INDIGENOUS SCHOOL ATTENDANCE: CREATING EXPECTATIONS THAT ARE ‘REALLY HIGH’ AND ‘HIGHLY REAL’

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INTRODUCTION

Educators and policy-makers are increasingly calling for ‘high expectations’ in education, including in Indigenous education. One of these expectations is improved rates of school attendance. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG)\(^1\) has included school attendance as a key Closing the Gap measure in national Indigenous affairs policy. COAG is seeking to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student attendance by 2018 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014).

Ensuring that all school-aged children and young people attend school regularly is a worthy social outcome. Regular attendance means learners are in a better position to keep pace academically and stay connected socially (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence & Zubrick, 2013; Zubrick, 2014).

In tackling social policy issues such as poor school attendance, policy-makers have a range of levers with which to try to effect positive change. These include law-making, public information campaigns, subsidies and investment in community programs and public services (Australian Government, 2007). Governments can also draw upon sanctions, penalties and fines as ways to influence behavioural change among citizens.

Public policy and political discourse about poor school attendance among Indigenous young people has, in recent years, been framed within the context of behavioural change by parents of Indigenous young people, namely through welfare reform. Both of the major political parties in Australia have signalled that welfare reform would be used to lift school attendance in Indigenous communities. And yet, single-level, ‘top down’ interventions are unlikely to have sufficient impact by themselves, especially when they are devoid of ownership, leadership and action at a community level.

Altman’s (2013) research on the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (also referred to as ‘the intervention’) showed ‘top-down’ approaches to be disempowering to communities. Yet, as the Australian Public Sector Commission has stated, “Government cannot solve complex problems alone” (Australian Government, 2007, p.2).

In tackling this particular public policy issue of Indigenous school attendance, expectations should be both ‘really high’ (of schools, students and parents and carers), and ‘highly

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\(^1\) The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia. The members of COAG are the Prime Minister, state and territory Premiers and Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA). COAG has developed a framework with targets to Close the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian in the early years, education, health and life expectancy.
This Policy Insights paper commences with a synthesis of publicly available data on school attendance by Indigenous Australians, highlighting areas of major risk. It explores Australian and international literature to develop an understanding of the risk factors and protective factors involved in strengthening school attendance. The paper then articulates a number of design principles to underpin future investment and intervention policies, and concludes with proposed guideposts which could be considered by policy-makers going forward.

This paper posits that addressing poor school attendance has to be seen in an holistic light: firstly by recognising the multifaceted nature of the challenge; and secondly by embracing a suite of responses to meet the many interdependencies involved. The paper argues that issues concerning Indigenous students’ school attendance fundamentally represent a broader social policy challenge, not merely a challenge within education policy circles. This paper questions whether a ‘one-size-fits-all’ or an ‘across-the-board’ response may be too blunt an instrument to effect positive change. This paper argues instead, that a highly focused policy design, targeted programs and coordinated efforts at local levels, are warranted.
BALANCING DEMAND AND SUPPLY

Public policy attention in Indigenous education has arguably concentrated in recent decades on the ‘supply’ side of Indigenous education: teacher training, school leadership, curriculum and school resources. It has too often overlooked the equally important ‘demand’ side of the equation in the form of Indigenous demand for high-quality and culturally responsive education.

Measures that simultaneously empower learning dispositions among Indigenous communities (by facilitating the valuing of, and demand for, lifelong and life-wide learning), and adequately equip schools to meet the needs of the whole child, are worthy of greater policy consideration.

In addition, when education policy and practice adopts learner-centred approaches, then Indigenous youth are more likely to stay engaged in learning (Wierenga & Taylor 2015). Learner-centred approaches include systematically listening and responding to the voice of learners, and ensuring curriculum offerings are balanced, interesting and provide choice for Indigenous youth, without losing academic rigour.

‘Lifelong learning’ is generally considered to refer to learning that is continued throughout one’s life. ‘Life wide learning’ refers to students learning in contexts that are real and often familiar to them.

Figure 1  Balancing demand and supply
CURRENT RATES OF SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

Like most Australian students, the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attend school on a regular basis. For example, 87 per cent of Indigenous children in New South Wales (NSW) attended school regularly in 2014 (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2014). However, educational data from across Australia show that absenteeism is higher among Indigenous learners compared to non-Indigenous students (Armstrong & Buckley, 2011; Helme & Lamb, 2011). Despite improvements over recent decades, research points to a gap of 10 per cent between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance (Purdie & Buckley, 2010).

It is neither accurate nor fair however, to say that school attendance is a chronic issue across the entirety of Indigenous Australia. The gap in school attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students widens as children grow older and tends to be significantly greater in remote and very remote areas (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). The Closing the Gap report, (Commonwealth of Australia 2016a, p.16) further notes that

"IN 2015, the attendance rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was 83.7 per cent, little change from the rate in 2014 (83.5 per cent). Progress will need to accelerate for this target to be met."

At a jurisdictional level, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Year 10 is comparatively large, but has been closing. In 2012, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) reported that there was a gap of 31% between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Year 10 students’ attendance in the Northern Territory. In 2015, according to the Northern Territory Department of Education, this gap in attendance data now stands at a difference of 27 per cent for Year 10 students (NT Department of Education, 2015a).

National Year 12 retention data and data at jurisdictional levels also point to improvements in the rates of Indigenous attendance and retention in schooling over recent decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2015). In NSW, for example, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ attendance has been closing between 2006 and 2014, as can be seen in Figure 3.

Additionally, Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) are on track to meet their attendance targets (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016a). While this is encouraging, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in these three
jurisdictions are small compared with NSW, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

Furthermore, as Ainley, Buckley, Beavis, Rothman & Tovey (2011) note, Indigenous completion rates in vocational education and training qualifications improved between 1996 and 2008, and the apparent retention rate for Indigenous students from Year 10 to Year 12 also improved by four fifths of a percentage point per year between 1995 and 2009. Meanwhile, the average attendance rate in 2014 of 87 percent for Aboriginal students in public schools in NSW was the highest rate since 2006 (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE), 2015a).

While improvements in school attendance have been achieved in some parts of Australia, there remains a considerable way to go. For example, the Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2016 indicates that in Semester 1, 2015, 79.3 per cent of non-Indigenous students attended school 90 per cent or more of the time compared to only 49.2 per cent of Indigenous students. In the Northern Territory, the Department of Education (2015) indicates that the proportion of Indigenous students attending school 90 per cent of the time in 2014 was 37 per cent, compared to 88 per cent for non-Indigenous students (NT Department of Education, 2015b).

Given this context, this paper seeks to pinpoint areas where policy-makers, community groups and educators should focus their collective attention.

**Connected Communities is a New South Wales Government initiative which targets vulnerable communities and strives to place schools at the centre of community.**

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**Figure 3** The gap in school attendance rates in NSW
THE ‘GAPS’ GROW UP (SECONDARY SCHOOLING) AND OUT (REMOTE)

National data show that where sizeable gaps remain in school attendance, two factors are generally at play:
- geographical isolation (along with associated socio-economic marginalisation);
- and disengagement from secondary schooling (especially senior secondary schooling).

Greater attention has to be given to geographical ‘hot spots’ and to Indigenous youth who are disengaging from school at far earlier and greater rates than their non-Indigenous peers.

The higher risks of school absenteeism in remote areas is illustrated in data from NSW which show that Aboriginal attendance at government schools in remote or very remote NSW was almost 10 percentage points lower than Aboriginal attendance in metropolitan schools in 2006. These data also indicate that the gap in Aboriginal attendance in public schools between remote and urban areas has narrowed between 2006 (almost 10 per cent) and 2014 (6 per cent) (CESE, 2015a).

Similarly in Western Australia, Hancock et al (2013) found that attendance rates on average between 2008 and 2012 were 72 per cent for all secondary students in very remote areas (where considerable numbers of Indigenous students reside), compared with attendance rates of 85 to 88 per cent in regional and metropolitan locations (where considerable numbers of non-Indigenous students reside) (see Figure 4).

Hancock et al (2013) also found that children in Western Australia “have highly stable attendance throughout the primary years [but] attendance rates fall in secondary school.” The authors also found undisputedly and unequivocally that “relative disadvantage was associated with poorer attendance, from the very beginning of formal schooling” (p. iv).

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2 Remoteness is calculated by the ABS using the road distance to the nearest Urban Centre in each of five classes (major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote, very remote) based on population size.
These data are consistent with those from Queensland, as illustrated by the following two maps (Figure 5). The map on the left is sourced from the recent *Dropping off the Edge 2015* report looking at multiple disadvantage in Australia (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015). The regions shown in red are the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas in Queensland. The map on the right shows the proportion of all state school students in each region attending less than 85% of the time (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2015). The results in south-west, north-west and far north Queensland help illustrate the association between high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and increased levels of school absenteeism.

These data from Queensland, NSW, and Western Australia show that the risk of non-attendance generally increases the greater the distance from capital cities. The data underscores the importance of focusing on geographically isolated communities. However, attention has to also be given to innovative responses to Indigenous youth who are disengaging from education in secondary school due to a lack of relevance in the curriculum. This is not confined to remote areas of Australia. The *Learning Choices* program delivered by the Dusseldorp Forum (2014) includes students from metropolitan, rural and remote communities. The program keeps students connected to learning and develops their sense of agency, skill and capacity.

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**Figure 5:** School attendance rates in Queensland

Dropping off the edge 2015

School attendance data
REASONS FOR MISSING SCHOOL

The reasons for non-attendance at school are many, varied and complex. In Queensland for instance, data between 2010 and 2014 show that ‘illness’ is the single biggest reason for explained absences among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In some parts of Indigenous Australia, ‘sorry business’ or funerals is also provided as a major reason for missing school.

While apathy, resistance and poor attitudes among students and parents may provide some explanation, such an explanation is dwarfed by data indicating that issues such as poverty, poor health and family stress are the most common causes. Geographical isolation and an associated lack of choices in secondary schooling experience are also contributing factors for school absenteeism in Indigenous communities (Hancock et al, 2013, Zubrick, 2014).

With regard to the relationship between poverty and school absenteeism, Australia is not alone. International data show relationships between the two, and these are not limited only to developing countries. Zhang (2003) for instance, established clear links between school absenteeism and child poverty in parts of the United Kingdom. Eleven years later, Clarke’s (2014) research also in the United Kingdom highlighted that adolescents from low socio-economic backgrounds are still more likely to underachieve academically and continue to be in a cycle of poverty.

The relationship between poverty and school absenteeism is not confined to geographical remoteness either. Researchers in the United States, for example, have explored the relationship between locational disadvantage and school outcomes in urban settings. For decades, the US National Center for Education Statistics has noted “the growing challenges of educating urban youth who are increasingly presenting problems such as poverty, limited English proficiency, family instability, and poor health”, concluding that “students flounder in decaying, violent environments with poor resources, teachers, and curricula, and with limited opportunities” (Lippman, Burns & McArthur, 1996, p. v).

Almost 20 years later, Anyon (2014) highlights the continued inequities in the political economy explaining poor educational outcomes in impoverished urban communities in the United States. Such issues of social inequity are equally pertinent in the Australian experience, as highlighted by the Review of funding for schooling (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, Scales & Tannock, 2011).
A distinction between absenteeism and truancy is important. Put simply, one might choose to describe absenteeism as ‘willing but unable to attend school’ while truancy as ‘able but unwilling to attend school’. Common causes of absenteeism for all children and young people relate to health, transportation, family circumstances and obligations, mobility, food and clothing. Common causes of truancy can relate to feelings of educational disengagement, peer factors (including bullying), family factors (including violence), and self-confidence (often referred to as ‘shame’). These risks point to the importance of protective factors such as child and adolescent health and wellbeing.

**Absenteeism is ‘willing but unable to attend school’ while truancy is ‘able but unwilling to attend school’**

Zubrick (2014) offers the following reasons for poor school attendance:
1. truancy
2. ‘dropping out’ of school (compared with engagement)
3. family mobility
4. absences (compared with attendance)

‘Truancy’ generally refers to ‘unauthorised absences’ as defined by legislative remits, while ‘authorised absences’ generally relate to health matters. Health is a leading factor in explaining absences. For instance, the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation’s *Ear Trial and School Attendance Project* in 2003 (Couzos, Lea, Mueller, Murray & Culbong 2003) found that children with otitis media (or ‘glue ear’) attended school only 69 per cent of the days available compared with 88 per cent of other children in the same schools. More recent work by Jervis-Bardy, Sanchez & Carney (2014) indicates otitis media and other issues remain outstanding and are of significant concern.

Poor health (both physical and mental) is often cited within international studies to explain school absenteeism. To illustrate: a survey involving 1300 teenagers in the United States found that ‘ill health’ (at 79 per cent) was by far the most cited reason for school absenteeism, followed by family obligations (40 per cent), and ‘not feeling like it’ (at 21 per cent) (Attendance Works, 2014). Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, a survey of more than 3000 people who have experienced mental health problems while in education found that 24 per cent of respondents did not go to school, college or university because they were worried by what other people would say, and 15 per cent were worried about bullying (Time to Change, 2014).

These findings illustrate the multi-causal nature of school absenteeism. Causes include but extend beyond young people’s attitudes (including, at times, apathy) toward schooling. To this end, it is important to differentiate between positive and negative dimensions to the notion of school ‘drop out’. On the negative side, young people (namely teenagers) may choose to resist school as they feel...
alienated from what is being taught and disengaged from how it is being taught. On the positive side, young people can choose to leave school as they find more meaning in vocational studies, training or employment.

The Social Equity in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Report (Rothman, Shah, Underwood, McMillan, Brown & McKenzie, 2013), found positive levels of participation in vocational education and training among young Indigenous Australians, including in traineeships and apprenticeships. This report indicates that where more choice is available for Indigenous learners, it can lead to positive outcomes.

Helme and Lamb (2011) summarise the major barriers to school attendance and completion among Indigenous students, namely:
- physical barriers (such as geographic isolation)
- cultural barriers (for example, due to discrimination)
- economic barriers (which include the costs associated with attending school)
- informational barriers (for example, due to the lower levels of English language literacy in Indigenous communities).

Similarly, Purdie and Buckley (2010) have documented a number of out-of-school factors that can lead to non-attendance at school, including:
- funerals
- health
- ceremonies
- sporting activities
- religious or cultural activities.

Small-scale research undertaken by ACER (Lonsdale & Armstrong, 2012) in remote parts of the Northern Territory is consistent with the above finding about funerals. ACER's research found that the main reasons for children not attending school was by far 'sorry business' or funerals (40 per cent of reasons offered for non-attendance); followed by 'participation in sporting carnivals'; 'student illness'; and incidents of 'family violence'.

In addition to these external factors, Partington, Galloway, Sibbel, Gray, Grote & Gower (2009) also list a number of in-school factors that influence school attendance, including:
- differing socio-cultural backgrounds
- language differences
- cultural differences
- extreme levels of poverty
- racism.

National data show that Indigenous children and young people are more likely to experience the following stresses and inhibitors to successful learning (Sims, 2011):
- family violence
- mental ill health
- overcrowded housing
- juvenile justice detention
- morbidity
- disability.

When both internal (inside of school) and external (outside of school) factors are borne in mind, it becomes apparent that addressing non-attendance is a broader social policy challenge, than solely one for the education sector. The Federal House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training in 1996 recognised as much when it defined truancy and its causes in the following terms:
TRUANCY IS the result of multiple negative and cumulative influences originating from the individual, the family, the school and the community and is therefore a broad social issue which needs to be addressed by comprehensive social policies (p. 25).

More recently, Petray (2013) suggests that punitive measures such as truancy officers and income management, take agency away from Indigenous people, and do not have a positive impact upon educational outcomes, including school attendance. Additionally, Justman & Peyton’s (2014) research indicates that linking school attendance with welfare payments is not feasible in the long term unless there are measures where learners can see a value in education. Programs that spark learner interest and inspire learners to take ownership and make choices about their lives, are therefore required.
THE ‘CATCH 22’ NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

In Indigenous affairs policy discourse, education is often cited by policy-makers and commentators as the single most important lever to turning around Indigenous disadvantage. Langton and Ma Rhea (2009) for example, argue that education is crucial to building capacity in communities and creating Aboriginal leaders, teachers, professionals and self-sufficient individuals of the future. This is supported by the Federal Member for Grey in South Australia, Rowan Ramsey MP, who suggests that attendance and education is the key to a good future for children in Indigenous communities (Scullion, 2015). On the other hand, the prevalence of relatively high levels of social and economic disadvantage continue to hamper children’s and families’ abilities to sustain engagement in, and reap rewards from, formal schooling.

These views represent two equally valid logical steps in understanding the risks to, and benefits of, increased Indigenous school attendance. Firstly, it makes intuitive sense that increased school attendance among Indigenous young people will lead to greater educational attainment which will, in turn, lead to more qualified people in jobs. Greater rates of employment will then lead to a situation where Indigenous people enjoy more economic independence and a greater quality of life (as illustrated in Logic Step Progression A Figure 6).

At the same time, the lack of quality of life in many Indigenous communities, as measured by rates of Indigenous unemployment, standards of health (including mental health), racism, overcrowded housing, and the prevalence of acute poverty, makes the task of attending and thriving in school all the more difficult. Literature and data in Australia and throughout the world show that people from socially and economically disadvantaged areas struggle to establish and maintain engagement in formal education. This can be due to unemployment, poor health and poor quality of life as presented in Logic Step Progression B Figure 7.

The challenge for education and social policy-makers, including those working in Indigenous affairs, is working out how to unlock this ‘catch 22’ scenario. This dilemma of how to work with these understandings to maximise Logic

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**Logic Step Progression A**

- Increased education
- Increased employment
- Increased quality of life

*Figure 6* Improving Indigenous school attendance logic step progression A
Step Progression A and minimise Logic Step Progression B highlights the importance of simultaneous and coordinated action both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the school gates.

Ainscow et al (2012) made similar findings in the UK by pointing to the dual importance of school leadership and reform coupled with an improvement of home circumstances to adequately tackle school attendance issues. Before children begin formal schooling, racial and socioeconomic gaps begin to form and can be attributed to family-environment factors. These data provide a salient lesson about stronger investment in early childhood education in Australia.

Indigenous participation in early childhood education is showing signs of improvement in the case of Indigenous child enrolment, particularly in remote parts of Australia. The Productivity Commission (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2013) found that both enrolment and attendance rates in the final year before full-time schooling were higher among Indigenous children in remote and very remote areas (75 per cent), than among city-based Indigenous children (65 per cent). These changes are encouraging developments from the point of view of school attendance later in life, given the importance of establishing early patterns in regular school attendance (Hancock et al., 2013).
RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

School attendance however, is influenced by the levels of social and economic disadvantage that populations experience. Two recent studies have once again emphasised the disproportionate levels of social and economic disadvantage confronted by Indigenous communities. Firstly, the *Addressing Entrenched Disadvantage in Australia* 2015 report by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia has found that Indigenous Australians continue to be at high risk of facing long-term disadvantage as measured not only by income, but material resources, employment, education, health and disability, social connection, community and personal safety. This report highlights the relationship between intergenerational disadvantage and the intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage.

Secondly, the *Dropping off the Edge* 2015 report (Vinson & Rawsthorne 2015) illustrates that social disadvantage, especially cumulative and intergenerational disadvantage, is heavily concentrated in the postcodes with sizeable proportions of Indigenous residents. The implications of these and other findings are clear. This level of disadvantage is disproportionate to the size of Australia’s Indigenous population.

Analysis of international and domestic literature suggests there has to be a comprehensive suite of investments and interventions so that communities are resourced to co-produce stronger wellbeing and growth among children and young people (Wierenga & Taylor, 2015). This approach is illustrated in Figure 8.

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*Indigenous Australians continue to be at high risk of facing long-term disadvantage as measured not only by income, but material resources, employment, education, health and disability, social connection, community and personal safety.*

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![Figure 8](image-url)  
Co-producing and enabling school attendance
Holistic, multi-faceted, co-produced models of interventions are particularly important in communities that are experiencing high levels of intergenerational and cumulative disadvantage, acute poverty, and family stress caused by social inhibitors such as overcrowded housing, racism and dispossession.

Social disadvantage, especially cumulative and intergenerational disadvantage, is heavily concentrated in the postcodes with sizeable proportions of Indigenous residents.

To increase school attendance two streams of effort have to be embraced and run concurrently:
1. Empowering communities (outside of school gates); and
2. Targeting resourcing to schools (inside school gates) to meet the needs of the whole child.

Furthermore, it is critical to implement programs that respond to the holistic needs of disadvantaged children, not only academically but emotionally, physically, culturally and in terms of their identity development.

The best role for government is as an ‘enabler’ of community-led and community-devised strategies. The enactment of this role has to be context-sensitive, culturally appropriate, collaborative, empowering and aimed at re-energising a love of lifelong learning by all Indigenous children and students.

With this notion of ‘public sector enabling’ in mind, policy-makers in Australia are being asked to give consideration to the principles outlined in the recent Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples – Design Report submitted to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2015 (Wunan Foundation, 2015). This report calls for a paradigm shift from centralised government control to empowered communities across the Indigenous affairs landscape. This is not new thinking in social policy in Australia or internationally, as the following examples demonstrate.

In Australia, the work of the Communities in Control initiative (2016) helps to highlight the merits of community-based investment and empowered communities.

Internationally, conceptual contributions such as that of McKnight and Kretzmann in 1993, point to the strengths of mobilisation of community-based assets to solve community problems. With regard to community empowerment models in educational contexts more specifically, Nielsen (2007) captures evaluation findings from the World Bank in the Empowering Communities for Improved Educational Outcomes paper. All of these reports highlight the benefits of endogenous effort and ownership within communities, coupled with exogenous investment and enablement from public, philanthropic and other external funders to improve both educational and broader social outcomes.
DATA HAVE TO IMPROVE

Alongside well-designed and targeted programs to address poor school attendance, it is important to improve data collection and analysis at both system and program levels. At the moment, there is a lack of consistency in the data collected across jurisdictions. At a national level, data on school attendance are sourced from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2012). However, as the Productivity Commission in its Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014) has acknowledged:

DATA ARE of acceptable accuracy within individual school sectors within a State or Territory, but are currently not comparable across school sectors or states and territories, due to differences in collection and reporting processes (7.3).

In addition, some data collection at the jurisdictional level is too broad to be useful for informing investment and resource allocations in education. Between 2010 and 2014 for example, in state schools in Queensland the highest recorded reason offered for non-attendance by Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike was ‘illness’ followed by ‘unexplained’. Sharper data, such as reasons for absence trends in participation data are necessary to guide and underpin public policy, program development and expenditure into the future.

Similarly, Mr Warren Mundine, Chair of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council, has argued that the states and territories have to improve the quality of the data collected at a jurisdictional level to enable the Australian Government to identify when Indigenous children are falling through the cracks (Everingham, 2015).

At a program level, Purdie and Buckley (2010) have provided an extensive case for improvements in the nature of the data collected, and of the evaluations conducted in Indigenous education. They cite a number of Indigenous education programs that have not been subjected to independent, publicly available or longitudinal evaluations. Further, they propose a key question for researchers and policy-makers to address: ‘What constitutes reliable evidence to evaluate programs and initiatives so that good policy and actions can be formulated to effect change?’ (p.16). This question is one that requires further consideration, as the collection of attendance data has to be improved to guide optimal policy development and program delivery.
SOME KEY LESSONS MOVING FORWARD

Going forward, coordinated interaction is required both inside and outside school gates. Literature about school attendance from Australia and internationally points to a case for coordinated and concerted interaction between schools and communities to lift school attendance. It is not a challenge for schools alone, but this is not to say that they are ‘off the hook’. As Indigenous educator Dr Chris Sarra argues, school leadership is essential in lifting Indigenous attendance. He has made the following point: “we know for sure from examples right across the country, where school leaders go out of their way to engage with parents and children and build positive relationships, attendance improves” (Sarra, 2011, p6). Relationships are therefore important. This viewpoint is consistent with calls from a principal in New Zealand, who suggests that relationships are the key to lifting school attendance:

IT IS not enough for the school to have good structures and procedures in place and to set standards and expectations for attendance – what sits underneath all that is relationships (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011, p6).

The recent interim evaluation report of the NSW Connected Communities Strategy (CESE, 2015b, p.10) suggests that, “Many of these issues are beyond the abilities of schools to address alone”. The evaluation found that attendance initiatives such as bus runs and reward incentives are important. Research under the former What Works (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016b) initiative in relation to school attendance highlights the value of developing partnerships with consistent engagement with the community.

In taking forward the issue of school attendance, policy-makers must simultaneously empower schools and community groups alike to effectively bolster school attendance in high-risk areas. A new premium has to be put on strategies that invest in child wellbeing, growth and development: inside and outside school gates. Tomaney (2010, p.6) describes these approaches as ‘place-based’ strategies, which is a “new paradigm of local and regional development [that] emphasises the identification and mobilisation of endogenous potential, that is, the ability of places to grow drawing on their own resources, notably their human capital and innovative capacities.”

Successful examples of ‘placed-based’ strategies include breakfast and lunch clubs, bringing Elders into schools, Aboriginal teachers and teacher aides and implementing programs that promote self-esteem and confidence with culture and academic pursuits (Behrendt, 2009).

The National Centre for Indigenous Excellence (NCIE) based in Redfern NSW, provides a holistic approach to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through learning and innovation, sport and recreation, arts and culture, and health and wellbeing. According to KPMG (2014) through the implementation of these initiatives, NCIE has created $30 million in social impact. The approaches proposed by NCIE are also consistent with international models.
In Canada (Alberta) (Edmonton Public Schools, 2007) under its Aboriginal Learning Policy, schools strive to create an educational environment that respects First Nations Peoples and includes Elders. Schools also consider spiritual, mental, emotional and physical perspectives to teaching students and infuse Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum.

The Harlem Children’s Zone is one example of a model which seeks to address the needs of disadvantaged children both in the school and in the community (Ainscow et al, 2012).

In Finland, under the Basic Education Act (World Future Council, 2016), provisions to support school attendance include free books and learning materials, a balanced meal at school every day for all students and free transport if students reside further than 5 kilometres from the school.

In the United Kingdom (RSM McClure Watters, 2012) rewards for attendance are given to individuals and to whole classes; there is a free phone number for parents who want to call or text to report a student’s absence; pastoral support is available for long term absences that recognise multiple disadvantages; and breakfast clubs and homework clubs are available for students.

In New Zealand, schools develop an attendance plan that is underpinned by an holistic approach towards school attendance, including the provision of a safe and engaging learning environment, and where schools see themselves as the hub of the community that connects education, health and community services.
WHERE NEXT FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA?

Boosting school attendance in Indigenous communities is a complex exercise. The task has to be kept in perspective and responses have to be focussed and well targeted. This paper provides ideas for policy-makers to consider in shaping policy and program designs. The overarching principle that emerges from the research, as drawn from international and national evidence and data, is that schools and communities require resources and empowerment at the local level to devise strategies that are context sensitive, culturally appropriate, collaborative, and re-energise a love of lifelong learning.

In summary, the following fifteen ‘guideposts’ are proposed for policy-makers and Indigenous communities, to improve school attendance in those communities that require it.

1. Set expectations early and establish patterns early, through sustained investments in early childhood education.
2. Build bridges between homes and schools in Indigenous communities.
3. Foster high-performing school leadership which is culturally responsive and externally engaged.
4. Support joint school–community collaborative initiatives in high-risk communities over the long haul.
5. Emphasise fostering and stimulating community demand for high-quality and culturally responsive lifelong learning.
6. Think creatively and laterally about community-based solutions and then seed and fertilise innovation, by investing in community-based human and financial resources.
7. Embrace whole-child and place-based models.
8. Integrate children’s academic development with their health, wellbeing and safety by supporting schools and the Indigenous non-government community sector simultaneously.
9. Improve data systems by making them transparent and regularly reported.
10. Refine and sharpen the data relating to why children and young people are missing school.
11. Innovate and open up choices for teenagers to retain their engagement in school education, through vocational education and training programs and also through project-based programs, creativity learning, work studies and entrepreneurial education.
12. Create reward and recognition systems for regular school attendees.
14. Recruit Indigenous students into Initial Teacher Education.
15. Foster the systematic professional development of teachers to ensure that there is continuous improvement in learner-centred teaching.

Bolstering school attendance in those Indigenous communities that require it is clearly a challenge requiring cooperative and concerted action between well-resourced schools and well-resourced communities.
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School attendance data
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