



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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MCEECDYA Secretariat
IEAP Consultation
Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
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Dear Members

Comment on the National Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014

On behalf of the Australian Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ACCG) I am pleased to provide comment on the draft Indigenous Education Action Plan (the Plan) for consideration.

ACCG members thank the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) for the opportunity to provide input into the Plan. The Children's Commissioners consider the issue of Indigenous education a critical area to address and of such national significance that they have prepared a joint response.

ACCG members who have contributed comment on the draft action plan are:

- Commissioner for Children and Young People, Western Australia, Michelle Scott (lead agency)
- Children and Young People Commissioner, Australian Capital Territory, Alasdair Roy
- Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People, New South Wales, Jan McClelland
- Acting Children's Commissioner, Northern Territories, Hilary Berry
- Commissioner for Children and Young and Child Guardian, Queensland, Elizabeth Fraser
- Guardian for Children and Young People, South Australia, Pam Simmons
- Commissioner for Children, Tasmania, Paul Mason
- Child Safety Commissioner, Victoria, Bernie Geary

The Commissioners, broadly, have legislated responsibility to advocate for all Australian citizens under the age of 18, and to promote and monitor their wellbeing. The ACCG has particular regard for the needs of Indigenous children and young people, and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

This letter focuses on a number of key areas of concern for ACCG and provides further advice to strengthen the finalisation of the Plan.

Caring for the future growing up today

In this submission, the term 'Indigenous' is used to refer to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders of Australia.

Summary of Recommendations

1. That the Plan be fully integrated with the wider COAG Closing the Gap agenda and initiatives that address Indigenous disadvantage.
2. That long-term investment is provided for culturally appropriate maternal health and early childhood services as well as support for parents and communities to engage and assist them in providing leadership to ensure the optimum development, health and education of their children and young people.
3. That new and innovative approaches are developed to strengthen connections between schools—as the hub of communities—and children's services, with a strong focus on integration and holistic responses to improve the overall health and wellbeing of Indigenous children.
4. That the importance of outreach services to reach chronically disengaged children and their families is fully reflected in the Plan, including further consideration of the role of dedicated Indigenous community liaison officers to maximise engagement and connections between schools, students, families and community services to improve educational outcomes.
5. That the Plan is a best practice, evidence based, well-resourced strategy that includes a robust performance management framework with clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.
6. That MCEECDYA considers further its role in monitoring the outcomes of the Plan and in holding jurisdictions accountable for progress.
7. That meaningful consultation and participation with Indigenous children and young people become a standard approach in future education planning.

Introduction

The education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and the continuing gap between outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a key area of concern for ACCG.

The results from the recent NAPLAN assessments show that the performance of Indigenous students, as a group, has not improved significantly over time. These results suggest that initiatives to enhance the education of Indigenous students, so far, have had little effect on overall results. Indigenous students remain at a substantial disadvantage, particularly those in regional and rural communities, and future opportunities will continue to be diminished unless changes are made to drive improvements.

The ACCG members welcome the release of the Plan and support in principle the targets and actions outlined in the priority domains. Specifically, the proposals to address the attendance and retention of students; ensure the active engagement of families and communities in supporting the education of Indigenous children; the flexibility for schools to tailor operations to the needs of local communities; and the implementation of culturally inclusive literacy and numeracy curriculum are all encouraging steps in raising the education attainment of Indigenous children.

Given the Plan builds on previous strategies and has received significant input already from education professionals, the ACCG's focus is on key areas of concern that require further articulation in the Plan.

Key Issues of Concern and Areas of Action

1. The Plan is fully integrated with the COAG agenda

In the past two years there have been a number of national commitments to Indigenous people—arguably the most significant of which has been the COAG Closing the Gap agenda. Under this agenda, Australian Governments have made substantial financial investments to support the objective of closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage in the areas of health, education and employment.

The ACCG recently advocated in their submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs ‘inquiry into the high levels of involvement of Indigenous juveniles and young adults in the justice system’ that it will be impossible to meet the ‘closing the gap’ targets around health, education and employment without also addressing the high level of Indigenous imprisonment which compounds individual and community disadvantage. The ACCG supported the Social Justice Commissioner’s call for specific justice targets to be integrated into the COAG Closing the Gap agenda.

ACCG reiterates the call to better connect targets and actions across a range of strategies and initiatives that address Indigenous disadvantage.

2. The importance of parenting and good health in being ready for school

A particular concern affecting Indigenous students, now and into the future, is a lack of investment in community child health screening, prevention and early intervention that is critical to ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and young people. It is also the key to addressing many of the disparities in health, education and employment and is essential in getting children school-ready.

The MCEECDYA is aware that a ‘good start’ to schooling is essential to securing future wellbeing and in providing opportunities later in life. The transition from home to school is a major change for children and can be a challenging and disruptive period. There is much evidence supporting this and in identifying the key factors that influence children’s readiness for school which includes maternal health, parenting style and the home environment.

An area of focus for the ACCG, and for COAG, has been to promote investment in early childhood services for Indigenous children and their families. The economic and social benefits of high quality early childhood education and care are now well documented, both in terms of the benefits to children and their families and in the longer term advantages to society as a whole.

The Plan should fully reflect how early childhood services can be boosted or better directed to support vulnerable families and enable children to achieve the best possible outcomes in their development through providing long-term investment in culturally appropriate maternal health and early childhood services.

3. Inter-sector collaboration

The lack of collaboration in government structures throughout Australia is a common issue faced by the ACCG. The experience in some jurisdictions is that government agencies have been unable to address complex social issues or achieve social policy reform where the involvement of several agencies is required.

To address this, there is a need to find new ways of doing business—rather than repeatedly calling for improved collaboration. The Plan should clearly articulate the merits of outreach strategies, and new and innovative approaches to strengthening connections between schools—as the hub of communities—and children’s services, with a strong focus on integration and holistic responses to improving the overall health and wellbeing of Indigenous children.

For instance, the development of the new Indigenous Children and Family Centres announced through the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development provides an opportunity for schools to consider the role they could play in the operation of these centres.

New approaches should not be limited to essential services either but encompass partnerships with industry, the non-government and private sectors. It should also consider building relationships with the Independent and Catholic Schools sectors in the development of strategies and initiatives that improve the engagement, retention and academic success of students. The Indigenous community must also be involved in this process and in any decision-making that affects them, taking into account diversity in language and geographic location.

4. Importance of outreach services

The importance of outreach services to reach chronically disengaged children and their families will be central to the successful implementation of the Plan. The development of the proposed outreach strategies at the local school-level is a welcome addition; however, specific regard must be given to the coordination and implementation of these strategies to ensure the effective connection and delivery of a range of community services.

Currently, across Australia there are a plethora of community liaison type officers that successfully coordinate services and ensure effective communication between Indigenous communities and service sectors including health, education, employment and the police.

ACCG would like the MCEECDYA and education providers to consider these roles in the development of outreach strategies, and in the new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Education Workforce Strategy to maximise engagement and connections between schools, students, families and communities to improve educational outcomes.

Australia also has a number of very successful Indigenous leaders who are making a difference to the lives of all Australians that also need to be recognised and supported as role models to encourage young Indigenous people to achieve at school. There are many great Indigenous Australians who have made enormous contributions in the field of policy making, education, sport, politics and the arts.

5. Support and selection of focus schools

The responsibility for implementation of the Plan fundamentally sits with schools. The ability of schools to effectively deliver the actions outlined will be seriously jeopardised by a lack of support including long-term funding, policy guidance, and explicit program examples.

The lack of previous success in this area has been confirmed and attributed, in the review of *Australian Directions*¹, to a myriad of schemes receiving inadequate program longevity and the lack of monitoring of outcomes to determine what works.

We reiterate the need for a best practice, evidence based, well-resourced strategy that includes a robust performance management framework with clear monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. A national approach will provide consistent assessment, reporting and the ability to make comparisons across jurisdictions as well as improve accountability.

¹ Review of *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008* for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs prepared by the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, University of South Australia, 2009.

ACCG also suggests that the final selection of 'focus schools' should represent metropolitan and regional, rural and remote areas of Australia including the Torres Strait region. This is to ensure that both larger schools and smaller remote schools are included to enable a better understanding of the issues faced in different schools in implementing the Plan before roll-out commences.

6. Accountability of schools

Better accountability of schools is widely considered an important element in improving student outcomes, and the recent introduction of the *My School* website goes some way toward addressing this.

High performing schools have long been associated with having greater autonomy and more responsibility, allowing schools increased flexibility to meet the needs of students and the ability to better manage operational and performance issues.

ACCG would like the MCEECDYA to consider further the role of the Council in monitoring the outcomes of the Plan and in holding jurisdictions accountable for progress.

7. Views and experiences of children and young people

Children and young people often have unique insights into issues, can offer creative solutions and their involvement can enrich decision-making processes and outcomes.

The active engagement of children and young people, as citizens and users of services, can ensure agencies and organisations are relevant to them. Their participation contributes to ensuring what is provided is what is needed, and children and young people are more likely to support the outcome if they have been involved in developing it.

One young Indigenous student from Western Australia recently outlined her views on what young people need to reach their full potential at school. The key ingredients described in her words, include:

- Unlimited access to teachers and resources
- The use of past exam papers
- Having an isolated study space away from the family home
- Support from family, friends and school staff
- Access to a computer for research, typing up notes and aiding better organisation
- Motivation!
- Better transition support, advice and guidance particularly in providing information on the expectations of students during the final two years of schooling
- Greater emphasis on doing well for the 'whole' year and not just focussing on exams.

An Indigenous student from South Australia recently contributed to a project to encourage children in care to think about university as a pathway. She said that: "Nobody from my immediate family had continued onto further study or considered getting a degree at university.

In the first few years of high school I would often wag school to escape from the boredom. At the same time I was managing a part-time job and still getting good grades. Getting good grades proved to me and the people around me what I could really achieve. I made sure that I always got my work in on time and if I didn't understand anything at all I'd just keep asking my teachers until I did.

The majority of my friends left about year 10 and then I became serious about my future. Support from my Aboriginal Education worker was great and kept me focused on success. I enjoyed art and history and I developed a good work ethic with support from my teachers who strongly encouraged me to go on to further study to start a career.

I thought I could be of great value in helping my community by going on to further study. My experience in university had given me insight in knowing that I can make the right decisions and choices. Now I feel satisfied that whatever career pathway I embark on will be the right one. There are many ways people can achieve and become the best they can if they believe in themselves."

ACCG call for the active participation of children and young people in the decision-making and planning for their education.

Conclusion

The ACCG has made a commitment to prioritise Indigenous education in each of their jurisdictions. The continued lack of improvement in closing the gap in educational outcomes is a key area of concern. This Plan represents an opportunity to focus on the translation of current research into effective action and introduce substantial change in the delivery of education programs.

ACCG will be monitoring closely the implementation and outcomes of this Plan and look forward to receiving a final copy, and refined State and Territory priorities.

ACCG members will be placing a copy of this letter on their respective websites. Making our work publicly available is one way of demonstrating our accountability to the children and young people we represent.

If you wish to discuss the content of this letter then please contact my office on (08) 6213 2218 or email at louise.atherton@ccyp.wa.gov.au

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of a strategy and action plan designed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Yours sincerely



MICHELLE SCOTT
Commissioner for Children and Young People WA
On behalf of ACCG

26 February 2010