



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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Mr Stephen Boyd
Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
PO Box 6021
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CANBERRA ACT 2600

Submitted by email to IndigenousAffairs.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Mr Boyd

Inquiry into educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

As Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia I am pleased to provide the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (the Committee) with a submission in response to the above Inquiry (the Inquiry).

Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act) it is my role to advocate for the best interests of all children and young people under the age of 18 years in Western Australia and to promote and monitor their wellbeing.

In doing so I must have regard for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and give priority to Aboriginal¹ children and young people, and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to an education and that this education should encourage children to respect their culture and other cultures.² The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognises the right of Indigenous people to all levels and forms of education of the State, without discrimination.³

I encourage the Committee to have regard for the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I believe that both of these conventions should underpin the Committee's deliberations.

It is within the context of my role as an independent, statutory office and the functions outlined above that I provide the following comments.

¹ For the purposes of this submission, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Australia's diverse language groups and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent. The use of the term 'Aboriginal' in this way is not intended to imply equivalence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, though similarities do exist.

² United Nations 1989, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Articles 28 and 29.

³ United Nations 2007, *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Article 14.

Caring for the future growing up today

Aboriginal children and young people and education

Education is a key influence on a child's life⁴. Early engagement with school assists a child to develop skills to succeed academically and to maintain social relationships. Schooling, from the early years to adolescence, has a strong influence on a child's future pathway into employment in adulthood and facilitates participation in social, cultural and economic life.⁵ Education has significant implications for wellbeing and is increasingly recognised as a key social determinant of health.⁶

Although there have been improvements in some educational outcomes, Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia. On average, Aboriginal students have lower levels of school attendance and lower academic achievement rates than non-Aboriginal students.⁷ The current gaps in these educational outcomes limit the post-school options of Aboriginal young people, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.⁸

Despite the significant educational disadvantage that Aboriginal children and young people continue to experience, the strengths of individuals and communities to make a positive difference in children and young people's educational engagement and achievement must be harnessed. It is pleasing to note the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) Closing the Gap revised target seeks to '*Close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018)*', recognising the importance of addressing school attendance among Aboriginal students.⁹

In 2014 and 2015 my office undertook consultations with Aboriginal children and young people across Western Australia (WA), published in the report '*Listen To Us: Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*'.¹⁰ Education emerged as a major theme in the consultations. Many children said they enjoy being at school and view their school as one of the positive things about their community.

"What matters to me? Family and school. Coming to school. School's important because you can learn." 13 year-old girl (Pilbara)

"SCHOOL! It's the only place which will make anything and everything happen." 15 year-old Noongar / Ballardong girl, Perth

⁴ Osbourne K et al 2013, *What works? A review of actions addressing the social and economic determinants of Indigenous health*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper no. 7, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.162

⁶ The Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2013, *Australia's domestic response to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health report "Closing the gap within a generation"*, Commonwealth Government.

⁷ Hancock KJ et al 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra*, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 249-51.

⁸ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network and Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 2.

⁹ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 11.

¹⁰ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

Through the consultations Aboriginal children and young people expressed a clear understanding of the connection between a good education and a good quality of life.

"Education [gives you a] better chance in life. Because without it, you won't get a job." 10 year-old Nyikina boy, Kimberley

"Education is my main thing I worry about in my life because it determines your future." 14 year-old Noongar / Bardi girl (Wheatbelt)

The comments demonstrate that Aboriginal children and young people highly value school and getting a good education, and see these as integral to their wellbeing now and important for a positive future.

Access to, participation in and outcomes of early childhood education

Successful participation in early childhood education is a key contributor to positive life outcomes. The benefits of attendance at early childhood educational programs include improved intellectual development and independence, sociability and concentration, language and cognitive development, and preparation for successful transition to formal schooling.¹¹ Although all children benefit from early childhood education, research indicates benefits are most pronounced among vulnerable children.¹²

In WA, Aboriginal students are significantly less likely to regularly attend kindergarten and pre-primary than their non-Aboriginal peers. In 2013 more than 70 percent of all students attended regularly, compared to around 35 percent of Aboriginal children.¹³ Furthermore, Aboriginal preschool children are less likely to be ready for primary school than non-Aboriginal students.¹⁴ This has a significant impact on a child's foundations for learning, contributing to the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and demonstrates the particular importance of quality early childhood programs for Aboriginal children.¹⁵

Despite widespread recognition of this need and significant investment in this area, the COAG Closing the Gap national target to '*ensure all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013)*' was not met.¹⁶ It is worth then exploring the factors that influence Aboriginal children's access to and participation in early childhood education.

The factors that influence preschool participation rates have been identified as the same among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal households, although the influence of these variables is greater in Aboriginal households.¹⁷ These factors include higher parental education and

¹¹ Gorey A, cited in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009, *A picture of Australia's children 2009*, Cat. No. PHE112, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, p. 48.

¹² Hewitt B & Walter M 2014, *Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia*. Family Matters, Vol. 95, pp. 41-50, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 42.

¹³ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.170.

¹⁴ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network and Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 10.

¹⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing Policy Brief: Aboriginal Children and Young People's Education*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 3.

¹⁶ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 10.

¹⁷ Biddle N 2007, 'Indigenous Australians and preschool education: Who is attending?', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp.9-16.

higher household income that positively influence participation, and remoteness, which negatively influences participation.¹⁸

Factors identified to be negatively associated with preschool participation rates specifically among Aboriginal children include households where housing is unstable, where a major source of income is government pensions or benefits and where there are fewer books.¹⁹

Other research identifies key barriers to Aboriginal families engaging with preschool as: the practical difficulties of transporting children to school; a cultural barrier of families feeling shame at their own low literacy and/or not always being able to provide appropriate clothing, footwear and food; and the complexities of community division on decisions of which preschools it is appropriate for their children to attend.²⁰

A review of factors that impact on school readiness among Aboriginal children and families found that Aboriginal children's school readiness is also influenced by the schools' readiness for the children²¹. This manifests in employment and valuing of Aboriginal school staff and positive school involvement for the children's families, such that schools which employ and value Aboriginal staff provide 'ready' links between school, families and communities which can enhance the transition to school for Aboriginal children.²²

Given the identified importance of early childhood education and Aboriginal children's continuing, disproportionate underrepresentation in this domain, new frameworks that incorporate the social, cultural, economic and environmental factors that influence Aboriginal children's participation in early childhood education are needed. One approach to this is investment in more Aboriginal early childhood education programs, which have demonstrable success in engaging with Aboriginal children, families and communities. These programs can provide culturally appropriate learning environments and create a positive first formal learning experience for Aboriginal children and their families.²³

Additionally, evaluation of what is and is not working in current early childhood education programs for Aboriginal children is needed to inform further program development and investment in this area, as described in more detail later in this submission.

Participation and achievement in education among Aboriginal students

Although many Aboriginal children and young people do well at school, there are significant and highly concerning disparities between the achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in WA. Data from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests for reading, literacy and numeracy indicate that Aboriginal student

¹⁸ Biddle N 2007, 'Indigenous Australians and preschool education: Who is attending?', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 9–16.

¹⁹ Hewitt B & Walter M 2014, 'Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia'. *Family Matters*, Vol. 95, pp. 41-50, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 49.

²⁰ Grace R & Trudgett M 2012, 'It's not rocket science: The perspectives of Indigenous early childhood workers on supporting the engagement of Indigenous families in early childhood settings' *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 10–18.

²¹ Dockett S et al 2010, *School readiness: What does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities?* Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No. 2, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 3.

²² Dockett S et al 2010, *School readiness: What does it mean for Indigenous children, families, schools and communities?* Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No. 2, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 5.

²³ Hewitt B & Walter M 2014, *Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia*. *Family Matters*, Vol. 95, pp. 41-50, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 49.

achievement in WA is significantly lower than non-Aboriginal student achievement for every subject across every age group,²⁴ though there has been some progress in recent years.²⁵

Regular school attendance is important for achieving core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, and achieving adequate levels of education is a key factor that can contribute to reducing Indigenous disadvantage.²⁶ While many Aboriginal children and young people attend school regularly and consistently, lower attendance levels remain a significant barrier to learning for more than half of all Aboriginal students.²⁷ Research shows that disparities in attendance rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students begin in early schooling and are carried into, and become wider, in secondary school.²⁸

The disparity between the educational achievement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children and young people is intrinsically linked to multiple aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage, including access to quality health services, employment and housing. In order to achieve gains in education, it is critical these social determinants of educational success are also addressed.²⁹

The Commonwealth Government has recognised the importance of attendance to the educational achievement of Aboriginal students through the decision to target closing the gap in school attendance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children within five years from May 2014.³⁰ In 2014, the gap for school attendance in WA was 15.4 percent.³¹

School retention is also a significant issue. Positively, in WA there was an improvement in the apparent retention rate for Aboriginal students between 2013 to 2014; the proportion of Aboriginal students continuing from Year 8 to Year twelve increased from 43.9 percent to 49.1 percent, respectively.³² However, the apparent retention rate for Aboriginal students continues to remain far below that for all WA students (90.3 percent).³³

The causes of non-attendance are complex and multi-dimensional. Recent research has identified three broad categories of non-attendance:³⁴

²⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p.180-85.

²⁵ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 15.

²⁶ Purdie N & Buckley S 2010, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No 1, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 3.

²⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 60.

²⁸ Hancock KJ et al 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra*, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 55.

²⁹ Osbourne K et al 2013, *What works? A review of actions addressing the social and economic determinants of Indigenous health*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper no. 7, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 17-18.

³⁰ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 11.

³¹ Department of Education WA 2015, *Department of Education Annual Report 2014–15*, Department of Education WA, p. 31.

³² Department of Education WA 2015, *Department of Education Annual Report 2014–15*, Department of Education WA, p. 32.

³³ Department of Education WA 2015, *Department of Education Annual Report 2014–15, Table 'A18'*, Department of Education WA, p. 158.

³⁴ Biddle N 2014, *Developing a Behavioural Model of School Attendance: Policy implications for Indigenous children and youth*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, p. 8.

1. children who do not go to school because they dislike it
2. children who identify other activities as of greater benefit than school
3. children who would like to go to school but are unable to (for example, due to poor health, transport or access difficulties).

The social determinants of education mentioned earlier can also be strong predictors of non-attendance and student mobility, as are school-related factors that contribute to disengagement.³⁵ The nexus between non-attendance and student mobility is noted as an area that requires further understanding to address educational achievement.³⁶

Aboriginal children and young people who participated in the Commissioner's consultation frequently commented on the importance of regularly attending school and expressed concern for their peers who did not go to school every day.³⁷

"Kids [need to] go to school every day" 14 year-old Jaru young person (Kimberley)

"[Make] children go to school and have a good education..." 14 year-old Nyul Nyul young person (Kimberley)

"I would make things better for kids at school [and for] kids that found school work hard and [I would] go around their schools and help them out and ask their parents if they would like their kids to have help [and ask them] why their kids are at home." 15 year-old Noongar girl (Wheatbelt)

Research suggests that living in a remote area is a risk factor for school disengagement.³⁸ Absences among Aboriginal students tend to be higher in more remote areas, with rates peaking for males in the upper school years of remote communities.³⁹ Living in a remote area is also associated with lower school achievement and completion, highlighting that improvement in overall figures will require significant improvement in remote and very remote schools.⁴⁰

Understanding the inhibiting and facilitating factors that impact on Aboriginal children and young people going to and staying at school, with particular consideration for those in remote areas, is critical to addressing persistent Aboriginal educational disadvantage. I urge the Committee to support further investigation into these factors and the strategies identified to work towards improved outcomes.

Transition to further education and employment outcomes

³⁵ O'Keefe et al 2012, *Obstacles to success: Indigenous students in primary schools*, Australian Primary Principals Association, p. 9.

³⁶ Prout S & Yap M 2012, No-one's really aware of where they are: A case study of Indigenous student mobilities in Australia's northwest, *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 54, pp. 9-20.

³⁷ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 59.

³⁸ Hancock KJ & Zubrick SR 2015, *Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school, Report for the Commissioner for Children and Young People WA*, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 7.

³⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing Policy Brief: Aboriginal Children and Young People's Education*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Helme S & Lamb S 2011, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No 6, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, pp. 3-5.

Completing Year 12 or equivalent plays a significant role in facilitating successful transition to employment and further education.⁴¹ Positively, at a national level improvements have been seen with the proportion of Aboriginal young people (20 to 24 years) who had achieved Year 12 or equivalent increased from 45.4 percent in 2008 to 58.5 percent in 2012–13.⁴² However, the gap in achievement persists and continues to impact Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal students in remote areas are particularly affected by the lack of pathways to post school options. For example, the proportion of Aboriginal students achieving Year 12 or equivalent varies from 65.5 percent in outer regional areas to 36.8 percent in very remote areas.⁴³ Geographic location presents a significant access barrier to secondary education for Aboriginal students due to the need to travel long distances or to leave home in order to attend secondary school.⁴⁴

Aboriginal children and young people interviewed in the Commissioner's consultation expressed their wish for reduced barriers to education and greater support to assist with the transition to employment, particularly in regional parts of WA.⁴⁵

"University should be open for everyone not just rich people." 11 year-old Noongar child (Perth)

"[I need] a good education to get to uni to be an engineer. I might need help with transport, money, a place to live [and] a tutor to help learn all the hard things..." 10 year-old Noongar child (Perth)

"I want schools to be much cheaper for us Aboriginal students so we don't feel that we're making our families poor just because we go to school. Also give every Aboriginal student a scholarship and apprenticeship." 15 year-old (Perth)

"I really want to get a job but there are no jobs for people in the community. I want to do cleaning on a mine or something but I will have to leave my home and community to get work. I need help to get a job close to my community so I don't have to move away from home by myself." 16 year-old Kariyarra young person (Pilbara)

An important factor in achieving successful transition to employment and further education is young people's aspirations. A recent study on the aspirations of Aboriginal young people in relation to their perceptions of opportunities for education, training and work in their local area showed many Aboriginal young people have lower aspirations than their non-Aboriginal peers.⁴⁶ They identify more barriers to achieving aspirations and have less understanding of how to navigate educational and employment pathways to achieve their

⁴¹ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2010, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014*, MCEECDYA, p. 26.

⁴² Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 17.

⁴³ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Helme S & Lamb S 2011, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No 6, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, pp. 56-63.

⁴⁶ Mission Australia 2014, *Indigenous aspirations – Employment and educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth*, Mission Australia, p. 6-9.

aspirations.⁴⁷ On the other hand Aboriginal young people who are aware of opportunities to transition from school to further study or employment tend to have higher aspirations and are more likely to stay engaged in education and make positive plans for the future.⁴⁸

Aboriginal children and young people in the Commissioner's consultations expressed a variety of aspirations for their future and employment.⁴⁹

"I'd like to be a lawyer, [a] land rights lawyer, or go to America and do acting, or be a teacher [here]..." 14 year-old boy (Pilbara)

"There's so much I can do...what about a wildlife officer...I can do that." 15 year-old girl (Great Southern)

Many children and young people identified the importance of education in achieving their aspirations.

"What's important to me? Finish school. Good job. Go back to [my town], look after my family." 12 year-old girl, Pilbara

"I want to finish school and go to university to be an electrician, electrical engineer, get my license and work in my home town, fix up houses there." 16 year-old boy (Pilbara)

The expressed aspirations of Aboriginal children and young people to complete their education and continue on to employment or further education, coupled with the self-identified barriers to achieving this, points to a clear need for greater investment in creating more jobs, traineeships and education services; but also an equally strong need to establish connections between young people and the existing programs and services which facilitate access to education, training and employment opportunities and to assist young people as they engage with these opportunities.⁵⁰

The role of families, community and culture

Family support and parental engagement is associated with higher attendance and positive educational attainment for students.⁵¹ Many Aboriginal children and young people in the Commissioner's consultation identified support from their parents and families as important for their education, a good future and a happy life.⁵²

"You need support and love from your family and friends, and you need to push yourself to be the best." 16 year-old Noongar boy (Wheatbelt)

⁴⁷ Mission Australia 2014, *Indigenous aspirations – Employment and educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth*, Mission Australia, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Mission Australia 2014, *Indigenous aspirations – Employment and educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth*, Mission Australia, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 62.

⁵⁰ Mission Australia 2014, *Indigenous aspirations – Employment and educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth*, Mission Australia, p. 3.

⁵¹ Higgins D and Morley S 2014, *Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 32, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies p. 6.

⁵² Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 57.

"I need help from my parents to help [me] to get there." 15 year-old girl (Wheatbelt)

Factors shown to be associated with low parental engagement in children's education include: poverty, poor parental education, unemployment and poor job prospects, parental problems such as ill-health, substance misuse or family violence, community and socio-economic problems such as racial prejudice, inadequate housing or study facilities at home, and fewer models of educational success in a formal school environment.⁵³ Aboriginal families experiencing these factors need more support and resources to overcome barriers to engaging with their children's education. This is particularly so given many Aboriginal parents may feel alienated from the education system because of their own negative experiences with, or exclusions from, school, and may be more reliant on schools to facilitate educational outcomes for their children.⁵⁴ Research suggests addressing the substantial gaps in school attendance and achievement of Aboriginal students is likely to require interventions that promote and support schools' abilities to engage with parents and their local communities.⁵⁵

Culturally inclusive schooling is important in increasing the engagement and self-esteem of Aboriginal students.⁵⁶ Incorporating and valuing Aboriginal culture in schools, through teacher training and across the curriculum, has been associated with increased attendance and positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.^{57,58} Effective partnerships between schools and Aboriginal families and communities can provide avenues for increasing teachers' and school administrator awareness of and respect for the cultural heritage of Aboriginal students, as well as the development of a culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum and school practices which incorporate Aboriginal perspectives.^{59,60}

A notable example is Cherbourg State School in Queensland, based on Aboriginal educator Dr Chris Sarra's *Stronger Smarter Leadership Program*.⁶¹ The program recognises that school leaders, including principals, teachers, parents and community Elders, all have a significant role to play in improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students, and equips school leaders to actively engage with the community. Significant improvements in attendance and achievement were achieved at the school through this commitment to

⁵³ Higgins D and Morley S 2014, *Engaging Indigenous parents in their children's education*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 32, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Ockenden L 2014, *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 33, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Hancock KJ et al 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra*, Telethon Kids Institute, p. 250.

⁵⁶ Ockenden L 2014, *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 33, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Purdie N & Buckley S 2010, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No 1, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p.19.

⁵⁸ Ockenden L 2014, *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 33, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Cazden L et al 2013, *A summative evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project: Vol 1 and Vol 2*, Queensland University of Technology.

⁶⁰ Ockenden L 2014, *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 33, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, pp. 14-15.

⁶¹ Ockenden L 2014, *Positive learning environments for Indigenous children and young people*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 33, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 9.

Aboriginal leadership, community involvement, high expectations of students and an Aboriginal studies program.⁶²

Several Aboriginal children and young people in the Commissioner's consultation said they believe greater integration of Aboriginal culture and ways of learning into the formal education system would be beneficial.⁶³

"Make schools for black kids 'cause we learn different to wadjellas, we think different, a school where wadjella kids could come too so we can share our ways and teach them..." 13 year-old Noongar young person (Perth)

"Closely involve the Indigenous elders with the decision making of the local council and integrate their culture into the curriculum of the school." 17 year-old Kaurareg boy, Mid West

"I think kids in primary school and high school should get more classes to learn the Aboriginal culture and how they lived back in the Aboriginal time..." 12 year-old Noongar young person (Perth)

It is critical for Aboriginal education policies to recognise the wider social environment in which Aboriginal children and young people live, and incorporate family and community into education models to ensure culturally inclusive schooling with strong parental engagement.⁶⁴ I encourage the Committee in its deliberations to consider educational opportunities for Aboriginal students through this Aboriginal sociocultural lens.

Best practice models for Indigenous education

The multifaceted set of factors that impact Aboriginal people's education has been well identified. These issues can be complex and may emerge at different points in the life cycle.⁶⁵ Although each phase of the education cycle is important, the growing body of evidence highlights the importance of healthy early childhood development and education to positive outcomes in the formal education system.⁶⁶

Key strengths identified to support Aboriginal children transition into school include family support, strong cultural identity, good health and positive self-identity.⁶⁷ Improving access to quality and culturally-inclusive programs and well-trained teachers have also been shown as

⁶² Helme S & Lamb S 2011, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 6, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 6.

⁶³ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2015, *"Listen To Us": Using the views of WA Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to improve policy and service delivery*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, p. 62.

⁶⁴ Osbourne K et al 2013, *What works? A review of actions addressing the social and economic determinants of Indigenous health*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper no. 7, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 22.

⁶⁵ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network and Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Hewitt B & Walter M 2014, *Preschool participation among Indigenous children in Australia*. Family Matters, Vol. 95, pp. 41-50, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 42.

⁶⁷ Armstrong S et al 2012, *Starting school: a strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*, Report for the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Australian Council for Educational Research, p. 31.

important factors in improving the early childhood educational achievements of Aboriginal students.⁶⁸

Looking more broadly across the education cycle, factors shown to be associated with positive education outcomes for Aboriginal students at all education levels include:⁶⁹

- Setting high expectations of students and promoting a positive Indigenous identity
- Active collaboration with Aboriginal parents and communities
- School-wide strategies that work to maintain student engagement and improve learning outcomes
- Well-trained, high quality teachers
- The development of culturally-sensitive and appropriate educational curricula and program design.
- A learning environment that is student-focused and responsive to individual needs, including mentoring and intensive case management.

It also important to recognise that achieving progress in areas that impact Aboriginal wellbeing, such as maternal and child health, housing, and family wellbeing, will yield improvements in students' ability to engage with the benefits afforded by a good education.⁷⁰

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia's Building Blocks (edition one and two) reports showcase programs that have demonstrated improved educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people or that show promise in this regard^{71,72}. Some examples of these are presented in the box below.

Best Start – Edition 1, page 24 (Building Blocks). Best Start is a flexible, family-friendly program targeted at Aboriginal families with children up to five years. It can include playgroups, nutrition and health education, early language and numeracy skills, and integration into pre-primary programs at school.

3A Project (Abecedarian Approach Australia) – Edition 2, pages 62–63. An early childhood education and care program for young Aboriginal children living in remote communities. Based on the highly effective US Abecedarian program, the facility provides high quality early childhood education to children and supports parents to learn appropriate care-giving and learning activities for their children.

Clontarf Academy – Edition 1, page 27 (Building Blocks). The Clontarf Foundation exists to improve the education, discipline, self-esteem, life skills and employment prospects of young Aboriginal men. The program has a positive impact on school retention rates and the participants' ability to secure employment after high school.

⁶⁸ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network and Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 28.

⁶⁹ Osbourne K et al 2013, *What works? A review of actions addressing the social and economic determinants of Indigenous health*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No. 7, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 22.

⁷⁰ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network and Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 26.

⁷¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2012, *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people - edition one*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

⁷² Commissioner for Children and Young People WA 2014, *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people - edition two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA.

Swan Nyungar Sports Education Program at Balga Senior High School – Edition 1, page 31. This intervention program is designed to improve school retention rates among Aboriginal adolescents in the Swan Region (covering the northern suburbs of Perth).

Scaffolding Literacy Program with Indigenous Children in School – Edition 1, page 32. This program provides a supportive curriculum framework to engage Aboriginal students at a level approximately equivalent to the full expected potential for their year level.

These WA examples represent a very small sample of the range of existing programs in place that demonstrate good practice in Aboriginal education. The elements of models associated with positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, and the available examples of good practice in Aboriginal education, provide a strong starting point for the Committee to further research and evaluate the best opportunities and pathways that can be created for Aboriginal students to assist them to succeed at school. This must be undertaken in recognition of the great diversity between and within Aboriginal communities, to ensure any models developed are adaptable and responsive to local needs and contexts.

The provision of boarding school education and its outcomes

In light of the identified disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal students in remote areas relating to access barriers, school disengagement and poorer educational achievements, an exploration of boarding schools as an educational model is worthwhile. This model, whereby Aboriginal children and young people board school away from home and family, has been in place, in a variety of forms, for many years in Australia.

In 2010, approximately 4,165 Aboriginal secondary students nationally accessed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander means tested Student Assistance Scheme (ABSTUDY) – School Fees Allowance (Boarding) Supplement, and were schooling away from home.⁷³ Critics of the boarding school model describe it as a ‘band-aid’ solution that only offers opportunities for a select few Aboriginal students; whereas supporters argue that boarding schools provide important educational pathways that overcome social disadvantage, inequitable access and standards of secondary education in regional and remote communities.⁷⁴

I encourage the Committee to examine existing boarding school models for Aboriginal students to identify their educational and wellbeing outcomes, in consideration of the value of investment in this strategy. There are a number of examples to look toward, such as Cherbourg State School (QLD) and specific programs that offer scholarships and other support for Aboriginal students to attend boarding schools including the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (NSW and QLD), Cape York Partnership Leaders Program (QLD), the Yalari Foundation (national) and Future Footprints Program (WA).⁷⁵ Exploration of such models should also incorporate a comprehensive review of the education services that are available in remote areas and identification of the gaps in service provision.

⁷³ Mander DJ et al 2015, ‘If I wanted to have more opportunities and go to a better school, I just had to get used to it’: Aboriginal students’ perceptions of going to boarding school in Western Australia, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol.44, No. 1, pp.26-36.

⁷⁴ Pearson N, cited in Mander DJ et al 2015, ‘If I wanted to have more opportunities and go to a better school, I just had to get used to it’: Aboriginal students’ perceptions of going to boarding school in Western Australia, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol.44, No. 1, pp.26-36.

⁷⁵ Purdie N & Buckley S 2010, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No 1, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, pp. 7-8.

Need for evaluation and a focus on outcomes

There is limited evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of many programs that are designed to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.⁷⁶ Fuelling this is the paucity of high-quality evaluation conducted to identify which strategies work to increase attendance or retention of Aboriginal students and the conditions needed for programs to work.⁷⁷ This is exacerbated by short-term program models and insufficient longitudinal data that tracks the progress of Aboriginal students over long periods time.⁷⁸

It is disappointing to note that a focus on developing this much-needed evidence through robust evaluation of education strategies and programs for Aboriginal students is not included in the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015*.⁷⁹ Embedding evaluation as a key component of future education strategies is critical to make meaningful progress. On a positive note, it is pleasing to see that nationally comparable student attendance data is now being collected as a result of the COAG Closing the Gap target in the school attendance of Aboriginal students.⁸⁰ The availability of this data will support improvements to the evidence base in this important area.

In addition to these quantitative measures of school attendance and retention, further research is needed to explore Aboriginal perspectives on effective and culturally safe education models. It is important to identify good practices that enable Aboriginal students to have positive experiences of education and achieve good outcomes.

Participation of children and young people

In undertaking all my work I advocate strongly for the participation of children and young people and promote the engagement of decision makers with children and young people to hear their views and ideas about matters that concern them. Aboriginal children and young are capable of forming views about decisions that impact their lives, particularly with regards to their education and schooling experience. School is a significant part of their lives and positive and negative educational experiences have the capacity to shape their identity and impact greatly on their wellbeing.

I strongly encourage the Committee to work with children and young people, their parents and carers, community Elders and educators in order to create opportunities to speak with Aboriginal students in a range of educational settings, to hear about their concerns, needs and what is important to their educational experience and wellbeing more broadly.

My office has produced guidelines to assist organisations to undertake activities that encourage the participation of children and young people. The *Involving children and young people: Participation guidelines* are available to download from my website at www.cyp.wa.gov.au.

⁷⁶ Helme S & Lamb S 2011, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 6, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Purdie N & Buckley S 2010, *School attendance and retention of Indigenous Australian students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Issues Paper No. 1, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 17.

⁷⁸ Helme S & Lamb S 2011, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students*, Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource Sheet No. 6, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Education Council 2015. *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015*. Education Council.

⁸⁰ Commonwealth Government 2015, *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2015*, Commonwealth Government, p. 12.

The gaps in educational access, participation, retention and achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students remain unacceptably high. This limits the post-school options and life choices of Aboriginal people, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. However there are many and varied opportunities for improvement, to draw on the strength of Aboriginal children and young people, their families and communities to create successful education outcomes. Such work must be addressed in recognition of the complex social, economic and environmental determinants of Aboriginal people's wellbeing. Education policy must reflect this through stronger cross-sector partnerships, and the inclusion of Aboriginal people in all stages of policy development, delivery and evaluation.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide these comments to the Committee and would be happy to provide further information as required.

Yours sincerely



JENNI PERKINS

A/Commissioner for Children and Young People

27 October 2015