Facing the Facts about Aboriginal education

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In late 2024 the Public Sector Commission reported on its Agency Capability Review of the Department of Education (DoE) and called on DoE to:

1. Exercise its system leadership role to make explicit expectations on key policy and strategy matters.
2. Respond to escalating complex student needs at a system and cross government level.
3. Develop a deliberate, future focused workforce strategy to address significant attraction and retention issues.

Nowhere are these reforms more urgently needed than in Aboriginal education.

To provide the culturally safe and responsive approaches needed by students, families, communities and staff to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people, a whole-of-system reform strategy must be implemented:

1. Establishment of a dedicated Aboriginal unit to support schools in implementing the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework with appropriate resources and face-to-face support at the local level, ensuring an element of the unit is present in every region.
2. Formation of an Aboriginal education team comprised of experienced and highly trained educators, especially Aboriginal teachers and school leaders, to staff schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students.
3. Provision of mentoring programs for aspiring Aboriginal educators to support Aboriginal people wishing to become teachers, school psychologists and school leaders. Additionally, efforts to improve the attraction, recruitment and retention of Aboriginal educators in the public school system are essential.
4. Delivery of annual reporting on Aboriginal student outcomes, including reporting on achievement and attendance levels of Aboriginal students by city, regional, remote and very remote indicators, as well as progress reporting on the implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework.
5. Focusing the public school review process to report on the achievement and progress of Aboriginal students and on cultural responsiveness in each of the other domains of school improvement and accountability.
6. Engagement of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide face-to-face, place-based cultural responsiveness training across the state to school staff, other government human services, and community services staff to improve cultural responsiveness and build relationships, shared understandings and concerted action.
7. Development of a whole-of-government approach to social and emotional wellbeing through a place-based approach to Aboriginal infant, child and youth social and emotional wellbeing.
8. Provision of dedicated support for aboriginal children and youth in care, including provision of school-based and inter-agency support for Aboriginal children and young people in care, especially those in residential care or in contact with the justice system, as well as targeted support for families and schools to reduce child removal and incarceration.
9. Investment in teaching and learning resources to teach Aboriginal history and prioritise truth-telling, culture, language, arts and knowledge in the WA curriculum.

A comprehensive strategy of concrete actions to implement the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework will require culturally safe and responsive services designed to meet the needs of all children and young people, particularly those who are most vulnerable due to disadvantage and complex needs, among whom Aboriginal children and young people are grossly over-represented:

- Support services that are accessible and responsive to local needs, focusing on schools and reinvigorated regional education services.
- Joined-up services for children, young people and families across government, as schools cannot continue to address these challenges alone.
- Face-to-face and culturally responsive professional learning, especially for the most inexperienced teachers and those most professionally isolated.

- Good quality school facilities and maintenance, regardless of location, and equivalent support for distance education infrastructure.
- Adequate and equitable school funding that truly considers remoteness, the needs of small communities and compounding disadvantage.
- Access to quality early learning opportunities for every child, regardless of their location.

Strong and authentic student, family and community engagement, as well as place-based co-design, are crucial to impacting connection, attendance, aspiration, learning and achievement.

Our members continue to raise concerns about the Kimberley Schools Project, worrying that attendance is actually worse and that achievement is declining as more and more students disengage. Adding to this concern is the lack of evaluation of the project, and that, despite this, the program is expanding.

The lack of strategically coordinated collaboration across agencies to optimise the effectiveness of programs such as the Kimberley Schools Program, the Kimberley Juvenile Justice Strategy, the Kimberley Aboriginal Youth Wellbeing Strategy and Target 120 only compounds the lost opportunity and waste.

Facing the Facts called for coherent human services policies to reduce family and child poverty and reduce educational disadvantage, delivered through joined-up services across government. Stronger engagement and improved achievement will reduce harms to children and young people, improve life outcomes, reduce costs across all human services and return benefits to the whole community. The Agency Capability Review affirms the need for different approaches: It’s time to face the facts!



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