be completely focused on the individual school in crisis and the staff in the school need to have a sense of control when negotiating to obtain such support. This form of support would have little in common with the practice of enabling principals to select the support to which their school is entitled from a menu of standard professional learning packages.

Support from school systems

There are situations where schools are reliant on school systems to act on their behalf. Further there are cost efficiencies to be found in central initiatives when these are appropriate.

An example of a problem that requires support and leadership from central education authorities is the need for better methods to track highly mobile students. Another example is the need for subsidised housing in some locations.

Implications of findings for strengthening the delivery of support

1 Obstacles are multifaceted and have deep roots.

It is self-evident that strategies used to fix a problem should take account of the factors that have contributed to the problem. This is difficult when problems are complex and have been in place for a long time and there are practical limits to how many such problems can be addressed simultaneously.

Most problem solving in relation to Indigenous students will require the school to gain support from family members and community leaders and a sustained commitment from all concerned. To concentrate on one problem while deferring attention to others may weaken the prospect of the school making a breakthrough. Equally, to try to solve all the problems at once without establishing priorities may overwhelm staff members and limit their capacity to effect any change. Therefore, schools must be highly strategic in determining where to place their effort.

It is conceivable that many problems (or obstacles) will take years of effort before strategies are brought to fruition. During that time the school may have had one complete turnover of teaching staff members. Stability of staff and succession planning involving local Indigenous people are therefore essential if earlier investments are not to be wasted.

In this context, two questions need to be answered. To what extent is the school responsible for community development? and, To what extent are agencies outside the school responsible for supporting the school? Without answering these questions with reference to the reality of the local context it is difficult for staff members in a school to strategically concentrate their effort.

2 Whole of government approach is not yet evident.

The National Indigenous Reform Agreement has emphasised that a whole of government approach to Indigenous service delivery is required to achieve the stipulated outcomes; Commonwealth and state and territory government agencies are expected to work collaboratively. Among the schools in the study there was little evidence of such coordination with the exception of some schools located in communities supported by the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership.

Individual school principals have little capacity to fix this problem; they must look to system leaders and peak organisations to take this matter up.

3 Place of schooling in national Indigenous policy needs review.

Although the overarching plan for Indigenous reform presented in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement cites the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, in practice the initiatives occurring under the auspices of the agreement rarely connect with schools. As a result, the intentions of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan are unlikely to be realised without a more dynamic process of review and adjustment.

It has become clear that all schools are expected to educate Indigenous children. It is not yet clear, however, whether there will be a coordinated national effort to support schools endeavouring to meet this expectation.

4 Evidence base for policy and practice is weak.

The reasons for the lower achievement of Indigenous students, and the persistence of the achievement gap, have not been satisfactorily explained. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the Indigenous reform policies that are being applied to schools are 'evidence based' when so much remains anecdotal.

The researchers were aware of pressure to represent school strategies as effective. In the quest for the 'silver bullet' schools with successful strategies have been reported widely often with photographs of students attached. The good-news stories provide the 'balance' to stories about Indigenous suffering and dysfunction. Educators and members of the public accept the bona fides of claims sometimes made when a strategy was launched without further details after implementation.

The lack of rigour in evaluating the effectiveness of strategies to improve Indigenous achievement places staff members in schools with Indigenous students in a compromised position. They must make judgments to the best of their ability on the limited information available. In this regard, they have not received adequate support from the national school education superstructure.

The evaluations of NAPLAN results undertaken for the Reform Council of COAG are principally designed to determine whether jurisdictions have met their performance targets. At this level of aggregation, they have little explanatory power.

Given the intractability of the problems of Indigenous achievement and its national significance more rigorous investigation that captures what is occurring at the school level is needed. Further, the investigation should be designed in such a way that it can authoritatively explain why schools and systems have achieved the outcomes expected of them, or why they have failed to do so.

10

Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter contains the recommendations that arise from the findings outlined in chapter 9. The recommendations are confined to actions intended to improve the delivery of support to primary schools that enrol Indigenous students.

In this report there have been accounts of initiatives that have roots in national school education policy or, alternatively, Indigenous affairs policy. Support for Indigenous students is delivered through school systems while support for Indigenous families is delivered through Indigenous agencies. These two frameworks are resourced and held accountable through different mechanisms. Although they are nominally connected, they tend to function in parallel.

Because of this dichotomy, the recommendations have been organised into two groups. The first group of recommendations relates to reforms associated with Indigenous affairs policy. The remaining recommendations are related specifically to school education.

Recommendations intended to better connect schools to Indigenous reform

1 Synchronise timelines contained in the National Partnerships and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.

This study has found that there is insufficient coordination between initiatives designed to deliver services more effectively to Indigenous people and those intended to improve the educational achievement of Indigenous primary school students. This is despite general agreement that improvement in one is dependent on improvement in the other.

The main method for supporting school-level actions recommended in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan is the National Education Agreement. The timelines established for the National Partnerships under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement should be reviewed to take account of the resources allocated to primary schools through the National Partnerships under the National Education Agreement.

Plans should be sequenced to provide sufficient time for support to be delivered *on the basis intended* and to be integrated locally.

Changes to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan may also facilitate improved integration.

2   Establish local linkages so resources delivered under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement are more visible to primary schools.

Knowledge of developments in Indigenous affairs was found to be limited among those working in school education. This was the case for school leaders and school system officials.

Schools with Indigenous students should be able to obtain descriptions of programs in their local area delivered through the National Partnerships under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.

Principals and Indigenous staff members working in schools need contact information for coordinating officials and local agencies delivering services under the Indigenous National Partnerships. They should also be informed about the mechanisms through which these services are governed so they can influence strategies and suggest priorities based on their knowledge of families.

Discussion about whether primary schools can contribute to, or benefit from, activities that have their origins in the National Indigenous Reform Agreement should be held at a local level and supported by senior officers in participating agencies.

3   Establish a small number of whole of government service delivery trials in which primary schools are encouraged to participate.

One of the recurring themes in this study concerned the responsibility of schools to provide non-educational services to children. Yet many of the whole of government initiatives have allocated to schools a minor role even when the school is the largest government agency in a local area.

Collaboration between schools and other agencies has been difficult to achieve. Regardless, collaboration provides opportunities to improve services for children. Therefore, a small number of shared responsibility trials of place-based innovation, in which primary schools are encouraged to actively participate, should be funded by the Commonwealth and conducted in association with the appropriate service providers.

The selection of locations for these trials should be dependent on support from: the school's leaders, representatives of the Indigenous people the school serves, at least one other agency and the school's system. The locations selected should

represent a range of demographic and disadvantage profiles. In some of these trials, the school should function as the lead agency.

To be successful, the trials will need senior officers in participating agencies to accept responsibility for removing or lessening the impact of those obstacles that result from organisational policies and which local service providers cannot reasonably be expected to remove.

Agency-specific financial acquittals should not prescribe the strategies. Rather 'good enough' governance should be created to allow sufficient flexibility to match strategies to local needs.

Both the costs and benefits for primary schools should be described as well as the innovations that prove to be effective and those that fail.

Recommendations specific to support delivered through school systems

4   Conduct a survey to ascertain the support needs of all primary schools in regard to Indigenous students including schools where they are a small minority.

This study has found that a high proportion of Indigenous children are enrolled in small numbers in the majority of schools in Australia; however, much of the Indigenous policy focus is on schools where Indigenous students are concentrated.

In order to close the gap in literacy and numeracy it will be necessary to improve the achievement of the vast majority of Indigenous students including many whose Indigenous identity is not acknowledged in the schools they attend.

As a first step, it is recommended that a representative survey be conducted so principals and Indigenous leaders can outline the needs of the full range of Indigenous students currently enrolled in primary schools. They should also be asked about the extent to which staff members in schools are adequately prepared to close the gap for their students.

5   Introduce an Indigenous perspective into mainstream education policy and programs.

There are existing mainstream programs that could be improved by introducing an Indigenous perspective without undermining their broad goals.

An example of a mainstream policy that would benefit from an Indigenous perspective is the 'Empowering Local Schools' National Partnership.

This study found that many staff and community members in schools with high Indigenous enrolments saw benefits in extending local school decision making. However, they tended to see this as a strategy to strengthen continuity and local leadership and so compensate for poor staff retention. The implications for implementation in this context are unknown but issues and school support needs unlike those found in mainstream schools can reasonably be expected.

Another example of an existing national program that would benefit from an Indigenous perspective is the Survey of Staff in Schools. This national survey of teachers and school leaders could usefully analyse responses by the proportion of Indigenous enrolments in a school.

6 Expand the body of research related to the education of Indigenous children.

This study has found that the knowledge base or 'evidence' about the obstacles limiting the success of Indigenous students is weak.

Nearly all the existing evidence has been based on cross-sectional studies (or snapshots) that cannot reveal the persistence of obstacles or trajectories of student achievement. The problems of a widely dispersed population and high student mobility rates partly account for the dearth of longitudinal studies.

Another weakness has been the focus on *either* health and social factors *or* Indigenous students at school. It is rare for studies of the achievement of Indigenous students to examine comprehensively the availability of out-of-school support for school learning and the interconnections or disjunctions between achievement and support.

Given the pivotal importance of primary schooling in the Closing the Gap reforms, and the likelihood that progress will be slow and hard-won, it is recommended that a national longitudinal study is conducted to investigate Indigenous student achievement at school taking account of the adequacy of out-of-school support they receive.

ACRONYMS, NAMES AND TERMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics is responsible for the Census of Population and Housing and other large national data sets.
ACARA	The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority is responsible for NAPLAN, ICSEA and My School.
ASSPA	Acronym for former Commonwealth funded program titled 'Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness'.
BasicsCard	Substitute for cash, used to purchase essential items when welfare has been quarantined.
Closing the Gap	Name of COAG initiative to reduce Indigenous disadvantage.
COAG	Council of Australian Governments.
Coordinator General	Most senior Commonwealth officer responsible for the implementation of the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.
FaHCSIA	The Australian Government department responsible for Families, Housing, Community Servcies and Indigenous Affairs.
Focus schools	783 primary and combined schools nominated as part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan.
Gap	Difference in mean scaled scores or percentage point differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.
Growth centre	20 towns in the Northern Territory that will benefit from place-based service delivery associated with the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.
Homeland	Discrete Indigenous community with corporate administration and less than 50 usual residents. Also known as outstation.
ICC	Indigenous Coordination Centres provide local Indigenous people with access to Commonwealth officers from a range of agencies.
ICSEA	The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage was developed by ACARA and is applied to individual schools. My School 2.0 was the source for the ICSEA scores used in this study.
Indigenous education worker (IEW)	Term used to describe school staff members who support Indigenous students and liaise with their families. Job titles vary across school systems.
Indigenous	Term commonly used in place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
Jurisdiction	Used as a synonym for state or territory.
Mainstream	In education, 'mainstream' refers to schools that enrol all students, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.
MCEECDYA	Ministerial council relevant to school education. Previously MCEETYA. In 2011, changed to SCSEEC (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood).
NAPLAN	The National Assessment Program–Literacy and Numeracy commenced in 2008, tests all Australian children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and is annually administered by ACARA.
National Partnerships	Bilateral agreements between the Commonwealth and jurisdictions linking funding to outcomes in particular areas of government.
NIRA	The National Indigenous Reform Agreement provides the framework for Indigenous policy and resourcing.
Outstation	Discrete Indigenous community with corporate administration and less than 50 usual residents. Also known as homeland.
Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage	Five reports have been published with this title 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2011.
Reform Council	Agency responsible for reporting annually on the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.
RSD	Remote Service Delivery is one of the National Partnerships under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.
RSS Study	Responsive School Support Study.
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, an interdepartmental committee that reports to COAG.
SEAM	Acronym for program titled 'Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure'.
Smarter Schools	Name given to the National Partnerships under the National Education Agreement.
SSI	The Stronger Smarter Institute is reponsible for managing the Next Steps program in approximately 100 focus schools.
Town camp	Location of Indigenous housing with corporate administration in a town or urban environment.

APPENDIX A

Number of Indigenous students, Indigenous students as a percentage, ICSEA, attendance rate as a percentage, 17 participating schools and median Australia 2010
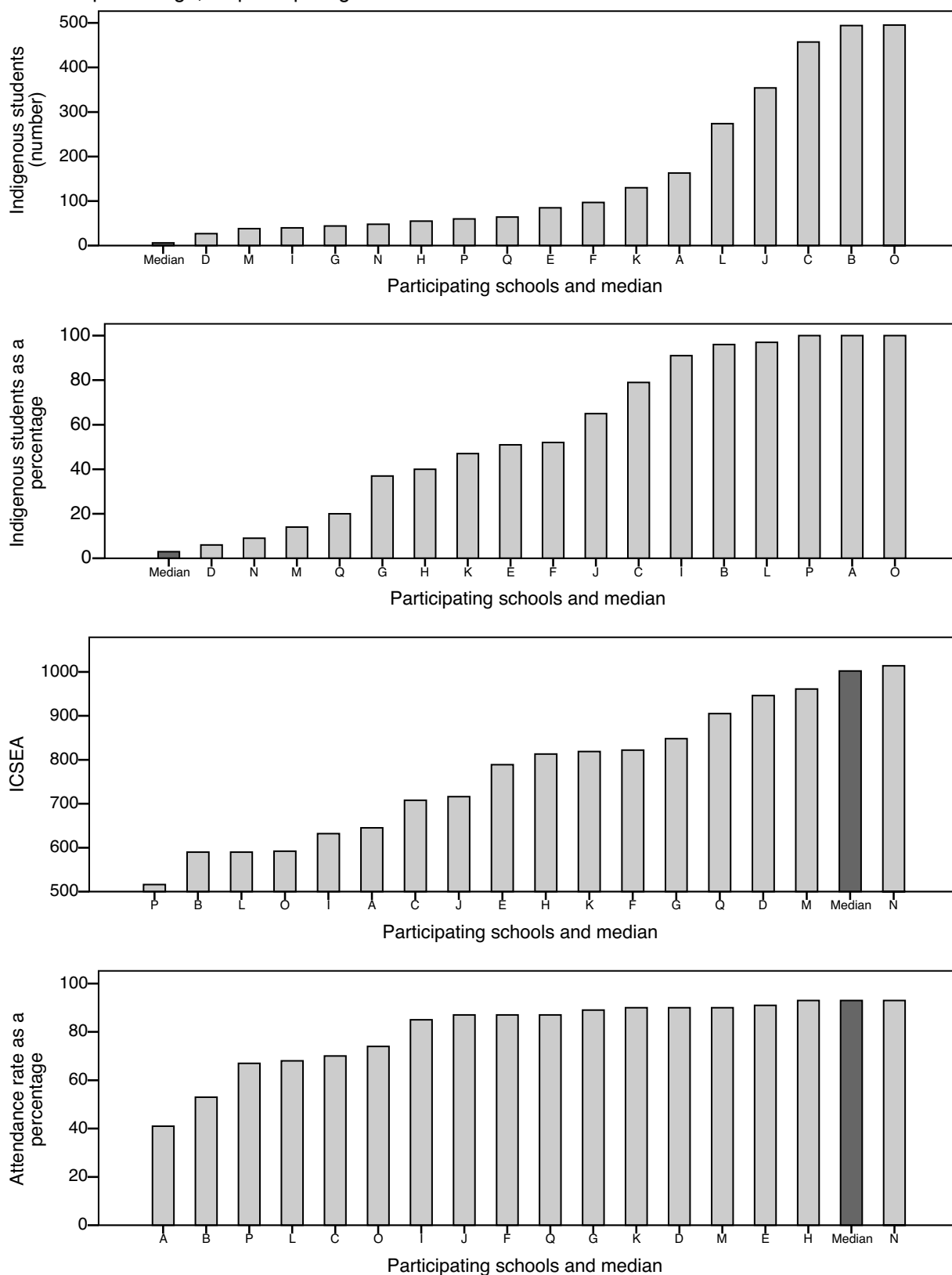
Source: My School website. Attendance rates were calculated for students enrolled in Years 1-10. Each school has been allocated a letter that serves as a unique identifier.

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