

## **Response to the Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010-2014 from the Australian College of Educators**

Note: Throughout this text the Indigenous Education Action Plan Draft 2010- 2014 is referred to as the *Action Plan*.

### **Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this important *draft Indigenous Education Action Plan* which will shape priority actions and resourcing in this area for the next four years.

The Australian College of Educators is a Professional Association of educators across all sectors with a long and proud history of supporting the interests of the profession and advocating in the interests of advancing the profession.

In developing a response to this draft we have had at the forefront of our thinking, the needs of the members of the education profession who teach or who are principals of schools with significant populations of Indigenous students. We also kept in view educators who work in relevant fields of policy development, program implementation, teacher education, professional learning and research whose focus is Indigenous education. For example we have tried to think about how this draft *Action Plan* supports them, or could support them better, to do their job in ways that deliver the best outcomes for Indigenous students.

First of all we commend the writers of the *Action Plan* for proposing that this be implemented using a focus school approach. This is important, at the school level, the 6 priority areas of action come together and work synergistically. Taking a holistic approach is essential if gains are to be made, as is recognising that priority areas interrelate. For example, improving attendance is brought about through addressing quality classroom teaching, genuine community engagement, and extended services working in collaboration and so on. It is to be hoped that this is not undermined by a business as usual implementation methodology where at the system level the 6 priority areas are managed by different line areas with separate processes of funding and supporting school level implementation. Whatever is agreed as the final version would do well to include a requirement that the implementation model supports a holistic approach and minimise the administrative burden on schools of the implementation.

We also support the strong and clear messages about investing in the early years through integrated servicing. We understand that there is a commitment in the Early Childhood National Partnership to review the funding for this program. It would be useful to note this in this *Action Plan* and to underscore the importance of focussing the funding review on the adequacy of service availability and suitability for Indigenous families, particularly in remote locations.

The *Action Plan* appropriately prioritises the critical importance of genuine community engagement. This is commendable too. While a great deal of effort has been put into the first phase of community engagement – the processes essential to getting to a signed community partnership agreement, the effort can often fade away at the implementation phase. This undermines the credibility of the process. It would be useful to strengthen this aspect of system reporting in the *Action Plan*.

Finally we have raised a number of key points which are outlined below along with a list of specific recommendations. Although these have been separated out for manageability purposes there are a few overarching themes informing them.

The first is that the *Action Plan* is less than it could be because program logic evaluation plan was not developed in parallel. Had this been initiated and had the evaluation process included input from experienced teachers, principals and researchers, the assumptions about the critical foundational dependencies that need to be in place for effective practice would have surfaced.

We make this point because we know only too well how the passion, vision and hard work of educators who valiantly strive to make a difference in challenging contexts of classrooms, schools research projects, programs and policies can be undermined by the most basic gaps in servicing – broken computers, run down schools, lack of resources, low numbers of competent and experienced teachers, non eventuating professional learning, poor teacher support and consequent high turnover, lack of time for the principal to focus on instructional leadership because the basics of school servicing are at risk, the absence of high quality and focussed induction, lack of specialist support services, lack of programs aligned to needs (such as literacy approaches that are developed with English as a foreign language learners in mind).

Our second overarching theme is that the *Action Plan* would have been richer had it incorporated as a cross priority theme the need to build on the strength of culture. Deficit models of understanding Indigenous culture and knowledge are deeply held, unexamined and devastating in their impact on the recipient – who can see it all too clearly. Many of the issues raised relate to this.

## **Key points**

### **1. Recognising and responding to the complexity and intractability of the issue**

The Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) has documented best practice approaches to complex and intractable issues.<sup>i</sup> They stress the importance of holistic rather than linear thinking, of thinking capable of grasping the big picture, including the interrelationships between the full range of causal factors and policy objectives. It is invariably the case that issues that are complex, intractable and long term in nature are imperfectly understood. Initial planning boundaries that are drawn too narrowly may lead to a neglect of what is important. They argue that this is one of the key reasons for repeated policy failure.

Given the complexity and history of systemic failure in Indigenous education the Action Plan's proposal to narrow the focus to six key priority areas and to a small range of actions and targets related to each priority is problematic. Taking on board the approach recommended by the APSC may have resulted in a more open *Action Plan*, still build around the focus sites, but seeing them more as sites of research or learning. An openness as to 'what works' and an acknowledgement that we have an imperfect knowledge base around this issue would have led to a more complex and open *Action Plan*.

### **2. Differentiating this Action Plan from previous efforts**

The data that is available around all Indigenous education indicators shows that during the past five years or more, the retention and achievement in education by Indigenous students has seen very little change if any. This suggests that a rather different approach is called for. However the *Action Plan* does not differ in broad approach from the approach of the previous plan known as Australian Directions.

The *Action Plan* would do well to acknowledge, as the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) does, that 'for far too long, remote communities have been recipients of dysfunctional, ad hoc uncoordinated actions and responses from Governments at all levels'<sup>ii</sup>. This new *Action Plan* is an opportunity to break with past approaches of pre defined solutions, pre packaged into discrete priorities and programs with a small number of targets, and to take a more open whole school/

whole community/ strength based approach where solutions are able to be generated more iteratively.

At the very least there needs to be some explanation about how this *Action Plan* will be different and lead to more positive outcomes. One of the biggest challenges facing any plan proposed to improve Indigenous education is the well entrenched belief that this is an unsolvable problem. Teachers and principals are not immune from this thinking and their experience as victims of '*death by 1000 new programs*' has contributed to a high level of cynicism. This *Action Plan* needs to provide a persuasive case as to why, given the long history of plans and lack of progress, this one will be different.

### **3. Importance of research and evaluation - to build a strong evidence base not currently in existence**

The *Australian Directions Review*<sup>iii</sup> states that Indigenous education has been the victim of multiple and unrelated initiatives and programs that have been inadequately implemented, poorly evaluated and subjected to uneven, spasmodic and short-term funding. It argues that this has resulted in a paucity of information about what works. The *Action Plan* does acknowledge this issue in passing but nevertheless proposes strategies based on 'evidence based practice' (known to be poor or absent).

Although in recent years the Best Evidence Synthesis approach to research has led to the growth of a sound evidence base about the value add elements of classroom and schooling practices, this has focussed almost exclusively on mainstream contexts. Nationally effective programs have yet to be developed and soundly evaluated for Indigenous students. The importance of developing the research base to inform evidence based practice in priority areas is under-scoped in the *Action Plan*. In this sense it is pleasing to see that the *Stronger Smarter Schools Program*<sup>iv</sup> has established an independent evaluation team. This is a significant starting point for growing a more mature evidence based practice culture in the context of Indigenous education.

### **4. Need to look beyond 'what works' - to what has not worked and why**

Over the past decade or more there has been a consistent focus by the former DEST and by DEEWR on the concept of 'what works' and on the importance of sharing best practice in education. While 'what works' initiatives have an importance role, an exclusive focus on this can lead to an unbalanced situation where there is a rush to claim success for new initiatives without a solid evidence base about the context in which it might, or might not, work. Something that is effective with a strong principal as sponsor, a cohesive stable teaching staff or in a well resourced school, will not necessarily be effective or sustainable in different conditions. Worse still, education still suffers from the tendency to showcase good news stories, where the reality is that the evidence base is thin or even in conflict with the claims of success

This is problematic not just because it leads to the rolling out of initiatives without adequate evidence of their efficacy for a particular context, but also because the very rich insights available from an investigation into what doesn't work in what contexts are not considered. We can learn a great deal through an open and thorough examination of why things don't work. Sadly, in the Indigenous education context, focussing on this would result in rich pickings.

The best way to capture these insights is to have an evaluation model that embeds evaluation into the design and implementation phases.

### **5. COAG commitment to a long term intergenerational plan.**

The four year time frame of this *Action Plan* is at odds with the review findings that there needs to be an intergenerational commitment - that is a plan that details goals for 5, 10 and 25 years. This is unfortunate as the discussions at COAG have created an expectation that a longer term, intergenerational commitment will be made, that adequately acknowledges the challenges and complexity of this area.

#### **6. One size does not fit all – the need to customise the *Action Plan* the specific circumstances of remote and very remote students**

The NIRA recognises that the issues for remote and very remote populations are different from populations that live a less traditional lifestyle on the eastern and western seaboard. In fact three of the six Indigenous Services National Partnerships under the NIRA focus exclusively on remote populations. The failure of this strategy to acknowledge the different contexts and focus strategies more explicitly to that context should be addressed. While it is logically possible to meet halving the gap targets by providing responses tailored only for non remote students this would not be an acceptable outcome. There is an obligation to ensure that the benefits of the *Action Plan* are customised to these very different contexts and that the differential starting points and rates of improvement are made transparent. Many of this submission's comments on the gaps in the *Action Plan* are gaps that relate specifically to remote community contexts.

#### **7. Needs of students not exposed to Standard Australian English except in the formal classroom**

Language differences must be both respected and provided for from the early years and in a connected and continuing way – for many, by treating English as a second language. There are two interlinked issues here and the *Action Plan* only addresses one of them.

The report addresses the desire of communities to continue to focus on children learning their own language outside of school hours. But there is a much more significant issue here that must be addressed.

The *Action Plan* should address the issue that, if a bilingual approach is not taken, there needs to be research and resourcing invested in identifying the best way to support Indigenous language speaking children to gain proficiency in Standard Australian English in social milieus where the only time they are exposed to it is in the formal classroom. We provide a mainstream English language environment and a 12 month Intensive English immersion program for new non English speaking background migrants. What is being or ought to be provided for Indigenous children who get even less informal exposure to Standard Australian English. This is important. For example, although millions of dollars have been invested in a number of whole school literacy approaches designed for Indigenous learners, none of these explicitly take into account the needs of English as foreign language learners.

#### **5 Measures and Targets – COAG targets necessary but not sufficient**

In *Australian Directions*, Ministers agreed that “**supplementary** (our emphasis) measures supporting Indigenous students through pathways into training, employment and higher education are pivotal to improving post-school transitions and breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and Disadvantage” (MCEETYA, 2006:29).

However the *Action Plan* proposes a limited number of targets and measure that include year 12 retention, average student attendance and NAPLAN test results. These are nationally agreed COAG targets and obviously need to be a key part of the reporting framework for Indigenous students. However this is an opportunity to also identify a small number of additional targets specifically for this *Action Plan* that are more fit for purpose, because they align more closely with the intended

outcomes, have more explanatory power and focus action more effectively. The Review of *Australian Directions* refers to the concept of nested targets and measures as a useful way to go.

### ***Year 12 retention***

The Review of *Australian Directions* points out that halving the gap in Indigenous attainment for year 12, and using apparent retention rates as the measure is problematic. Now that systems no longer classify students as ungraded, students who reach the age of 17 (or the agreed age grade for year 12) are allocated to year 12 by the school irrespective of where they are in their learning. A student can stay on until the end of year 12 and be working at a primary level or not be able to read. Staying on until year 12 is not the same as achieving understandings benchmarked to a standard year 12 unit or even the same as benefitting from school to an agreed minimum level. Year 12 retention rates overstate achievement. The inadequacy of this measure is also noted by the COAG Reform Council's first report on the National Education Agreement.

The Review of *Australian Directions* recommends including indicators relating to types of units or courses completed, improvement in the rate of course completion, and even negative data such as changes in the rate of Indigenous students caught up in the juvenile justice system.

### ***Average student attendance***

Systems prioritise attendance because of the assumption that children cannot benefit from school unless they attend on a regular basis. However, a 60% attendance rates could mean anything from, 60% of students enrolled attending for 100% of the time, to all students attending for 60% of the time, to anything in between. In the first extreme 60% of students should be benefitting but a large proportion of children would get no benefit. However in the second extreme scenario, none of the children would benefit.

Of course, most schools are not at either extreme but we still don't know what an average attendance figure means in terms of its impact on student learning. It is also possible that where average attendance is low, this creates a chaotic, classroom environment that lowers the probability that even regular attendees can progress in their learning.

Using the average attendance rate does not necessarily lead to a focus on increasing the proportion of children whose attendance approaches the 90% mark. If there is evidence that an attendance of 90% is what makes a difference for achievement, then a supplementary target expressed in terms that enable schools to focus on increasing the proportion of children who attend for 90% of the time would focus effort.

### ***Reliance on NAPLAN Data***

If school principals are relying on NAPLAN data to know how their students are doing, we have a serious problem. In the vast majority of schools, principals and teachers already know where their students sit on a more complex scale of learning. However the high publicity around NAPLAN and the use of it as the only evidence about student progress below year 12 on *MySchool* can mislead teachers about what to attend to. This would be a backward step.

The current structure of NAPLAN is not aligned well to assessing the learning progress of remote Indigenous students who do not speak Standard Australian English. There are a number of reasons for this:

- By year 3 many children are still at the beginning stages of proficiency in ESL. This is particularly the case for students who, until recently, have been in a school with a bilingual program; and

- The NAPLAN is not a multi level test and does not support the assessment of students who are well below the minimum benchmark for their year level. This results in large numbers of students at very remote schools scoring a zero on the tests. This is not particularly helpful for classroom planning.

There is an urgent need to improve the accessibility of high quality diagnostic data and to better support teachers to track student progress using their curriculum frameworks (and eventually the National Curriculum). While all systems have committed to reporting to parents on their children's progress on an A-E scale, it is highly likely that this data is less reliable in remote schools where there is less access to other teachers for moderation purposes.

The high visibility of NAPLAN should not distract schools from continuing to improve this aspect of their work. To support this, it would be useful to note that nationally comparable data on student progress should be the subject of further research and development to supplement NAPLAN data. The imminent rollout of the National Curriculum would increase the ease of implementing such a system.

The *Action Plan* addresses this in part in the area of on-entry assessment. This is commendable. The issue of national quality standards around on entry assessment has been with MCEECDYA for some time but has not progressed. The fact is that all systems have something in place but:

- quality is highly variable; and
- it is not compulsory in all sectors. For example, in the NT where the Indigenous school age population is now greater than 40% of the total student cohort (and 47% of the early years cohort and growing) it is not mandated and most remote schools do not utilise it.

Changes in data, measures and targets agreed to will have significant impacts for systems and may require a staged implementation. But the inability to identify suitable data sources should not be used as a reason to adopt data sets that will help to focus priorities and actions.

## **8. Getting the basics working first**

While the *Action Plan* focuses on outputs, outcomes and targets that are measurable and achievable (while ambitious) there is also a need to focus on inputs. All the new initiatives in the world will not be effective when rolled out over an inadequate base standard of service delivery.

The *Action Plan* implicitly assumes that there is a minimum standard of schooling that is being delivered across all schools in Australia. There is very little hard information about this although a baseline study of the standard of service delivery that is being developed under the NIRA could be useful.

There is extensive anecdotal evidence that this is not the case, especially in remote school contexts. The consistent message from remote communities, when consulted about their school is that they want a 'real school'. They mean by this a school that is of the same standard as a school in an urban area – where, for example, there is air conditioning that works, covered ways between buildings and footpaths rather than mud puddles, trees and landscaping, shading, playgrounds, ovals in usable condition, water bubblers, computers that work, well resourced libraries and labs, specialist teachers aligned to needs, a teaching staff not dominated by neophytes, teachers that stay the whole year and so on.

The NIRA refers frequently to the importance of setting and measuring standards of service and this principle should be built into this Strategy. This is a neglected area and in an age where all priorities are measured and counted there is a need to include agreed national measures for the physical

resources and standards of school service delivery. If we are going to compare student outcomes and school demographics under the *MySchool* website, there is also a strong case for establishing infrastructure and other capital and resourcing standards against which to assess all schools.

What is the minimum standard for a primary school of 400 students –ICT setup, classroom resources, physical indoor and outdoor space, specialist areas, ovals, areas of recreation, number of teachers, areas of specialism and so on?

Of course, high needs schools need resourcing above any standard Australian benchmark. For many very remote schools, the school environments and the classroom environments can be chaotic places, because facilities require maintenance, ICT does not work, bandwidth is low, teachers are moving in and out in a very short space of time, teacher absenteeism is high and at the same time student needs are high, disruption for ceremony is frequent and low attendance leads to classroom churn and reduced time on task.

The issue of unmet need can be significant. The Review of *Australian Directions* notes the following observation:

‘Most jurisdictions have a shortage of staff to deal with issues such as foetal alcohol syndrome, speech, guidance, hearing loss and other impediments to learning which require specialised support. Some children remain un-assessed; others are assessed late. Some of those assessed cannot get the special support they require. These sentiments were summarised by one senior officer: “... there are too few teachers working with insufficient resources and poor support in inadequate facilities for too short a time to achieve real student learning outcomes and ... there are no strategies to address this” (NT DET, 2009).

Remote Indigenous schools should have access to the same standards of service delivery as urban schools as a starting point. But in addition to this these schools require additional needs based funding to respond to the high student needs as well as the additional cost of delivering services to a community where:

- There is no housing market, so every staffing resource requires significant additional capital injection.
- Buildings, building grounds and resources do not measure up to their urban counterparts.
- The cost of attracting and retaining teachers of equal experience, skills and specialism are much higher.
- The additional needs based cost required to address the out of school disadvantages that are concentrated in remote communities – this includes but is not limited to:
  - Failure to thrive
  - Low birth weight
  - Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
  - Trauma related to violence in families
  - Nutrition issues
  - Health issues – skin, eyes, hearing and so on
  - Sleep deprivation from overcrowding
  - Significantly lower levels of literate practices in families
  - Inter-clan tension, conflict and violence in some larger communities
  - English as a foreign language with very low levels of proficiency or even engagement with the English language

## **9. Developing an evaluation strategy at the design and development stage – surfacing assumptions**

The benefit of a well thought out evaluation plan integrated into the development of the program design is well understood in some discipline areas (e.g. health and international development programs) but less accepted in the education context. This is a pity, because, in well designed programs to address complex problems, a sound evaluation plan will frequently highlight areas that were at first overlooked. A program logic approach works from the desired end state backwards and exposes the assumptions about program dependencies. For example, a program logic approach to this *Action Plan* would have exposed a dependency on the basic standard of service delivery being of an acceptable and dependable quality.

This strategy should include reference to, and explicit funding for, an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the initiative. This evaluation should be embedded into the design and implementation planning process and not a post implementation one. To be of best value, it should be a part of the ongoing feedback loop to continuously finetune and document learning.

This approach is supported by the research on complex problems as noted by the APSC publication on this matter:

“One way of increasing adaptability in the public sector is to blur the traditional distinction between policy development and programme implementation when dealing with complex programmes. Policy development and evolution needs to be informed with on-the-ground intelligence about operational issues and the views of service users or recipients, and be modified in the light of feedback about what works and what doesn’t. Programme evaluations play an important role in this regard. In a recent UK study of ‘Better Policy Delivery and Design’ prepared by the Cabinet Office’s Performance and Innovation Unit, it is argued that system design should be iterative.”

NIRA also recommends an annual review of progress with a special focus on factors affecting progress. This should be adopted.

## **10. Student attendance – a complex issue**

The section around student attendance requires further development. The previous Indigenous Education Action Plan (*Australian Directions*) also had a focus on attendance but there was very little evidence of progress. Most schools with high numbers of Indigenous students have prioritised attendance and engagement for many years but there is very little solid and repeatable evidence about what works.

The following issues should be considered:

- There is a direct relationship between student attendance and geo-location. There is also a tendency for large remote and very remote schools to have lower attendance rates than smaller very remote schools. This may suggest that there is a relationship between the coherence of the community and levels of schools attendance. Many large communities have grown out of mission stations that served a number of surrounding but distinct clan groups. Over time the different groups were brought together to improve accessibility of services. Tense inter-clan relations are often a feature of such communities and may have an impact on attendance. Further research is needed in this area.
- In discrete Indigenous communities, traditional ways of knowing and understanding are often the highest priority for the families and communities. This includes language, ceremony, relational obligations and understandings, the law and cultural understandings.

The importance of a western style education is often of a lower order. Where communities feel that the school way of knowing is being inculcated at the expense of community ways of knowing, their commitment to school may be lower and more ambiguous. This strategy needs to acknowledge this and ensure that communication to families about the importance of attendance and engagement is linked explicitly to the community's vision for their children. For example, linking success at school to getting a job may carry less weight than linking success at school to nurturing and developing strong leaders who will be able to negotiate with government and other bodies on behalf of their community or contribute to the social goals of the community such as caring for country.

- This means that there needs to be an emphasis on the importance on building on the strength of culture – cultural practices and competencies - and acknowledging different ways of knowing and understanding. This perspective should be infused throughout the document. This will have an impact on the way all the proposed strategies are understood and implemented

One of the main limitations of the *Action Plan* is that the approach recommended assumes there is enough information about what works to develop an evidence based attendance strategy. This is a complex and challenging issue and the complexity is under-scoped in the draft plan.

The attendance issue is also used as an excuse by school staff about poor performance – don't blame us, it is the parents fault. It needs to be clear that this is an area of shared responsibility and cannot be seen just as a community issue. Issues around classroom teacher practices that promote student engagement, that communicate cultural respect and understanding, that communicate high expectations and that develop positive relationships are part of this complex issue. School structures that impact on student safety and well being play a role. School curriculum offerings and time tabling can also influence attendance. For example, block delivery of VET units are being trialled in some communities to good effect and the value of linking of success at school to community valued post school roles such as social enterprises that draw on Indigenous practices and knowledge, the promotion of citizenship rights and responsibilities, and effective engagement with government on behalf of the community are also worth investigating..

### **11. Addressing data gaps**

Data gaps particularly in remote and very remote Indigenous communities need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Under current arrangements almost all ABS surveys do not include remote Indigenous communities. The NIRA stresses that to overcome Indigenous disadvantage all government agencies and non government service delivery agencies have to prioritise this and work collaboratively. However significant funding would be required to address this. Telephone surveys are not an option in most very remote communities.

### **12. Teacher quality issues – closing the gap in teacher quality**

#### ***Quality Teaching – teacher skills and experience***

There is very little evidence or research about the particular range of skills, understandings and experiences that are required to successfully manage the challenge of teaching in remote Indigenous schools. However there is evidence that it requires much more than just giving all new teachers a quick shot of cultural understandings.

There is a growing body of literature (e.g. Stronger, Smarter Schools) around the potential impact of schooling approaches that consistently and clearly communicate to students, a respect for their culture and high expectations about their potential. This sounds simple – deceptively so.

There is a need to invest in research about strategies that will support all staff to be aware of complex ways in which cultural respect, or lack of it, is communicated to a community and its students.

Ways in which students get messages about their potential and their value are part of what is known as the hidden curriculum of a school. They are not usually intentional messages. It would be a rare teacher who would say ‘I let my students know that I don’t think much of my student’s culture and I don’t expect too much of them’. Yet it is clear that this is a message communicated to Indigenous students and to their communities all too frequently.

This suggests that one essential skill set required of remote teachers in Indigenous schools is the ability to be critically self reflective and highly attuned to the many unconscious ways in which, as teachers, we privilege certain ways of knowing and unknowingly convey powerful messages about having lesser expectations of Indigenous students.

The reality is that teachers in hard to staff schools (especially remote and very remote Indigenous schools) are, as a group, significantly less experienced, more likely to be teaching outside their area of speciality, more likely to have consistently low rates of unplanned absences and less likely to have easy access to professional learning than their counterparts in other schools. However, the nature of their task demands our best teachers.

### ***Attracting high performing teachers to hard to staff schools***

The decision around how leading and accomplished teachers are identified and whether this is a ‘personal skill allowance’ approach or an ‘identified positions’ approach will have a significant flow on effect for hard to staff schools. If a ‘personal skill allowance’ approach is agreed to, this will lead to an increased concentration of advanced standing teachers in the ‘easy to staff schools’ and a higher proportion of the salary budget transferring to these same schools. This needs to be acknowledged as an issue that requires compensatory strategies and resources.

Specific strategies need to be developed to attract high performing teachers and principals to hard to staff schools. Any strategy developed needs to be informed by the fact that a high performing teacher at a high end school will not necessarily be a high performing teacher at a remote or hard to staff school.

Progress on enriching the mix of experience levels, specialist/ expertise levels, and advance standing levels of teachers in the focus schools should be monitored as part of the *Action Plan* reporting, with a view to closing the gap in teacher quality.

### **Reducing teacher turnover is essential - targets/standards should be set**

Increasing teacher retention is a critical issue because without this a school/ system cannot effectively invest in the skill development of teachers – they are always at the starting point. Whole school literacy strategies and whole school improvement cannot be effectively implemented in an environment where the average length of stay is too short. This also limits the ability of teachers and students to know and understand each other and to form relationships that support effective learning.

The *Stronger Smarter School* initiative stresses the central importance of establishing strong professional learning networks in schools as a way of building shared internal accountability, shared

vision and a shared commitment to reflexive practice and school improvement. In a high turnover environment processes set up to establish this culture are always at the starting point because of the staff churn.

There needs to be better data on this. There is overwhelming anecdotal evidence that teacher retention in hard to staff schools is higher than in other schools, but no agreed measures for benchmarking and improvement. This is an opportunity to develop metrics around optimal levels of staff retention. This could also be included in the future planning for the *Myschool* website

### **Indigenous Education Workers**

The *Action Plan* proposes an expanded role for Indigenous Education Workers to also include the role of family liaison. The needs of schools, especially remote schools for Indigenous Education Workers in the classroom and as liaison officers may mean that there needs to be different roles. It would be unwise to assume that their roles can simply be expanded. A better approach may be to resource remote schools to employ dedicated home liaison officers.

### **Recommendations**

The Australian College of Educators recommends that the following changes be considered.

- 1 Amending the text of the introduction to incorporate the understandings arising from research into tackling complex and intractable problems
- 2 Revising the introduction to communicate clearly what differentiates this *Action Plan* from plans that have gone before it
- 3 Restructuring the *Action Plan* to differentiate between remote/ very remote Indigenous schools and urban/provincial and regional Indigenous schools in terms of issues, challenges, baseline starting points and close the gap targets that recognise this differential starting point
- 4 Addressing the needs of Indigenous learners for whom Standard Australian English is a foreign in terms of researching how best to meet their English language learning needs
- 5 Identifying supplementary measures and targets related to school retention and completion as nested measures as recommended by the Review of Australian Directions – including a consideration of negative outcome data
- 6 Considering the inclusion of additional student attendance measures that support schools to focus on increasing the proportion of students that achieve the levels of attendance likely to lead to learning progress
- 7 Engaging an independent expert to review and recommend on improving comparability and quality of state and territory based approaches to on-entry assessment
- 8 Prioritising investing in computer supported culturally inclusive diagnostic assessments
- 9 Including a recommendation that ACARA be tasked to increase the value, quality and consistency of schools national reporting of student progress using a shared A-E framework aligned to new national curriculum when available, with clear guidelines and accountability around moderation procedures
- 10 Applying the findings of the independent evaluation of the *Stronger Smarter Schools Institute* to ongoing refinements to the priorities and initiatives in focus school sites
- 11 Expanding the section on quality teachers to address issues of attracting advanced standing teachers to focus school sites and to include targets around the comparative experience level of focus site schools relative to other schools and to set improvement targets and measures around teacher turnover based on benchmarking data
- 12 Including in the systemic initiatives a proposal that ACARA be asked to develop standards, scales or measures relating to the overall level of quality and experience of the teaching staff

and the overall quality and level of resourcing in terms of the physical provisions of schools and improvement targets be set based on benchmarked data

- 13 Engaging experts to provide advice for consideration by ACARA on how the metrics and benchmarks that are being developed on schools funding should address the need for a needs based funding loading based on ICSEA ratings
- 14 A new section is developed to address the evaluation and research priorities including a focus on gathering richer information about the barriers to effective school improvement and why so many programs are not effective. A particular sub focus of this area should include professional learning programs and initiatives directed to improving student attendance

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems4.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2009-07-02/docs/NIRA\\_closing\\_the\\_gap.pdf](http://coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-07-02/docs/NIRA_closing_the_gap.pdf) Section A-25

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/Review\\_of\\_Aust\\_Directions\\_in\\_Indigenous\\_Ed\\_2005-2008Att\\_Comm.pdf](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/_resources/Review_of_Aust_Directions_in_Indigenous_Ed_2005-2008Att_Comm.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.strongersmarter.qut.edu.au/sslc/research.jsp>