

LITTLE IMPROVEMENT IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE IN OVER 30 YEARS

Media Statement

March 24, 2006

The most comprehensive survey every undertaken of Aboriginal education has found little significant improvement in outcomes for children in more than 30 years.

The finding is contained in the latest volume of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, launched today by Education Minister Ljiljanna Ravlich.

The survey, undertaken by researchers at Perth's Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, analysed data from more than 2500 students from across Western Australian.

Chief Investigator Professor Steve Zubrick said the report *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People* provided powerful evidence for an urgent major overhaul of Aboriginal education.

"It is clear that it is a matter of too little too late. Many of the programs to support Aboriginal children start in late primary or high school by which time the gap in performance between Aboriginal children and others is simply too great," he said.

"The focus needs to shift substantially to the early years of child development to help Aboriginal children be ready, socially and academically, to learn at school."

Professor Zubrick said the data show that not only are Aboriginal students starting well behind non-Aboriginal children, the gap widens the longer they are at school.

58 per cent of Aboriginal children were rated by their teachers as having low academic performance compared with 19 per cent of non-Aboriginal children. Only a quarter of Aboriginal students entering year 8 go on to Year 12. Of those who start Year 11 just 22 per cent of those complete their Year 12 certificate, compared with 62 per cent of all students.

Head of the Institute's Aboriginal research division, Kulunga Network Manager Colleen Hayward, said the very poor educational outcomes of Aboriginal students needed urgent attention.

"If we are serious about overcoming the social, economic and health disadvantage faced by Aboriginal communities then we need to start by making sure children have access to a good education," Assoc Prof Hayward said.

The report identified three major factors driving the poor outcomes for Aboriginal students:

- higher rates of school absenteeism
- much higher prevalence of emotional and behavioural difficulties
- parents and carers having generally lower levels of education.

"While absenteeism is a big issue, this only accounts for a portion of the educational outcomes we have observed. Simply making sure that children get to school will not fix the problems - there is clearly more which schools can do to provide learning environments which are appropriate to the specific needs of Aboriginal children," Assoc Prof Hayward said.

"At the same time we must also address other opportunities to improve Aboriginal children's life chances well before they begin school, and even before birth.

"What's also worrying is that most parents in the survey thought their kids were doing okay even where the results in the classroom show a very different story.

"What that tells us is that poor educational outcomes are being passed down between generations as families are disengaged from their child's learning and communication between schools and parents is failing."

The report makes fifteen recommendations including:

- more funding to support early child development and school readiness
- programs to support, engage and equip parents
- a focus on improving school attendance
- support for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties
- mandatory Aboriginal studies for teachers
- an emphasis on explicit methods for teaching standard Australian English
- a national research agenda to chart progress, evaluate programs and measure improvement.

Copies of the full report and summary booklet are available at
<http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/news/news.lasso?id=170>

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