Closing the gap
clearinghouse

School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students

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Summary

- Engagement or participation in education is a key factor affecting the life chances of all Australians. It is particularly important for Indigenous Australians who have lower levels of educational attainment than non-Indigenous Australians.

- Regular school attendance is important for achieving core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and achieving adequate levels of education is one of the key factors that is likely to reduce Indigenous disadvantage.

- A combination of home, school and individual factors are involved in students' absence from school, although the relative importance of the various causes is contested:
  - parents and students tend to stress school-related factors (for example, poor teaching and failure to engage students); educators tend to stress parental attitudes and the home environment (for example, poor parental attitudes to school).

- The available data on attendance and retention are limited, though there is evidence that Year 7/8 to Year 12 school retention rates for Indigenous students have improved over the last 10 years (from 35% in 1999 to 45% in 2009).

- The available data also show that the gap in school attendance and retention between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is large:
  - the proportion of students attending school is some 10 percentage points lower than non-Indigenous students and this gap increases as the level of schooling increases

  - the retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 in 2009 was 45% for Indigenous students compared with 77% for non-Indigenous students.

- This paper provides information on the different approaches that have been used to improve attendance and/or retention, including programs that:
  - directly address attendance and/or retention, for example through applying incentives or rewards for attendance or sanctions for non-attendance
  - indirectly address attendance and retention issues, for example through attempts to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes; improve teacher quality; develop culturally relevant curricular.

- A review of the literature that evaluated which programs work to increase attendance or retention found that there were very few high-quality evaluations that had been conducted in this area. The evidence about attendance and retention strategies that work for Indigenous students is, therefore, not strong.

- A common feature of successful educational programs, however, was that of a creative collaboration, which builds bridges between public agencies and the community, often by engaging parents or community-based organisations.

- Although it is important to continue small, contextualised investigations of participation and engagement issues, more large-scale research is needed.

- It is recommended that any new programs or strategies for improvement should build in monitoring and evaluation components.

Contents

Introduction

Engagement or participation in education is a key factor affecting the life chances of all Australians, and it is particularly important for Indigenous Australians who have an overall lower level of participation in education than non-Indigenous Australians. Higher levels of educational attainment improve employment opportunities, are associated with higher income and promote participation in all societal activities. Education includes preschool education, primary and high school education, tertiary education and vocational training, as well as education and training outside a formal institutional framework. This issues paper deals with school attendance and retention.

This paper draws upon key national and international literature pertaining to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It highlights the issues in analysing Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance and retention; the gap in school attendance and retention and the causes of this gap; and the success or otherwise of the various programs and initiatives designed to reduce the gap. Issues in the quality of the data and research are also discussed.

A key purpose of the paper is to evaluate the quality of available evidence regarding strategies for improving school attendance. This paper gives more weight to research that is higher up the evidence hierarchy. Evidence hierarchies reflect the relative authority of various types of research. The studies least likely to produce good evidence for policy and practice are single case studies, followed by descriptive studies that may provide helpful lists of quotations but do not offer

detailed analysis. Greater weight is given to conceptual studies that analyse data according to conceptual themes but these studies may be limited by a lack of diversity in the sample. Studies using conceptual frameworks, appropriate sampling and data analysis techniques, and that can be generalised to a wider context are considered to provide the best evidence for policy and practice development (Daly et al. 2007).

Methodology

An initial literature search was conducted using several key databases: Family and Society, Australian Education Index (AEI), Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), American Psychological Association database (PsychINFO), SocINDEX Database (SocINDEX). Key search terms included: school attendance, school retention, school participation, school readiness, educational participation, educational aspirations, absenteeism, truancy, attendance patterns, dropouts, and school holding power.

Relevant Australian and international literature published in the last 10 years was identified. This core literature was supplemented with literature identified through internet searches, and reference lists within the initial publications consulted. The identified literature included reports of large-scale data collections and interpretations thereof, as well as single case studies that were essentially qualitative in nature, and which may have adopted an action-research approach.

In addition, relevant personnel in state and territory education jurisdictions and independent organisations/ foundations were contacted to seek material that was not publicly available but which documented strategies, programs and practices that had been implemented, and evaluations of these.

Reasons for non-attendance and causes of the gap

A combination of home, school and individual factors are involved in students' decisions to miss school although the causes of non-attendance are contested. While parents and pupils tend to stress school-related factors as the main cause, staff in education jurisdictions and teachers tend to believe that parental attitudes and the home environment are more influential (Gray & Partington 2003; Malcolm et al. 2003).

Causes of non-attendance

National and international research indicates that the causes of non-attendance are constantly changing in accord with developments in modern life. Across countries, there is a consistency in the reasons that are generally presented. Reid (2008) has summarised these causes, as shown in Box 1.

Indigenous-specific reasons for non-attendance have been proposed (Biddle et al. 2004; Herbert et al. 1999; Schwab 2001)—the majority of which relate to a lack of recognition by schools of Indigenous culture and history; failure to fully engage parents, carers and the community; and ongoing disadvantage in many areas of the daily lives of Indigenous Australians.

Consequences of non-attendance

Children who regularly miss school are likely to experience significant disruption to their education. A student who misses more than one full day per week on average would lose two years of education over a 10-year period (Western Australia: Office of the Auditor General 2009). Many reports highlight the importance of regular school attendance in order to achieve core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and note that achieving adequate levels of education is one of the key contributors to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Two key Western Australian research studies by the Institute for Child Health Research (Zubrick et al. 2005; Zubrick et al. 2006) have shown that a student's level of school attendance has a major influence on their academic achievement. These studies concluded that a child's education is at risk if they frequently miss more than half a day of school a week (less than 90% attendance). Attendance above 90% is considered regular attendance.

The *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2002* (DEST 2003) and the report *Katu Kalpa* (Senate Reference Committee 2000) claim that the well-documented problem of poor school attendance is the most important feature accounting for the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Students with high rates of non-attendance are more likely to leave school early and are less likely to undertake alternative education and training pathways (Wheatley & Spillane 2001). Research has also shown a strong positive relationship between truancy and crime (Beresford & Omaji 1996) as well as between failure to complete high school and criminal activity (Chapman et al. 2002).

Box 1: Causes of non-attendance (from Reid, 2008)

1. **Parents and carers:**
   - parental-condoned absenteeism, parents failing to accept their legal responsibilities
   - poor parental/carer attitudes towards schools
   - 'them' and 'us' attitude between schools and parents

2. **Society:**
   - insufficiently valuing education
   - inadequate welfare support practices, especially in the early years of schooling

3. **Schools:**
   - poor teaching
   - inconsistent approach to absenteeism between and within schools

4. **Government:**
   - lenient application of law
   - unsuitable curriculum for some pupils
   - too few out-of-school/alternative curriculum places

5. **Students:**
   - bullying, peer pressure, 'cool' to skip school
   - lack of career aspirations
   - low self-esteem

6. **Education jurisdictions:**
   - inconsistent policies and practices of local schools and education welfare services
   - inconsistent referral policies between schools
   - differences between jurisdiction and schools' policy documents on attendance
   - poor inter-agency practices
   - confused role of social services in non-attendance cases

7. **Local economy:**
   - local unemployment, poverty, poor community facilities

8. **Cultural diversity:**
   - differences between boys' and girls' aspirations and achievements
   - rise of disaffected youth, gang culture, antisocial behaviour

9. **Research:**
   - too little evidence of good practice
   - little improvement in overall attendance figures despite a range of initiatives over the last 20 years

Measures of school attendance and retention

This section provides a brief summary of current official figures related to school attendance and retention. It must be noted that there are deficiencies in the official statistics—these are outlined below.

The difficulties in collecting, collating and comparing information on school attendance and retention at a national level have been well documented (Boulden 2006; Bourke et al. 2000; Gray & Partington 2003). Reasons for this difficulty, especially as it relates to attendance information, revolve around the different ways in which student attendance/absenteeism is recorded in the different states and territories and across the different education jurisdictions. More detailed information on the broader concepts of participation and engagement is even harder to locate.

There are sufficient data to indicate a gap between non-Indigenous and Indigenous school attendance rates, although the data are insufficient to demonstrate if the gap has increased or decreased over time. In addition, apart from statistics that indicate, on average, the gaps in attendance and retention are greater in remote locations, the data are insufficient to show if there are pockets where gaps are less pronounced or non-existent.

Attendance data

MCEECDYA National Report on Schooling in Australia

The *National Report on Schooling in Australia* is published by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA). The report presents information about the number of actual full-time equivalent 'student days' attended as a percentage of the total number of 'possible student days' attended. This percentage is the attendance rate of enrolled students.

In this report for 2008 (MCEETYA 2008), school attendance by Indigenous students was consistently lower than non-Indigenous students, with a difference of up to 10 percentage points in the proportion of days attended in the past year across government schools in all states and territories. This gap tended to increase in the later years of schooling. However, in the Northern Territory (NT) and Western Australia (WA), the difference was well over 10 percentage points across all years, rising to over 20 percentage points by Year 10. This pattern of lower attendance by Indigenous students was also present in Catholic schools (See Table 1).

Table 1: School attendance [a] of enrolled students by Indigenous status in government and Catholic schools, NSW, Qld, WA and the NT, 2008

	NSW	Qld	WA	NT
	Per cent			
Year 1				
Government schools				
Indigenous	89	85	78	70
Non-Indigenous	94	93	93	92
Catholic schools				
Indigenous	89	87	73	67
Non-Indigenous	94	93	92	91
Year 10				
Government schools				
Indigenous	81	70	64	69
Non-Indigenous	89	89	87	89
Catholic schools				
Indigenous	85	84	76	69
Non-Indigenous	92	91	93	88

(a) The number of actual full-time equivalent 'student days' attended as a percentage of the total number of 'possible student days' attended over the period.

Source: MCEETYA 2008. *National Report on Schooling in Australia.*

In 2007 and 2008, aggregated student attendance data was reported in the National Report on Schooling for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Years 1 to 10, by school sector, by state/territory. Future similar reporting will enable monitoring of attendance over time.

Data issues

The *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, published annually by the MCEECDYA, includes information on student attendance for Years 1–10 that is derived from data that the state and territory education jurisdictions collect.

The data are reported:

- by school sector, by state and territory
- separately for each of the agreed year levels
- for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students
- by gender.

The figures on student attendance and participation need to be interpreted with care. Although the student attendance measure agreed by MCEECDYA is the number of actual full-time equivalent student days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible student days attended in the first semester (as defined by each state and territory's school calendar), it has not yet been possible to obtain this consistent measure.

For example, in the government sector in 2008, most jurisdictions measured student attendance over the

entire first semester in the school calendar year; the remaining jurisdictions measured attendance over the term that included the month of May and the Catholic and independent school sectors collected data over a 20-day period, in the month of May.

The student attendance data collection is in a transitional phase until all sectors have the capacity to be able to report using the agreed standard. Each jurisdiction and sector provides explanatory notes about the method used to collect and report on student attendance data.

Table 2 shows 2006 Census data on school attendance rates for students aged 15–17 years by remoteness area. The Census data on Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance show a similar result as the data from the MCEETYA National report on schooling. The gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance were over 10% and some more than 20%. The Census data also show a general decline in school attendance from metropolitan areas (major cities) to remote areas. This decline is particularly marked among Indigenous persons.

Table 2: Secondary school attendance [(a)] by remoteness area by age, 2006

Age in years	Major cities	Inner regional	Outer regional	Remote	Very remote
			Per cent		
Indigenous					
15	77	77	76	67	53
16	60	58	60	49	34
17	44	38	37	29	16
Non-Indigenous					
15	90	89	89	88	82
16	82	79	77	75	61
17	68	62	58	52	39

(a) Number of persons attending school as a percentage of all persons (excluding school attendance not stated).

Source: Derived from *Population characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Australia, 2006* (ABS 2010).

ABS data

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) measured school attendance differently. The ABS used data from the 2006 Census of Population and Housing to calculate the proportion of school-aged children who are enrolled in a school, either full time or part time.

The ABS publishes *Schools, Australia.* The statistics in these annual publications are obtained from the National Schools Statistics Collection (NSSC), which is the product of a collaborative arrangement between Australian education authorities and the ABS, designed to bring together consistent and comparable statistics on primary and secondary education in Australia.

According to Rossiter and Duncan (2006), the NSSC is currently the most authoritative source of data on student involvement in education. These authors contend that participation rates are important in understanding school attendance within the wider context of all education and labour market opportunities for young Australians. They maintain that the majority of education policy issues can be substantially addressed by the informed use of participation rates.

Data issues

The ABS provides a number of warnings with respect to its schools data collections. The accuracy of ABS data collections is influenced by other factors, including changes in scope and coverage over time. The methodologies employed in compiling the government sector aggregates, on which the statistics are based, vary between the different state and territory Departments of Education. They range from accessing central administrative records to direct collection of data from establishments.

The ABS warns that comparability of statistics between states and territories and between government and non-government schools in any one state or territory can be affected by a number of factors: differences in the organisation of grades/year levels (for example, there is no Australia-wide standard method of allocating students and classes to a certain year of school education); policy on student intake and advancement; flows from secondary to vocational education; and the recruitment and employment of teachers.

The relatively small populations in some states and territories can promote apparently large movements in rates and ratios, which may be based on relatively small movements in absolute numbers.

Retention data

Another measure of the degree to which students engage or participate in the school education system is the apparent retention rate. This is a measure of student progression through school. Rates are described as 'apparent' because they estimate the proportion of students who continue studying to a certain year at school, based on the respective cohort group in a base year. For example, for the 2009 apparent retention rate for Year 10 to Year 12, the cohort group in the base year would be the number of Year 10 students in 2007, and the designated year level of education would be the number of Year 12 students in 2009.

Table 3: Apparent rate of retention from Year 7/8 to Year 12, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

	1999	2004	2009
Indigenous	35	40	45
Non-Indigenous	73	77	77

Source: ABS 2009.

Although Indigenous student retention rates are increasing, they are still lower than those of non-Indigenous students. In 2009, the apparent retention rate for full-time Indigenous students from their first year of secondary school through to Year 12 was 32 percentage points lower (compared with a 38 percentage point difference in 1999) for non-Indigenous students. Nevertheless, Table 3 shows that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous rates has narrowed slightly. From 1999, the apparent retention rate to Year 12 increased by 10 percentage points for Indigenous students and 4 percentage points for non-Indigenous students (ABS 2009). There is considerable variation across the states and territories.

Data issues

The ABS warns that the method of calculation of apparent retention rates does not take into account a range of factors, such as students repeating a year of education, migration and other net changes to the school population. At lower levels of disaggregation, additional factors affecting the data, such as enrolment policies (which contribute to different age/grade structures between states and territories), inter-sector transfer and interstate movements of students, are also not taken into account (ABS 2009).

In small jurisdictions, relatively small changes in student numbers can create apparently large movements in retention rates. In addition, 'the rates in the smaller jurisdictions may be noticeably affected by changes in such factors as the proportion of ungraded and/or mature-aged students from year to year. The inclusion or exclusion of part-time students can also have a significant effect on apparent retention rates, especially in SA, Tas and the NT which have relatively large proportions of part-time students' (ABS 2009:32).

What has been tried?

In this section, we present examples of initiatives or programs that aim to increase the attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students in schooling. We have attempted to provide information about the source of the program, the type of program (that is, the key components) and the extent to which the program can be said to be achieving its aims.

The approach used

Source of initiative or program

One way of categorising programs is based on a distinction between government-based programs and those initiated by independent organisations. Government-based programs are designed and delivered by national, state and territory education departments or jurisdictions, or schools within a jurisdiction. Broadly speaking, approaches within education jurisdictions are two-fold. The first includes state-wide, departmentally designed and funded programs. These programs are often developed in response to broader policy considerations around social inclusion. The second approach includes programs developed and implemented at the school level, particularly in schools in rural and remote areas. While the majority of government programs focus on direct program delivery to students, there is also attention to system-level policy, professional development, and cultural change.

Independent programs operate under the auspices of philanthropic foundations or Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities. Government funding also supports some independent programs.

Type of initiative or program

Categorisation of programs into 'types' is difficult because the various components of programs can be targeted individually or they can be combined in different ways. Some programs specify improvements in attendance and/or retention rates as outcomes, whereas others specify, for instance, improvements in literacy or numeracy, using a focus on attendance as a strategy to achieve the outcome. In such instances, the attendance strategy may be spelled out in detail or an improvement in attendance rates may simply be listed as something that must be achieved if literacy is to improve.

According to Patterson (2006), research and practice indicate a number of key components for increasing engagement in learning and therefore school retention over the longer term. These components include those that are specifically school focused, those that are community focused, and those that are interagency focused.

School-focused components attempt to make learning environments more responsive to the needs of young people by: ensuring students' voices are heard;

modifying schooling practices; developing models for community access to school resources; increasing the availability and quality of career advice; providing quality alternative learning opportunities for young people at risk of disengaging or who have already disengaged from education and training; and ensuring young people receive the necessary individual and specialist support to remain engaged in learning. School-based and school-designed programs target at-risk students through presentation of relevant and engaging curricular responses to 'the many complexities of these students' lives and the reality that the role of and identity as a "student" is only one of many and often the least meaningful to them. Some are highly case specific, others are cohort or community specific' (Nicholls 2006). Two key features of these programs include their embeddedness in an environment of high expectations, and the belief by teachers that all students can achieve.

Community-focused components involve: increasing local community involvement in innovations that support school retention outcomes at a local level; connecting young people with their communities more effectively by facilitating youth development and youth participation; and promoting and recognising community-based learning.

Interagency approaches might include improving cross-agency linkages and the sharing of good practice across agencies; providing support to families (with children in the early years) through the development of a whole-of-government early childhood strategy; and the implementation of early childhood services. However, according to Reid (2008) there is very little research evidence into the efficacy of the multi-agency approach working. Moreover, because each agency (for example, education, health, social services) has its own priorities, there are inevitable tensions created by models of multi-agency functioning that may not be conducive to best policy development.

Achievement of aims

Indicators of the success or otherwise of school attendance and retention programs include: increased daily attendance rates; increased progression rates through to Year 12; improved achievement, such as in national testing (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)); jurisdiction certificates of education and school-based tests; successful transitions from school to further education or employment; and the extent of demand for programs.

The following section provides examples of programs using both type and source headings. These headings have been used so that key features can be highlighted.

Scholarships, financial support and support structures

In the past 10 years, hundreds of Indigenous students have been educated in big city schools under scholarship programs. Independent school networks and private philanthropic groups mostly run these programs with some funding support from Australian, state and territory governments.

Also included in this category of programs and initiatives is the provision of financial support (for example ABSTUDY) and the setting up of structures to assist Indigenous students to remain in education.

The following brief description of initiatives and programs in this category are provided as examples.

The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF)

The AIEF is an independent fund that coordinates scholarships for Indigenous students from remote locations. AIEF models its work on the Indigenous education boarding school program at St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill (a suburb on the lower north shore of Sydney, NSW). AIEF currently has partnerships in place for the AIEF Scholarship Program with 10 schools in NSW and Qld, with an approximately even mix of boys and girls. The foundation believes that best practice in this field is for its partner schools to have a close and direct relationship with the Indigenous families and communities they work with.

The foundation is supported by $20 million in Australian Government funding.

For more information see:
<http://www.aief.com.au/>

Evaluation

No formal evaluations of the scholarship program have been conducted. The 2009 Annual Report (AIEF 2009) notes that in the last five years at AIEF partner schools, there have been 149 Indigenous students enrolled at the schools, of whom 127 (85%) have either completed Year 12 or are still at the schools (in addition to 13 other Year 12 completions before 2005) and 22 Indigenous students left before completing Year 12. However, these figures are not for AIEF scholarships but for the collective historical rates for the overall Indigenous education programs at AIEF partner schools over the last five years.

Cape York Institute Higher Expectations Program

The Higher Expectations Program (HEP) supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from Cape York, Palm Island and Yarrabah communities to finish high school and go on to university. HEP (secondary) funds a small number of students to attend one of nine boarding schools in Queensland. Funding covers tuition and boarding fees. Funding is also available to support the development of individual leadership planning and leadership workshops, mentoring, orientation activities, extra curriculum and study tours. In addition, the program provides cultural awareness sessions with all staff in direct contact with Indigenous students.

Although only a fraction of Cape York students are able to participate in the program, the institute expects that students' completion of secondary school and enrolment in tertiary studies will greatly impact Cape York school retention statistics and provide Cape York communities with a pool of educated future leaders.

For more information see:
<http://www.cyi.org.au/hep.aspx>

Evaluation

There is no available evaluation material.

The Yalari Foundation

Yalari runs the Rosemary Bishop Indigenous Education Scholarship Program. The scholarship helps Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote or regional areas attend a private boarding school for their secondary education. Students are selected on the basis of a variety of qualitative factors, including a good attitude to education, enthusiasm, consistent achievement in all school activities, and a commitment to complete Year 12. Yalari funds the financial difference between the ABSTUDY designated allowance and the scheduled boarding fees, uniforms, textbooks, and laptop hire. Parents are required to pay $600 per year, as well as the cost of student travel to and from school, school excursions and student's personal requirements, including sporting equipment.

For more information about the Yalari Foundation see: <http://www.yalari.org/>

Evaluation

There is no available evaluation material.

The Catherine Freeman Foundation

The Catherine Freeman Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation established in 2007 with the aim of 'creating pathways to a brighter future for Indigenous children'. The foundation works in partnership with community organisations, businesses, schools and other philanthropists in facilitating educational opportunities for young Indigenous girls. The current focus of activity is the remote Indigenous community of Palm Island in far north Queensland.

A number of programs have been implemented, including a targeted truancy program. The Non-Truancy Project presents mountain bikes to students who show the biggest changes in attendance, academic achievement, attitude to peers, behaviour in school and manners.

Other programs include an after-school activity program, a scholarships program (in partnership with the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation), and an educational and aspirations tours program.

For more information see:
<http://www.catherinefreemanfoundation.com/>

Evaluation

According to information on the project's website, over the past 2 years, the program has resulted in a 20% increase in attendance rates at local schools. There is no other available evaluation material.

Future Footprints Program

This is an initiative of the Association of Independent Schools, Western Australia. It is an additional support structure for Indigenous students from regional and remote areas of WA attending residential schools in Perth. The goal of Future Footprints is to support students' engagement in education and to enhance their transition to and from school, to further education and employment or training.

Specific goals of the program are to: increase retention of Indigenous students from Year 10 to Year 12; increase the level of successful Year 12 completions; ensure Indigenous children are ready and inspired to learn in the school environment; and strengthen the capacity of parents and the community to work with schools to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

The program currently employs two liaison officers, who provide regular supportive contact with students in areas such as: homework and study; access to scholarships and other financial support; vocational/career information; transitional issues; recreational activities; living/family issues; and peer relationships.

For more information see:
<http://www.ais.wa.edu.au/future-footprints/>

Evaluation

There is no available evaluation material.

Sanctions

One controversial approach initiated as a trial by the Australian Government at the commencement of the 2009 school year attaches school attendance conditions to income support payments to parents. The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) aims to ensure that children of compulsory school age are enrolled in and attending school regularly.

The SEAM initiative was a response to the finding that an estimated 20,000 Australian children of compulsory school age are not enrolled in school, and many others do not attend regularly (FaHCSIA 2009). SEAM links school enrolment and attendance to Centrelink income support. If parents do not enrol their school-aged children, or are assessed by Centrelink as making inadequate efforts to get their children to school, payments can be suspended. The two components of the measure—enrolment and attendance—are implemented as separate processes.

The SEAM policy is based, in part, on research that has established links between low educational outcomes and a number of undesirable outcomes, such as increased likelihood of welfare dependency, unemployment and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Although not Indigenous-specific, the measure is being trialled, monitored and evaluated in predominantly Indigenous communities. SEAM commenced on a trial basis in six Northern Territory communities during the 2008–09 financial year. It was extended to a number of sites in Queensland from the beginning of Term 4, 2009.

Critics of income management approaches to student enrolment and attendance (for example Campbell & Wright, 2005) claim that they place on children an increasing burden of responsibility for families' receipt of income support and consequently their financial wellbeing, despite a longer term potential to improve children's skills to decrease welfare dependency in the future. Campbell and Wright claim that programs linking welfare payments to school attendance are based on assumptions of questionable validity, including the fact that they implicitly define the problem as one of parental or student negligence.

Other literature (Cortis et al. 2008) notes key differences between welfare reforms such as SEAM and those in other countries. According to Cortis et al. reforms in the United States of America prioritise coercive behavioural change and caseload reduction whereas the United Kingdom approach includes behavioural incentives and an emphasis on promoting outcomes for children through investment in child care and early years' services. Cortis et al. also claim that Australia does not have the layered financial and service support available in the French and Norwegian systems. Halvorsen and Jensen (2004) argue that peer support programs such as those in Norway help welfare recipients to map their needs, raise self-esteem and develop networks (through for example, attending classes on child development or social outings) before plans are put into action.

For more information see: <http://www.facs.gov.au/sa/families/progserv/welfarereform/Pages/ImprovingSchoolEnrolmentAttendance.aspx>

Evaluation

There are no publicly available evaluations of the SEAM initiative, although a qualitative evaluation of the SEAM trials was conducted by Urbis in 2008-09. Evaluation of the SEAM trials (stage two) is proceeding.

'Hooks', incentives and rewards

In contrast to initiatives such as SEAM that apply sanctions for recalcitrant behaviour, some programs apply incentives and rewards to increase school attendance rates. Sporting programs, school nutrition programs, and 'no school, no pool' policies are examples of using 'hooks' to attract non-attending students to school.

Indigenous students have been particularly targeted through programs with a strong sporting element. For instance, programs provided by the Clontarf Foundation have targeted boys through involvement in Australian Rules Football. Both boys and girls are targeted through the Academy of Sport, Health and Education in Shepparton, which is a partnership between the University of Melbourne and the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club. The Australian Football League (AFL) Kickstart program, supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, was initiated in 1997 for Indigenous youth across remote communities in Northern Australia.

For more information see:
<http://www.aflvic.com.au/index.php?id=116>

Most of the sports programs now come under the auspices of the Sporting Chance Program, which is an Australian Government initiative originally announced in the 2006–07 Budget. In 2010, a total of 22 providers were funded to deliver 59 projects (54 school-based sports academies for approximately 5,000 students, and five education engagement projects for approximately 5,000 students). Sporting Chance has two elements: school-based sports academies that provide sports-focused learning and development opportunities to

secondary school Indigenous students and education engagement strategies that provide a range of sport, recreation and education activities for primary and secondary school Indigenous students.

For more information see: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/Schooling/Programs/SportingChance/Pages/default.aspx>

Because of the multiplicity of these sporting programs, we describe only one here—that delivered through the Clontarf Foundation Academies.

The Clontarf Foundation

The Clontarf Foundation developed one of the earliest and best known of the sporting programs. Speaking in the *National Times* (17 January 2010) the prominent Aboriginal leader Mick Dodson referred to the Clontarf Foundation program as an example of what is working in Indigenous education, one of the inspiring chinks of light that are 'up against some appalling examples of forgotten kids, forgotten places' (Dodson 2010).

The Clontarf Foundation programs are delivered through a network of academies, each of which operates in partnership with—but independent of—a school or college. The programs aim to improve health, education and life skills outcomes for young men. They encourage students to stay on at school for the completion of Year 12 and require regular school attendance as a condition of continuing enrolment. Football is used to attract Indigenous young males to school and then keep them there. As well as delivering a football program, academy staff (many of whom are ex-AFL players) act as mentors and trainers who address many of the negatives that have an impact on participants' lives.

By the end of 2009, the foundation operated 23 academies located on 27 school campuses. Eight new academies opened in February 2010. Approximately 2,200 boys are enrolled.

For more information see:
<http://www.clontarffootball.com/>

Evaluation

According to a 2004 WA Department of Education and Training (DET) evaluation of the program (unpublished), it is the staff commitment to the participants and the strength of relationships that underpins the foundation's success. Other specific success factors mentioned in an evaluation of the program (Purdie & Stone 2005) include: the development of an appropriate curriculum, including a significant vocational education and training (VET) component; an attitude by members of staff that all students can succeed; the provision of appropriate structures and support; the strong sense of belonging

experienced by students; clear vision and goal setting by members of staff; the provision of assistance to students to set and achieve their own goals; the provision of adequate and appropriate resources and opportunities; the promotion of healthy lifestyles; the employment of committed staff members as mentors; and the use of data to inform policy and practice. Both the DET (2004) unpublished evaluation and the Purdie and Stone (2005) evaluations, however, were case studies and not based on attendance and retention data.

The 2009 Annual Report (Clontarf Foundation 2009) provided attendance and retention evaluation information across all academies as being:

- attendance—77%
- 110 students completed Year 12
- 76% of Year 12 students achieved a fully recognised graduation
- 75% of graduates in full-time employment within 1 year of graduation.

No longitudinal data were presented in the 2009 Annual Report.

Cultural relevance

One approach to engaging Indigenous students has been to use events or programs that have a focus on building cultural identity and pride in that identity, as well as a focus on promoting education, training and vocational pathways. The Key Indicators 2009 report (SCRGSP 2009) presented the Community Festivals for Education Engagement program as an example of what works in increasing attendance for Indigenous children at school in this way.

For more information see: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/Schooling/Programs/Pages/CommunityFestivals.aspx>

The Community Festivals program (an Australian Government initiative) targets events that encourage students, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to attend school and lead healthy lifestyles. In 2008, five organisations were responsible for 15 festivals around Australia, including those held in remote locations. Students participate in concerts and cultural activities that endorse education, health, culture and potential vocational pathways.

For more information see: Music Outback Foundation; Broome Aboriginal Media Association; Wakakirri Limited Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW; and Vibe Australia.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) assisted with a survey of teachers following the Vibe

Australia community events in 2008. Vibe Alive is a two-day festival for students of all cultures and backgrounds, incorporating music, sport, dance and art in a high-energy, youth-friendly setting. The festival is designed to encourage school attendance, retention and healthy lifestyles for all young Australians, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Vibe Alive also aims to facilitate the connection of students with suitable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander role models, and to provide information and resources promoting education, training and vocational pathways.

Evaluation

The major aim of the Vibe Alive teacher survey was to gauge teachers' perceptions of the impact on and awareness by students of the messages associated with Vibe Alive. On the whole, teachers judged the events to be highly successful and a valuable source of encouragement and inspirations for students, teachers and community members. However, there was insufficient data to assess whether student attendance actually increased following the events and, if so, whether any effects were sustained.

System-based initiatives

In this section we highlight two types of systemic approaches to addressing the attendance and retention of Indigenous students—strategic plans and specific programs that include a focus on attendance and retention. The latter may draw on a strategic plan but they may not address all specified targets, actions, and outcomes.

Strategic plans

Most education jurisdictions have articulated policies in relation to the attendance and retention of all students. In addition, jurisdictions have developed specific strategic plans for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. These plans are important for a number of reasons—they have been developed in conjunction with Indigenous educators and in consultations with communities that have occurred over many years; they generally specify Indigenous parent and community involvement in the implementation, continual development and monitoring of the strategies; and they involve interagency collaborations—all characteristics that have been identified as important in improving attendance and retention rates.

We provide one example of an attendance, participation and retention strategic plan (Table 4) drawn from the relevant section of the SA Department of Education and Children's Services (SA DECS) Aboriginal Strategy 2005–2010, which details the targets, priority actions and outcomes pertaining to its Aboriginal students.

For more information see: <http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/docs/documents/1/DecsAboriginalStrategy2-1.pdf>

Evaluation

The DECS Aboriginal Strategy 2005–2010 notes that each education district reports annually on its progress in achieving the strategy targets. They are based upon evaluation and review processes, which include the collection and analysis of relevant data. However, no information is provided about the outcomes of such processes.

Specific programs

The Follow the Dream: Partnerships for Success Program (FTD: PFS) is a program designed to help aspirant Aboriginal secondary students achieve a successful tertiary destination. The program operates in 24 sites across WA. Eleven of these sites work in partnership with the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation.

For more information see: <http://www.det.wa.edu.au/aboriginaleducation/detcms/navigation/teaching-and-learning/attendance-and-retention/follow-the-dream/partnerships-for-success-outreach-program/?oid=Category-id-7348879>

The Department of Education and Training designed the FTD: PFS program to increase the opportunities for success of secondary Aboriginal students in WA schools. The key intended outcome of the program is an increase in the number of Aboriginal students staying at school and going on to university.

Students are selected on their potential for success and provided with support through mentoring, family support, extracurricular programs and study assistance. Where possible, industry assistance is obtained to fund the additional resources needed for the program.

FTD: PFS promotes partnerships by combining community, cross-agency, and industry collaboration. Learning Centres are central to students' experiences of FTD: PFS. Most Learning Centres are on the premises of the host school, but a few operate off-campus, at the request of the local Steering Committee. Each student agrees to attend the Learning Centre after school on at least two afternoons each week; coordinators and parents also make commitments to their roles in supporting the student.

Table 4: South Australian DECS Aboriginal Strategy 2005–2010—Key focus area 2: Participation, retention and attendance

Targets	Priority actions	Outcomes
Reduce suspensions and exclusions of Aboriginal children and students to address rates that are currently significantly higher than for non-Indigenous students	Establish working party with District representatives to inform action and accountability at school, district and state levels	More detailed analysis of current data relating to suspension and exclusion of Aboriginal students, including input from students, communities and sites
	Develop Aboriginal Suspensions Action Plan	Reduce suspensions and exclusions
Increase the participation of Aboriginal children in Children's Services programs: • Family Day Care • Child Care • Outside School Hours Care • Early Learning programs including Learning Together and Playgroups	Work with the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and Aboriginal Resource and Management Support Unit (ARMSU) to develop and implement a joint state/Commonwealth strategy to improve participation and retention rates for Aboriginal services	Improved capacity of early years programs to deliver effective support for Aboriginal children and their families
	Develop a strategy to assist Aboriginal families to become registered family day care providers	
	Increase the number of Aboriginal workers in service delivery positions in DECS-operated or sponsored services	
Increase attendance of Aboriginal children in preschool to state average	Increase field support for attendance, participation and to assist transition to school for children most at risk of early disengagement	Improve the capacity of early years' programs to deliver effective support for young Aboriginal children and their families
Increase the numbers of Aboriginal students in senior secondary programs by 2010 from 7% to 16% in Year 12 and from 17% to 21% in Year 11	Involve Aboriginal parent and community involvement in the implementation, continual development and monitoring of strategies for Aboriginal learners in senior secondary education	
Increase the retention rate of young Aboriginal people to Year 12 or its equivalent from 36.4% in 2004 to the state equivalent of 70% by 2010	Liaise with and provide support to senior secondary staff in schools to develop pathways in conjunction with Learning Band Coordinators and Aboriginal Education Coordinators in Districts	Educational needs of Aboriginal students in the senior years are met at the site level
		Case management models in place to support Aboriginal students
Increase the number of Year 12 Aboriginal students completing South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) or the equivalent to the state level of 70% by 2010	Provide information sessions for Aboriginal families and communities regarding subject selection and senior secondary course patterns	Students and families have necessary information to make informed choices
	Further develop the secondary curriculum to better serve the needs of remote Aboriginal communities	A strategy for secondary Aboriginal students in remote areas
	Further develop the access to and quality of distance education	Students in rural and remote communities can access distance education via improved technology
	Exemplify schools where Aboriginal learners are participating successfully and/or completing secondary education	Opportunities for educators and community members to access Aboriginal Education Professional Development Programs

Table 4 *(continued)*: South Australian DECS Aboriginal Strategy 2005–2010—Key focus area 2: Participation, retention and attendance

Targets	Priority actions	Outcomes
Increase participation of Aboriginal secondary students in Structured Workplace Learning (SWL) from 42% in 2004 to 50% by 2010	Collaboration between Aboriginal Education and Employment Services (AEES), Department of Further Education, Employment and Science and Technology (DFEEST) Futures Connect team, Futures Connect Transition Brokers in regions and TAFE Institutes	Improved opportunities in SWL for Aboriginal students in DECS schools
Increase participation of Aboriginal young people in school-based apprenticeships from 4% in 2004 to 10% by 2006 and to 40% by 2010	Liaise with Business SA to reach employers Build networks with Aboriginal service providers and employers to provide culturally friendly work placements	The development of partnerships between DECS, relevant stakeholders in regional and remote communities, and registered training organisations. Community consultation and active participation in the development of regional workplace initiatives. Improved career education for Aboriginal secondary students, with improved resources and increased participation in structured work placement and accredited VET in schools programs
Improve completion rates of Aboriginal students by increasing access to a wide range of VET courses and learning plans leading to job opportunities	Develop structures to support transition from secondary to higher education, training or employment Strengthen integration of Aboriginal students into DECS VET program by end of 2005 Develop partnerships between AEES and relevant stakeholders in regional and remote communities and registered training organisations	Increased retention of Aboriginal students

Source: DECS 2005.

The program provides students with:

- tutors to assist with homework, study habits, and goal setting
- an individual education plan
- a mentor to review their school progress and general wellbeing
- regular updates on academic performance
- educational excursions to develop confidence and skills
- a safe and supported environment to study after school, equipped with computers and educational resources
- career guidance
- regular contact with parents and teachers regarding academic progress.

Evaluation

Although there is a formal evaluation of the program in progress, results are not yet publicly available. There is some informal information available about program outcomes on websites (for example, Dare to Lead) but that information is too general to be confident about the exact nature of the outcomes of the program:

> 'Our goal was by 2008 we would have 100 WA Aboriginal students with TERs high enough for university. We will achieve that. In 2007 three students had TERs over 99, one had 99.83.
>
> We didn't realise that once we put a program together saying to kids, ''You're an achiever, we expect you to do well'', they achieve. Suddenly we saw other things happening, with Follow the Dream students getting into other programs. These kids are winners and they expect to keep winning.'

For more information see: <http://www.daretolead. edu.au/servlet/Web?s=169694&p=STORY_NIEC_ Maximing_The_Potential_August08>

School-based initiatives

There are many initiatives developed and implemented at the school level. Similar to systemic initiatives, most schools with a significant Indigenous student enrolment have operational plans. In addition, schools develop specific programs that may draw on the operational plan but which may not address all of its specified targets, actions and outcomes.

School operational plans

The 2010 Annual Operational Plan for Milingimbi Community Education Centre in the Northern Territory is presented in Table 5 as an example of a school operational plan.

Evaluation

In general, the evaluation information about school operational plans is limited. Some schools publish their annual reports online but the information contained in these reports is limited.

Specific programs

The Wiltja Program

This program has operated within Woodville High School, South Australia for almost 20 years, and is responsible for providing a city-based secondary option for Indigenous students from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands and the western region around Yalata and Oak Valley. The overall aim of the program is to provide a context in which students can achieve academic success. Strategies to achieve this include a focus on: literacy and numeracy improvement; attendance and retention; vocational education; student wellbeing; and teacher composition, expertise and participation in professional learning.

Although the Wiltja program is based within Woodville High School, it operates with autonomy and is responsive to the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Educational Committee.

There is a Bridging Program after students have been selected by their home community and home school to attend Wiltja. This program focuses on literacy and numeracy as well as independent living skills (such as travelling around a large metropolitan city). Most students are English as a second language (ESL) speakers.

The Wiltja program works in close collaboration with the Wiltja Residential program. At the Wiltja residence, students participate in a program that supports them in their education, recreation and cultural transition. They participate in an after-school tutorial program that is designed to support the school-based program. There are youth workers at the Wiltja residence in Northgate who help maintain a teaching and learning focus.

For more information see: <http://www.daretolead. edu.au/servlet/Web?s=169694&p=STORY_Wiltja_ Program_Woodville_HS>

Evaluation

Evaluation information about the program is limited although the information presented on the website shows the percentage increase in retention from 2006 to 2008:

- 2006—three students in Year 10 from 11 who commenced Year 8 in 2004 (33%)
- 2007—five students in Year 10 from eight who commenced Year 8 in 2005 (62%)
- 2008—14 students in Year 10 from 14 who commenced Year 8 in 2006 (100%).

Other

What Works: The Work Program and Dare to Lead are two national initiatives that have the broad objective of improving the educational outcomes of Indigenous Australian students. Both programs have been pivotal in raising the awareness of educators of actions that need to be taken in order to close the gap in educational outcomes.

What Works: The Work Program

This is a set of print and online materials designed to assist schools to plan and take action to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian students.

The program presents a number of case studies or descriptions of supposedly successful practice at particular points in time in particular schools. In this respect, it is interesting to note the observation of the authors of *What works? Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students* that the results of programs highlighted by What Works provide 'a gold mine for policy makers and practitioners alike' (McRae et al. 2000:1). However, a major gap in the What Works overview of projects is that very little evidence is presented about either specific short-term outcomes or the effect of programs in the long term.

For instance, in the case study of one school, only three statements are made in relation to attendance:

Table 5: Annual Operational Plan for Milingimbi Community Education Centre 2010

Key result area	Student wellbeing and engagement—Attendance	
Improvement goal(s)	To improve student attendance To identify and increase enrolments of preschool students Improve and maintain participation rates in NAPLAN	
Improvement target(s)	To increase overall attendance to 75%: increase secondary retention to Year 12 by 60% increase attendance % of students in 60–80% bracket Baseline data: Early Childhood; Upper Primary; Middle Years; Senior Secondary	
Strategies	To fully implement the school's policy and procedures for improving attendance: • support teachers in development of appropriate classroom management plans • Advertise position and employ Senior Cultural Advisor • Assist camps to develop attendance plans to get their children to school • Provide regular visual graphs of camp attendance to attendance officers for distribution in their camps • Use individual graphs to work with 'problem cases' through teacher and school attendance team • Facilitate home visits • To access the attendance team in DET to create resources and training for attendance officers • Follow through with reporting procedures and engage with external agencies to assist attendance • Revisit the Remote Learning Partnership Agreement each term with the Dha-Djirripul group • Implement school's NAPLAN attendance strategies • Newsletters, photographs and posters • Family meetings • Attendance team & Cultural Advisor—target good news stories • Cultural programs are conducted within the school • BBQs and parent meetings • Investigate alternative curriculum for students with poor attendance • Involve the School Council in attendance decisions & strategies • Employ attendance officers for each camp area (5) • Participation in sporting activities and excursions will be linked to 90–100% attendance of students • Fortnightly classes in camp areas—Family days • Families as First Teachers—reading & educational toys to be used in camps by the school team, to encourage an interest in education by the parents of 0–4 year olds	**Budget:** **National Partnership Remote Whole School Reform (RWSR)— Student attendance and engagement** • Attendance Officers 2009–10 $25,750 2010–11 $38,625 **RWSR principals leading whole school reform** • AO4 Senior Cultural Advisor 2009–10 $8,654 2010–11 $34,614 • Professional learning and admin set-up for AO4 2009–10 $8,000 2010–11 $4,000 **Equity and base** • Incentives for attendance $10,000 • Meetings & BBQs $4,000
Professional learning requirements	Learning together—cultural understandings Connected Classrooms Program (CCP)—Attendance continued from 2009	
Strategy leader(s)	Senior Cultural Advisor Manager-in-Partnership Home Liaison Officer Attendance Officers Principal	
Monitoring	Student Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS) attendance NAPLAN attendance Number of students enrolled in Stage one and two (Senior Secondary)	

Source: http://www.det.nt.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/12723/MilingimbiSchool.pdf

'As residential students and as teenagers, our residential program supports consistent attendance and learning how to learn within this kind of environment.

Students who speak English as a second language and who have consistent attendance backgrounds in schooling are placed in mainstream ESL programs.

Students who speak English as a second language and who do not have consistent attendance backgrounds in schooling are placed in an intensive ESL program.'

Another case study reported that 'A compact was signed by participating students, their families and the project steering committee. This compact committed each of the signatories to carry out agreed requirements, including regular attendance at school.' However, there is no information about whether the agreed requirements were upheld.

For more information see: <http://www.whatworks. edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=homePage>

Evaluation

What Works: The Work Program provides information about a range of initiatives but there are no credible evaluations of these initiatives. In addition, initiatives are not necessarily transferable to other schools; there is possible dependence on particular staff that may move; and the funding for the initiative may have been short term.

The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) commissioned a formal evaluation of the program in 2007 but there is no publicly available report of the outcome of this evaluation.

Dare to Lead

Dare to Lead (DTL) is a Commonwealth-funded national project with a focus on improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students. The project began in 2000 when representatives of the four peak principal's associations met at a national forum and agreed that Indigenous education would be their highest priority. Each member school is connected to a cluster of others in the same region. The clusters of schools (Action Areas) are led by school principals who are supported by the project to play an integral role in identifying the professional development needs of their colleagues.

There are currently 120 Action Areas across Australia, with 30–50 schools in each. State coordinators support the work of the Action Area in their state/territory.

For more information see: <http://www.daretolead.edu.au/>

Evaluation

The DTL project reports on two specific Indigenous student outcomes—Year 5 literacy and Year 12 completion. Schools are also asked to report on activity in a range of other areas in their case study reports of their projects.

The DTL site notes that all data are aggregated on a national basis and that no school, system or sector is identified or identifiable in reports based on analysis of that data (Dare to Lead 2010). Although this is presented as a strength of the reporting process, it prohibits investigation of which initiatives have worked best in particular contexts.

The DTL website reports that there was an average improvement of Year 12 completions of 8.59% across all DTL schools (aggregated results for 2005–06) but it's not possible to interpret this as an outcome of the DTL program.

DEST commissioned a formal evaluation of the DTL program in 2007 but there is no publicly available report of the outcome of this evaluation.

What works?

The nature of evidence

A key question for researchers and policy makers seeking to address the Indigenous disadvantage in education (indeed, in any area of Indigenous disadvantage, including health, housing, and employment) is: what constitutes reliable evidence to evaluate programs and initiatives so that good policy and actions can be formulated to effect change?

Evidence hierarchies reflect the relative authority of various types of research. Although there is no single, universally accepted hierarchy of evidence, there is broad agreement on the relative strength of the principal types of research, particularly in medical research that evaluates the efficacy of treatments.

One limitation of an evidence hierarchy in the social sciences is that some methodologies are better suited to answering different types of questions. In particular, while a randomised trial may be an effective way of testing the impact of a program, randomisation is often not possible (especially in education) or is on too small a scale to enable generalisation of results that can reliably inform policy development or change.

Leigh (2009) noted that despite limitations, an evidence hierarchy can assist in classifying a large body of empirical

evidence. He presents a possible evidence hierarchy for Australian policy makers in the social policy field, including education, health, income support, and crime (see Box 4).

Robust evidence-based research with a prominent Indigenous component is particularly contentious. The term 'research' has a poor reputation among many Indigenous people and communities, not least because much of it has been conducted from an etic (outsider) perspective rather than from an emic (insider) perspective. Regardless of who has conducted the research and what methodologies have been used, the appropriateness of policy recommendations drawn from research must adequately reflect the experiences and worldviews of Indigenous peoples and communities (Martin 2003).

> **Box 4: A possible evidence hierarchy for Australian policy makers (Leigh, 2009)**
>
> 1. Systematic reviews (meta-analyses) of multiple randomised trials
> 2. High-quality randomised trials
> 3. Systematic reviews (meta-analyses) of natural experiments and before–after studies
> 4. Natural experiments (quasi-experiments) using techniques such as differences-in-differences, regression discontinuity, matching, or multiple regression
> 5. Before–after (pre–post) studies
> 6. Expert opinion and theoretical conjecture.
>
> All else equal, studies should also be preferred if they are published in high-quality journals, if they use Australian data, if they are published more recently, and if they are more similar to the policy under consideration.

Types of research on attendance and retention

There are different types of research concerned with student school attendance and/or retention. One major research type is concerned directly with attendance and/or retention. It includes:

- identification of the current rates of attendance and retention across states and territories—this research depends mostly on education jurisdiction annual data collections and ABS census and specific population survey data
- identification of the main drivers of trends in attendance and retention across states and territories

- evaluation of the quality of programs that have been implemented to promote improved attendance and retention.

Other research indirectly addresses attendance and retention issues. This type of research includes that which seeks to evaluate attempts to close the gap through, for example, initiatives to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes and other educational outcomes (for example science); improve teacher quality; develop culturally relevant curricula; and so forth. Also, research might evaluate programs that use 'hooks' to engage young Indigenous people in school (for example sport, the arts) or programs for specific groups (boys/girls, students in remote locations). This 'indirect' research usually identifies increased attendance and retention rates as one measure of success.

In addition, there is literature that cannot be classified as research but which is nevertheless concerned with student attendance or retention. Some of this literature describes 'programs' designed to promote attendance or retention. However, often program descriptions are limited in the sense that it would be difficult to replicate them elsewhere, and there is no clear evidence about the impact of the program other than claims, unsupported by evidence, that attendance or retention, or both, have improved.

Other literature purports to summarise what is known about causes of non-attendance, truancy, absenteeism, failure to remain at school or, conversely, in the positive, what is known about how to increase attendance and retention and decrease truancy and absenteeism. Much of this literature refers back to other reports that, in themselves, are summaries of ideas and not based in evidence.

The literature presents serious challenges when trying to find credible evidence about the exact state of Indigenous participation and engagement in schooling and what works in terms of trying to close the gap. There is a substantial body of literature that has helped to build our understanding of the issues. This literature is both national and international, Indigenous specific and non-Indigenous specific. Some of it purports to be evidence based in the sense that it is derived from official attendance and retention figures, or it provides results of evaluations of strategies and programs that link improvements in attendance and retention with implementation of particular initiatives.

Much of the literature, however, is clearly not based on what would normally be taken as credible evidence. This literature is based on opinion, rhetoric, or polemic and is sometimes clearly biased.

One problem with much of the evaluation literature is that many programs aimed at improved attendance and retention do not specify targets or key outcomes. Aims and objectives are generally of the type 'to improve levels ... ' That is, they are too vague to be able to determine whether change has occurred. Key outcomes are not specific and cannot be used to judge the effectiveness of a program in terms of improvement. Typical of lack of outcome specificity is that described in one SA program: 'The … Program has in recent years been successful in helping a high number of Indigenous students complete their SACE (30 in the past 10 years)'. More credible evidence would have shown how many students in the program completed the SACE compared with the numbers of students who completed the SACE as a result of other initiatives. Population growth over a 10-year period may have accounted for increased completions.

A further example of what constitutes evidence is found in discrepant reports about the effectiveness of the WA Aboriginal Literacy Strategy. One report provided the following information:

> 'The Aboriginal Literacy Strategy in the four remote districts of Kimberley, the Pilbara, the Mid-West and Goldfields introduces a daily two-hour session of English language and literacy for every student who attends school. In 2007, it operated in 49 remote schools for the first time covering all four remote districts. *Improved attendance was observed.*' (italics added) (Hughes & Hughes 2009:9).

However, an evaluation of the Aboriginal Literacy Strategy (Purdie et al. 2009) found that, based on figures provided by the WA Department of Education, student attendance did not change significantly between 2006 and 2008 (6.3% and 5% in 2006 and 2008, respectively, above 90% attendance was reported).

Other credible literature relating to examinations that go beyond seemingly straightforward evaluation or presentations of official figures is even more difficult to find. For instance, Indigenous parental engagement in and satisfaction with schools has been linked to student attendance and retention (Bourke et al. 2000). So too, has Indigenous student self-concept (Craven & Parente 2003). Sport has been found to be linked to the formation of self-concept for Indigenous students, which in turn has been found to be linked to their attendance and retention at school (Kickett-Tucker 1999). But research that has examined in detail the interaction effects of a combination of such variables on Indigenous student engagement and participation is practically non-existent. One reason for this is that such research requires a relatively large sample size and this is difficult to achieve in the Australian context. It also is viewed by many as requiring an approach that has engendered suspicion amongst many Indigenous communities about the nature of research that positions its people as 'objects' rather than as participants in the process.

What does the evidence show?

In our exploration of the attendance and retention literature, one fact was overwhelmingly evident—there is very little high-quality evaluation literature. Much is claimed about what works, but supporting evidence is thin on the ground. This means it is difficult to be clear about what does work or what is merely someone's 'good idea'.

The consensus of both national and international research is clearly that non-attendance and non-completion of school causes harm (Reid 2008; Zubrick et al. 2006) and it is important to implement policy and practice that will work to minimise this harm. Most harm is to the non-attenders themselves, but there can also be an adverse effect on teachers who become demoralised, attending students who receive less attention when non-attendees re-enter the classroom and require extra help, jurisdiction personnel who face the increased costs and time related to dealing with the consequences of non-attendance, and families and communities who are stigmatised when their children do not attend school.

Despite the lack of robust evidence as proposed in Leigh's (2009) evidence hierarchy, there appears to be consensus that the reasons for non-attendance and non-completion of school are complex and contextual; that there is no simple answer; and that real change occurs over time. Some programs and strategies that have been implemented recently take account of the full range of factors implicated in the participation and engagement of Indigenous students in school. Other programs focus on just one or a small number of the factors.

Although reasons for non-attendance are complex and contextual, the national and international literature commonly cites four contributing factors: the individual, the family, the community, and the school. These factors are applicable to the non-attendance of all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and address the underlying causes or antecedents of student absenteeism. For instance, students are unlikely to be able to fully participate and engage in education if they face a complex set of circumstances that result in disadvantage across a range of life experiences.

There has been criticism that much of the early literature that addressed issues of Indigenous educational failure focussed on individual and family factors and was located within deficit discourses of Indigenous students, their families, and Indigenous cultures (Burke et al. 2000; Herbert et al. 1999). In the last decade, there has been

greater recognition that school-based factors are of primary importance in relation to the non-attendance of Indigenous students.

> 'While mobility within the Indigenous community and student transience are widely recognised in the literature as significant 'out of school' factors influencing absenteeism, the most frequently identified 'school-based' factors relate to: inadequacies in and inappropriateness of, the schooling process itself; inadequate pre and in-service training of teachers and their unpreparedness for teaching in a cross-cultural, bilingual situation; poor teacher/student relationships; teacher attitudes, expectations and a tendency to rely on deficit explanations of low levels of academic achievement and a significant lack of Indigenous parental/community involvement in the schooling process' (Burke et al. 2000:3).

A positive school environment plays a significant part in determining the extent to which students participate and engage in schooling (Osterman 2000). Schools are communities and it is important that students perceive themselves as members of this learning environment. Researchers have emphasised the link between students' perceptions of school and their motivation, achievement, and behaviour. Students who feel connected with school are more motivated to attend and engage. This enables learning and academic accomplishment to occur. Burke et al. (2000) suggest that Indigenous students will be more empowered in relation to their learning and feel more connected to their school context if they are involved in decision making within the school.

A particular school-based issue of importance, and one highlighted by Boulden (2006), is teacher quality. Good teacher/student relationships are fundamental to a positive learning experience and teachers must be aware of and respect the cultural heritage of their Indigenous students. Curriculum must also reflect a valuing of Indigenous history and the communicative styles that are a part of Indigenous cultures. Nevertheless, the best curriculum taught by the most capable and dedicated teachers will have no effect on students who are not regularly in classrooms to participate.

'Failure to establish meaning in the curriculum or to build satisfactory teaching relationships reduces the possibility of successful learning, which is the most important intrinsic motive for staying on at school' (Lamb et al. 2004:9).

The recommendations of Boulden (2006), and those of Bourke et al. (2000) about how to improve attendance are the most extensive that we could find in the literature. Although they are not based on strong empirical evidence, one of their major premises is important—there is no one strategy or factor that can be considered as being the key to higher attendance rates. Rather, attendance is a complex issue requiring particular inputs from the individual, the family, the community, and the school.

Attendance and retention strategies

Bourke, Rigby & Burden (2000)

- Provide professional development training for staff, raising their awareness of and sensitivity to the history, culture, contemporary lifestyle and enduring characteristics of their Indigenous students.
- Recognise the fact that Standard Australian English is not the mother tongue of most Indigenous students.
- Respect Aboriginal languages, and recognise the validity of, and respect for, Aboriginal English and Kriol (Creole), which many Indigenous students bring with them into the classroom.
- Recognise the benefits of an explicit teaching/learning approach and early intervention strategies to ensure the adequate acquisition of literacy skills in the early years of schooling.
- Recognise Indigenous patterns of discourse, minimising misunderstandings between teacher and student in the classroom.
- Recognise the importance of focusing on the learning needs of the individual student, and the use of teaching strategies which match these needs, particularly for the hearing impaired.
- Recognise the need to value the students' cultural background and the skills and knowledge which they bring with them into the classroom.
- Use computers which allow students to feel in control of their learning situation by working at their own pace and level.
- Use a whole-school approach based on a commitment to providing successful learning experiences and outcomes for all students.
- Involve Indigenous teaching personnel, parents and community members in all aspects of the schooling process from initial planning, to implementation and delivery of programs, to develop Indigenous ownership of educational programs.
- Provide a safe, secure school environment, characterised by good teacher/student relationships, which is free from racism and welcoming to Indigenous students (particularly in early childhood years), and to parents and community members.
- Empower students by allowing them to be involved in making real decisions with respect to the learning process through planning of the learning context in collaboration with teaching staff.

- Engage in collaborative planning and choice of appropriate teaching material which helps to ensure that learning activities are relevant to students' experiences and to their current needs and interests, providing meaning and purpose to what they are learning.

Boulden (2006)

- Take a whole-school approach that involves all students, all teachers, parents, and ancillary staff, and enlists the support of local business and community services.
- Develop and use appropriate service-level agreements.
- Implement appropriate early intervention schemes.
- Implement straightforward, plain language, behaviour management policies that are applied consistently to address bullying, harassment and peer pressures.
- Computerise roll-marking several times in the course of a day (each lesson in secondary school) so that patterns and possible causes of absenteeism can be quickly identified.
- Have an intensive focus on literacy and numeracy problems so that poor attendees can make progress.
- Organise extra-curricular activities that appeal to and engage students at risk of absenteeism.
- Provide learning options for suspended students, to facilitate reintegration post-suspension.
- Improving teachers' skills via professional development.
- Encourage diversity and flexibility in pedagogy and curriculum.
- Use data capture and management which distinguishes between authorised and unauthorised absences and provides categories of authorised and unauthorised absence to enable patterns and issues to be identified.
- Target pupils whose attendance falls below a certain level.
- Provide effective teaching and learning environments characterised by:
  – respectful ways of relating to students
  – smaller class and group sizes
  – subject matter that is connected to personal interests and aspirations.

It is important that both government and non-government agencies take account of such strategies, as well as the general student, school, family and community causes of non-attendance outlined in Box 1, and build them into specific plans for action. Good action plans also will clearly identify the outcomes that will demonstrate achievement of targets. The SA DECS Aboriginal Strategy outlined in Table 4 is an example of a detailed strategic plan that addresses the full range of factors associated with successful engagement with school. To complete the cycle, such plans must be part of an iterative evaluation process to assess progress towards targets and to adjust actions when targets are not being met.

It is unfortunate that the literature cannot provide clearer guidance about what works in promoting better attendance and retention for Indigenous Australian students. This is not to say that some initiatives that are currently in place are not working. In the absence of rigorous evaluation literature, the strategies that Bourke et al. (2000) and Boulden (2006) suggested provide a sound starting point. They are in accord with what educational research does tell us about highly effective practices for continuous improvement in learning for all students. Continuous improvement in student performance depends on the implementation of highly effective teaching practices, supported and driven by aligned school and system policies and practices (Barber & Mourshed 2007; Hattie 2003). The principal antecedents of student progress that must be promoted by teachers, schools, and systems are high expectations, deep knowledge, targeted teaching, and continuous monitoring (Masters 2009).

Implications for policy and research

Policy implications

Behrendt and McCausland (2008) advocate an evidence-based approach to increasing the numbers of Indigenous children attending and remaining at school. They encourage the use of strategies that have been shown to work, rather than resourcing strategies where there is no evidence to show that they work. This is crucial advice. However, the evidence about attendance and retention strategies that work for Indigenous students is not strong.

A common feature of successful educational programs is that of a creative collaboration, which 'intentionally builds bridges between public agencies and the community, often by engaging parents or community-based organisations' (Behrendt & McCausland 2008:10). Thus, interagency partnerships that go beyond the educational arena should be encouraged.

For instance, a focus on all aspects of early childhood is essential for the future engagement of Indigenous children in education (Boulden, 2006). This means that the full set of developmental needs of children in

early childhood must be met in order to encourage the greatest chance for their educational growth. Thus, health and housing factors are of primary importance. So, too, is parental education.

There is ample anecdotal and qualitative comment that things are moving in positive directions. Such positive views should be exploited and promoted among teachers, their students, students' families and communities, and education policy makers to maintain the impetus that has resulted in focused efforts to address attendance and retention gaps. Most importantly, education practitioners and policy makers need to be well versed in the importance of cultural factors in schooling. They must continue to develop policy and programs that take account of Indigenous cultures and history, and they must develop expanded understandings of what it means to participate and engage in education.

The issue of non-enrolment must also be recognised as just as important an issue as non-attendance. FaHCSIA (2009) estimates that 20,000 children of compulsory school age are not enrolled in school. Many of these children are thought to be Indigenous students and efforts to identify these children and work with their families and communities to support them to engage with schooling must be earnest and ongoing.

Improving the evidence base

Although it is important to continue small, contextualised investigations of participation and engagement issues, more large-scale research is called for. Unless this occurs, advancement will be limited because sound policy and generalised practice cannot be extrapolated from findings that are based on small samples drawn from diverse communities. Then again, there are good reasons for the lack of large-scale research. It is expensive and time consuming, there is resistance born of a historically hostile and imposed culture, and there are quality limitations in evaluation methods used. Government funding and support is required in order for the necessary evaluation research to be undertaken.

Any new programs or strategies for improvement should build in monitoring and evaluation components. This includes guidelines for researchers to evaluate the merit of the initiatives. Evaluations should use mixed methods and combine qualitative and quantitative approaches for assessment. This research should also be longitudinal so that it is possible to track progress and confirm that programs are sustaining positive outcomes. Programs

should be tested for their transferability to different contexts. Research conducted within this framework will not only benefit Indigenous students but all students across the nation.

In addition to conducting new research within this framework, data collection procedures that are currently in place must be improved. The MCEECDYA annual *National Report on Schooling in Australia* does not disaggregate attendance data by remoteness area and does not list any source of such disaggregated data in the statistical annex. This is a weakness in data collection as the Council of Australian Governments' National Indigenous Reform Agreement has identified geo-locational school attendance rates as one of the performance indicators to assess progress towards the Closing the Gap target to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AEES	Aboriginal Education and Employment Services
AFL	Australian Football League
AIEF	Australian Indigenous Education Foundation
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AO4	Northern Territory government pay scale level
BBQs	Barbeques
Census	Census of Population and Housing
DECS	Department of Education and Children's Services (South Australian)
DEST	Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training
DET	Department of Education and Training
DTL	Dare to Lead
ESL	English as a second language
FaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
FTD: PFS	Follow the Dream: Partnerships for Success Program
HEP	Higher Expectations Program
MCEECDYA	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
	The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) was established on 1 July 2009 following agreement of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to a realignment of the roles and responsibilities of two previously existing councils—the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the Ministerial Council for Vocational and Technical Education (MCVTE).
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy
NSSC	National Schools Statistics Collection
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
Qld	Queensland
RWSR	Remote Whole School Reform
SA	South Australia
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SCRGSP	Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision
SEAM	The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure
SWL	Structured Workplace and Learning
Tas	Tasmania
TER	Tertiary Entrance Rank
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WA	Western Australia

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Terminology

Indigenous: The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to Australia's first people. This term refers to 'Aboriginal Australians' and 'Torres Strait Islander peoples'.

Participation and engagement: There are a number of terms that are relevant to this issues paper, including attendance (non-attendance), absenteeism, truancy, and retention. These terms are all indicators of student participation and engagement in schooling. In the education literature, the concepts of 'participation' and 'engagement' have multiple dimensions that go beyond the physical presence of a student at school (as measured, for example, by enrolments, attendance and the completion of academic objectives). These terms may also encompass participation in non-academic school-related activities, amount of time spent on homework, rate of homework completion, and affective components, such as psychological attachment or connectedness, motivation to learn, and self-esteem.

Initiatives and programs: These terms are used interchangeably depending on the source use of the term. In general, both terms apply to a planned sequence and combination of activities designed to achieve specified goals, although 'program' implies a more systematic approach than 'initiative'.

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