

Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing

Policy brief – May 2015

Aboriginal Children and Young People's Education

A snapshot

- Education is a key influence on a child's life.¹ It can assist them to realise their full potential and make positive, informed choices.²
- While 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.
 - The current gaps in educational outcomes limit the post-school options of Aboriginal young people, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.³
- Education plays a pivotal role in reducing disadvantage when it is part of a coordinated and culturally inclusive approach, involving active collaboration with the Aboriginal community.
- Shared responsibility between schools, families and communities can enable the environment and experiences that support the healthy development of their children.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People WA acknowledges the unique contribution of Aboriginal people's culture and heritage to Western Australian society.

For the purposes of this policy brief, the term 'Aboriginal' encompasses Western Australia's diverse cultural and language groups and also recognises those of Torres Strait Islander descent.

What is the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia developed the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to monitor and report on the wellbeing of Western Australia's children and young people.

The Framework comprises two reports, the second editions of which were tabled in the Western Australian Parliament on 14 July 2014:



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia



- *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* provides a picture of how children and young people in WA are faring according to 40 key measures of wellbeing.
- ***Building Blocks*** lists and describes best practice and promising programs from around Australia which have been shown to be effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

This policy brief presents key information from the Framework reports related to education and Aboriginal children and young people in Western Australia.

Why this issue is important

Education is a key influence on a child's life. Early engagement with school assists a child to develop skills to succeed academically and to maintain social relationships. Schooling has a **strong influence on a child's future pathway** into employment and further education.⁴

Consultations undertaken by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2014 and 2015 demonstrate that Aboriginal children and young people value school and getting a good education highly. They see them as integral to their wellbeing now and important for a positive future.⁵

What we know already

Of the five key measures in the education domain in *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People*, comparative education-related data about Aboriginal children and young people is available in the following measures:

- Early education
- Children developmentally vulnerable on entering school
- Students achieving at or above national minimum standards
- Pathways for leaving school.

The report identifies the ongoing and, at times, **significant disadvantage that continues to be experienced by many Aboriginal children and young people**.

There are multiple and complex reasons for this disadvantage, as with many areas of disadvantage for Aboriginal children and young people. It is beyond the scope of this policy brief to explore these in detail, and there are numbers of reports and studies which do attempt to draw out the complexities of disadvantage impacting on Aboriginal children and young people in their education.

However, statistical data alone does not capture the remarkable strength and resilience present in the stories of Aboriginal children and young people in our State.



Rather than reinforcing a deficit-driven approach, the data should be considered in light of successful programs described in the following section, which build on the strengths of individuals and communities to make a positive difference in children's educational engagement and achievement.

Aboriginal children and young people living in WA are more likely to be living in regional and remote areas. Around 60 per cent of Aboriginal children and young people aged 0 to 19 years live outside the Perth metropolitan area compared to 22 per cent of non-Aboriginal children and young people.⁶ Research suggests that **living in a remote area is a risk factor for school attendance**.⁷ 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.⁸

Early Childhood Education - Successful participation in early childhood education is a key contributor to positive life outcomes. Attendance at early childhood educational programs is considered to have a number of benefits, including better intellectual development and independence, sociability and concentration, language and cognitive development, and preparation for the successful transition to formal schooling.⁹

Most eligible Aboriginal children are enrolled in Kindergarten and Pre-primary programs. In 2013, around 6.4 per cent of Kindergarten students and 6.8 per cent of Pre-primary students are Aboriginal children.¹⁰ These proportions are slightly lower than the proportions recorded for 2011. The number of Aboriginal children in Kindergarten programs decreased from 2,347 in 2011 to 2,275 in 2013, while the number in Pre-primary programs increased from 2,192 in 2011 to 2,327 in 2013. Legislation requiring all children to attend Pre-primary classes full-time was introduced in WA in early 2013.

Aboriginal students are significantly less likely to regularly attend Kindergarten and Pre-primary than their non-Aboriginal peers. In 2013 more than 70 per cent of all students attended regularly, compared with around 35 per cent of Aboriginal children.¹¹

Aboriginal preschool children are less likely to be ready for primary school than non-Aboriginal students.¹² This affects a child's foundations for learning, contributing to the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Results from the 2012 Australian Early Development Census AEDC (formerly Australian Early Development Index or AEDI) data collection indicate that the majority of WA children at Pre-primary level are considered 'on-track' when starting school.¹³ The number of Aboriginal children found to be 'developmentally vulnerable'



(demonstrating a much lower than average ability in the developmental competencies) on more than one domain has decreased slightly since 2009 (from 52.3% to 49%) but this is still more than double the incidence for non-Aboriginal children (21.2%).¹⁴

Attendance - The WA Department of Education school attendance data counts all students enrolled at any time during Semester 1. Aboriginal students generally have lower attendance rates than non-Aboriginal students and this difference is larger in Years 8 to 12 than in pre-primary to Year 7. In 2013 the state-wide attendance rate for Aboriginal students was 76.9 per cent compared with 92.3 per cent for non-Aboriginal students.¹⁵ The primary attendance rate for Aboriginal students was 80.7 per cent compared to 93.7 per cent for non-Aboriginal students, while the Aboriginal attendance rate in secondary years was 67.2 per cent compared to 89.1 per cent for non-Aboriginal students.¹⁶ It has been shown that irregular school attendance results in lower academic achievement.¹⁷

Research shows that disparities in attendance rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students become wider in secondary school and that NAPLAN test scores decline with absence from school.¹⁸

A student's physical, social and emotional health can affect school attendance as well as the ability of students to fully participate while at school. Across a range of measures, Aboriginal children and young people continue to experience significant disadvantage across a range of health measures (for more information, refer to the Commissioner's *The Health of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Western Australia* policy brief).¹⁹

Achievement - The annual NAPLAN assessments test students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in the areas of reading, literacy and numeracy. There is evidence of improvements in some benchmark results for Aboriginal students in recent years, however a significant gap remains.

- **Reading** - The proportion of Aboriginal students achieving the minimum standard in reading has increased between 2008 and 2013 for each year level, particularly for Year 3 (57.3% to 75.2%) and Year 5 (51.8% to 79%).²⁰ However, the percentage of Aboriginal students achieving the minimum standard is lower than for all students. For example in 2013, 94.3 per cent of all Year 3 students met the national minimum reading standard compared to 75.2 per cent of Aboriginal students.²¹
- **Numeracy** - While there has been some improvement in Year 3 and Year 5, Aboriginal students were considerably less likely than all students to achieve the minimum standard in numeracy. In Year 9, a smaller percentage of Aboriginal students achieved the minimum standard in 2013 than in previous years (66.2% in 2008 compared with 60.6% in 2013).²²

Participation - The WA Department of Education requires all students to be in an approved education, work or training situation until the end of the year they turn 17 years old. The percentage of Aboriginal students participating in education, employment, training or some combination of these has fluctuated, increasing from 77.4 per cent in 2009 to 79.0 per cent in 2011 and then declining to 74.6 per cent in 2013.²³ This is lower than the percentage of non-Aboriginal students (92% in 2013). In addition, a greater percentage of Aboriginal students are represented in the categories 'not participating' and 'other' (11.3% compared to 5.5% for non-Aboriginal students).²⁴

The number of WA Aboriginal students continuing from the first year of high school to graduation has increased significantly from 23.1 per cent in 2000 to 56.1 per cent in 2014.²⁵ Nationally, 59.4 per cent of Aboriginal students complete Year 12. The retention rate for Aboriginal students is however significantly below that of non-Aboriginal students (91.4% in WA).²⁶

The WA Department of Education reported an increase in the number of Aboriginal students achieving university entrance in 2011.²⁷

Programs that have been evaluated as effective

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia's *Building Blocks* edition one and two reports showcase 126 programs that have been shown to be effective at improving the wellbeing of children and young people or that demonstrate promise in this regard.

Common themes of programs which have been shown to be successful include meaningful community engagement, local design, reciprocity and strong and engaged leadership.

The following programs are examples from editions one and two of *Building Blocks* that have been shown to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and young people, or show promise in that regard.^{28 29}

- **Best Start** – Edition 1, page 24. 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.
- **Clontarf Academy** – Edition 1, page 27. 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.



- **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.
- **Bridging the Gap** – Edition 2, pages 64–65. A program designed to encourage Aboriginal families to participate in shared book reading at home. Implemented by Aboriginal Education Officers from the Catholic Schools Office in NSW, the program seeks to minimise the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children when learning to read.
- **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.
- **Wyndham Early Learning Centre** – Edition 1, page 35. The centre aims to provide early learning activities that encourage the promotion of children’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development as well as providing a source of support for their parents and carers.

Policy implications

The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse associates the following factors with positive education outcomes for Aboriginal students:³⁰

- Setting high expectations of students
- Active collaboration and cooperation between community-based organisations and parents in decision making
- Taking a ‘whole of school’ approach
- Well-trained, high quality teachers
- The development of culturally-sensitive and appropriate educational curricula and program design.

Education can play a pivotal role in reducing the disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal children and young people in WA.³¹

Data from the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework shows that **educational disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children and young people is marked by lower school attendance and retention rates** and a widening gap in academic



achievement throughout their schooling. The Australian 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 2014.³² As noted previously, the gap for primary attendance is around 13 per cent, and for secondary school is 21.9 per cent.

The reasons for the gap in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are varied and complex and are affected by political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, behavioural and biological factors. Therefore, any approach to improving the outcomes for disadvantaged students requires multiple approaches with shared responsibility between students, families, schools, communities and a range of government agencies.³³

The evidence strongly suggests that **success in early years education is key** in achieving educational parity.³⁴ Family support, strong cultural identity, good health and positive self-identity are key strengths found to help Aboriginal children transition to school.³⁵ Improving access to quality and culturally-inclusive programs and well-trained teachers are important factors in improving the educational achievements of Aboriginal students.³⁶

Aboriginal education policies must recognise the wider social environment in which Aboriginal children and young people live.³⁷ Adopting a community development focus that involves active collaboration with Aboriginal communities is associated with positive education outcomes.³⁸ Progress in related areas, such as early childhood health, housing and family wellbeing, will also yield improvements in a student's ability to engage with the benefits afforded by a good education.³⁹

Improving the evidence base

Reliable, up-to-date, comprehensive and comparable information is essential for informed decision-making on policies and programs aimed at improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.⁴⁰

Linking data across various domains and Australian jurisdictions will enable improved research and assist in supporting evidence-based policy-making, program management and service delivery. There have been significant efforts to achieve this through the Council of Australian Governments early childhood reform agenda. Linking health and education data using national and jurisdictional data sources is being developed through the National Early Childhood Development Researchable Data Set.⁴¹

While attendance is important, a student's level of engagement while they are at school is also critical and the development of indicators to measure this is crucial.⁴²



Other indicators relating to education that require further development include behavioural problems, peer relationships, cultural appropriateness and parenting. Indicators requiring national data sources include social and emotional wellbeing and family social networks.

The Telethon Kids Institute report, *Student Attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, identifies gaps in the knowledge base with important considerations from an educational policy perspective.⁴³

It is suggested that more research is required to establish minimum school attendance levels and the specific effect of cultural and socioeconomic background on school outcomes.

¹ Osbourne K, Baum F and Brown L 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.

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

³ Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) & University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network & Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 2.

⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 162.

⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People (forthcoming publication), *Consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People*, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011*, cat. no. 3238.0.55.001, Table 'Estimated resident Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Non-Indigenous population', Remoteness Areas, Single year of age, 30 June 2011, data cube: Excel spreadsheet, viewed 27 February 2014,

<www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3238.0.55.001June%202011?OpenDocument>

⁷ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2001, *Exploring Multiple Pathways for Indigenous Students*, Taskforce on Indigenous Education, Discussion Paper, MCEETYA, 2001.



⁸ Bourke CJ, Rigby K, Burden J 2000, *Better Practice in School Attendance. Improving the School Attendance of Indigenous Students*, Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

⁹ 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; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Starting Strong: Early Education and Care*, Paris: OECD, 2001.

¹⁰ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 168.

¹¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 170.

¹² Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) & University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network & Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, , p. 10.

¹³ Children developmentally 'on track' score above the 25th percentile (in the top 75 per cent) of the national AEDC population in each of the five AEDC domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. For more information, see www.aedc.gov.au

¹⁴ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 176.

¹⁵ Department of Education WA 2014, *Department of Education Annual Report 2013–14*, Department of Education 'Table A15', viewed 23 March 2015, <<http://www.education.wa.edu.au/home/detcms/public-education/content/about-us/publications/annual-reports/2012-2014/department-of-education-annual-report-2013-2014.en?cat-id=14662810>>

¹⁶ Department of Education WA 2014, *Department of Education Annual Report 2013–14*, Department of Education, 'Table A15', viewed 23 March 2015, <<http://www.education.wa.edu.au/home/detcms/public-education/content/about-us/publications/annual-reports/2012-2014/department-of-education-annual-report-2013-2014.en?cat-id=14662810>>

¹⁷ Hancock KJ, Shepherd CCJ, Lawrence D, & Zubrick SR 2013, *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, p. 251-2.

¹⁸ Hancock KJ, Shepherd CCJ, Lawrence D, & Zubrick SR 2013. *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations,, p. iv-v.

¹⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2015, *The Health of Aboriginal Children and Young People, Commissioner for Children and Young People Policy Brief*, <www.ccyp.wa.gov.au>

²⁰ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 180.

²¹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 184.

²² Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 181.

²³ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p. 189.

²⁴ 'Other' includes students who have left WA, already graduated, are working with the Participation Unit, have passed away, or whose whereabouts are unknown.

²⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, *Schools, Australia, 2014*, cat. no. 4221.0, Table 64a 'Apparent Retention Rates (ARR) by Year (grade) Range, Affiliation, Sex, Indigenous Status, States and Territories, 2000-2014', data cube: Excel spreadsheet, viewed 23 March 2015,
<<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4221.02014?OpenDocument>>

²⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015, *Schools, Australia, 2014*, cat. no. 4221.0, Table 64a 'Apparent Retention Rates (ARR) by Year (grade) Range, Affiliation, Sex, Indigenous Status, States and Territories, 2000-2014', data cube: Excel spreadsheet, viewed 23 March 2015,
<<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4221.02014?OpenDocument>>

²⁷ Department of Education WA 2011, *Aboriginal Education Plan for WA Public Schools 2011-2014*, Department of Education, , viewed 12 January 2015,
<<http://www.det.wa.edu.au/aboriginaleducation/detcms/aboriginal-education/aboriginal-education/docs/aboriginal-education-plan-2011-2014.en?catid=8092822>>

²⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2012, *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people*, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

²⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *Building Blocks: Best practice programs that improve the wellbeing of children and young people - edition two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People.

³⁰ Osbourne K, Baum F and Brown L 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.

³¹ Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) & University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network & Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, , p. 5.

³² Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2014, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2014*, Productivity Commission, p. 7.3.

³³ Hancock KJ, Shepherd CCJ, Lawrence D, & Zubrick SR 2013. *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations,, p. viii.

³⁴ Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) & University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network & Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 15.

³⁵ Armstrong S, Buckley S, Lonsdale M, Milgate G, Kneebone LB, Cook L and Skelton F 2012, *Starting school: a strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children*, Australian Council for Educational Research.

³⁶ Zubrick S, Silburn S, De Maio J, Shepherd C, Griffin J, Dalby R, Mitroub FG, Lawrence DM, Hayward C, Pearson G, Multoy H, Milroy J and Cox A 2006, *The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal children and young people*, Curtin University of Technology and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

³⁷ Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) & University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network & Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, p. 25

³⁸ Osbourne K, Baum F and Brown L 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

³⁹ Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth (ARACY) & University of Western Australia, Kulunga Research Network & Think Tank of Indigenous Education 2007, *National Indigenous education: an overview of issues, policies and the evidence base*, ARACY, , p. 5

⁴⁰ Bowes J & Grace R 2014, *Review of early childhood parenting, education and health intervention programs for Indigenous children and families in Australia. Issues paper no. 8*, Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Australian Institute of Family Studies p.3; Helme S and Lamb S 2011, *Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students, Resource sheet no. 6*, Produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & Australian Institute of Family Studies p.2.

⁴¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014, *Developing the National Early Childhood Development Researchable Data Set*, Cat. no. PHE 179, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

⁴² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014, *National outcome measures for early childhood development—phase 2: scoping paper*, Cat. no. PHE 184, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

⁴³ Hancock KJ, Shepherd CCJ, Lawrence D, & Zubrick SR 2013. *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*, Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, p. 15.