



INDIGENOUS
EDUCATION
& BOARDING
AUSTRALIA

KEYNOTE

Andrew Giles MP

Federal Member for Scullin, VIC
Shadow Assistant Minister for Schools

13 March 2019. Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, and pay my respects to elders - past, present and emerging.

It's a great privilege to be here today, to share Labor's thinking on this important policy question, and to share in the wisdom that is in this room. I hope today can be the start of an ongoing dialogue, not just the giving of an address.

Thank you to the organisers of this symposium, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to it, and an important debate.

A couple of weeks ago the parliament considered the latest closing the gap report, which can be summarised as: too little closing, too great a gap, ten years on.

In 2015, that year's report noted that around 20% in school performance related to school attendance. Today, the target to close the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous attendance is not on track. In fact, whilst there has been some, albeit uneven, progress towards year 12 attainment targets, there has not been an improvement in respect of attendance since 2014.

Attendance lessens once secondary school is commenced, and the gap increases - this is also the case when we look to remote, and very remote areas, where the trend is more pronounced.

Of course, this has followed commitments of the present government to both incorporate attendance targets into closing the gap, and, on the part of Minister Scullion in particular, to emphasise the importance of indigenous boarding.

Distance matters when it comes to education - remoteness is of course one of the loadings recognised in the original Gonski report. And it seems very clear to me that distance matters more acutely when we also consider the complexities of intergenerational trauma, and the other cultural questions which impact on the success of indigenous boarding experiences (as well as the challenges of logistics and the burden of administration) and so for so many young First Nations peoples on whether their schooling meets their needs, and our obligations.

For me, the logic underpinning our needs-based approach to schools funding means that we don't simply recognise the fact that children begin their schooling journey from differing starting points, we must also account for their circumstances on their terms, working with family and community.

This is especially important when we are talking about educational pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who live in remote and very remote communities.

Boarding is and will be an important part of the educational experience of many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, one in five of whom live in remote areas of our country. But its role and resourcing requires more attention from policy-makers, and more input from those directly affected, if it is to make the contribution it should to opening up opportunities, in education and in life.

Labor's approach to schools education for First Nations children

The importance Labor attaches to the education portfolio is demonstrated by it have been chosen by our deputy leader, Tanya Plibersek. Of course, this is matched by Bill Shorten taking on responsibility for First Nations issues himself, working with Senator Pat Dodson.

Education is the key to both Australia achieving economic growth that is inclusive and sustainable, and to our fight against inequality.

Before we get to the moral imperative that drives so many of us in Labor to be passionate advocates for education and its transformative powers, let's briefly touch on the economic case for doing better.

Recent research conducted for the Gonski Institute has estimated that if we are able to lift non-urban educational attainment in Australia to the same level as that in our cities, we could lift our GDP by 3.3%. Clearly, reaching this goal requires closing not only the regional gap, but that between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

Whilst there is much talk of Australia's schooling performance against various international rankings, I am more concerned about the widening gaps within Australia.

This is the link between the hard economics and the moral dimension too. These gaps, of course, don't end when school ends. They are separating Australians through their life courses, as they hold back our economic performance.

So we see in this year's Closing the Gap report, progress in that we are on track to meet our year 12 attainment targets, but behind in not just school attendance but reading, writing and numeracy too.

We have seen a marked improvement in year 12 attainment by First Nations Australians from very remote regions - from 23% to 43% in the decade 2006-2016. This represents the largest gain in attainment and a major contribution to this target being on track - thanks in part to people in this room. This is a major improvement but a huge gap remains compared with non-indigenous Australians from similar regions.

And the school attendance performance is very concerning, this being so fundamental to learning and building towards the other goals.

This is especially so for indigenous students in very remote areas, where the attendance rate is more than 20% less than for those in more metropolitan parts of the country.

And this is why that doing better at supporting options for studying away from home matters so much.

The fact remains that are failing too many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, tragically so too many times.

Closing the gap is about lives, not just life opportunities in the abstract.

Every child deserves a great education, no matter who they are or where they live.

And there's not a one-size fits all approach - a needs-based approach is all about responding to the individual circumstances and attributes of our kids as learners.

Labor recognises this.

This is why we have committed an additional \$14 billion to restore needs-based funding to all our schools.

This is why we have focused on developing leadership in schools; supporting and elevating the status of the teaching profession; responding to the great challenge of building a more inclusive approach to schooling for students with disability and why we've committed to a national evidence institute for education, to ensure that our teachers and other staff in schools have access to all the tools they need.

I note the recent initiative of the government to encourage teachers to remote schools. Surely, though, the point is not simply to attract teachers to remote schools but to encourage our very best teachers to community, and to redouble our efforts to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in these classrooms. These are Labor priorities.

Getting great results in school starts before kids enter the classroom. Labor recognises the critical importance of early learning and will ensure universal access to preschool for three and four year olds, replacing the present uncertainty with a bold vision for reform, founded in evidence and equity.

In responding to the latest Closing the Gap Report Bill Shorten committed an incoming Labor government to convene a Nation Summit for First Nation Children within 100 days. This would be a critical foundation for learning, in a culturally safe and appropriate manner, with real agency from the start.

In discussing any aspect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs in this country, we cannot forget the 2014 budget and its half-a-billion dollar cut to indigenous programs. It's often said that we should judge a government's priorities by its allocations rather than its words, and here we see a decision that has profoundly set back our capacity to build effective and enduring partnerships. This has been compounded through the rejection of the statement from the heart.

We would take the opposite path, embracing and prioritising the Statement from the Heart, and redoubling our efforts toward Closing the Gap.

The importance of indigenous boarding

This brings me to indigenous boarding, and to the nearly 6000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are studying away from their homes.

Who are we talking about?

The Study Away review conducted by PMC provides important, though now a little dated, data. It shows that around half the 5700 students granted ABSTUDY away from home benefits did not have effective access to a local secondary school program, such as to support them to year 12. More than three quarters of those students had a resident address classified as remote or very remote.

There's clearly great demand for boarding options, and for the right boarding options. Figures from the Australian Boarding Schools Association, referred to in the Study Away review, suggest demand from ATSI boarding places increased by over 40% from 2012 to 2016. This is consistent with ABSTUDY figures.

I also note a report from the NT News late last year, which referred to recent boarding school closures and other changes, in which Dr John Guenther of the Batchelor Institute was quoted as saying 'There's about 800 spaces for kids from remote communities to go to boarding school in the NT but the demand far exceeds that.' The story goes on to attribute to him that there were approximately 1500 young Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory without access to secondary education at all, as well as over 900 children boarding interstate.

Making sure that every child gets every chance to fulfil his or her potential in school means taking a close look at boarding options for First Nations children, in remote and very remote parts of Australia.

Looking to the evidence, and looking to the lived experience of those directly involved to see how we might better apply a strengths-based, community-led approach to indigenous boarding.

Let me be very clear, Federal Labor sees a major role for indigenous boarding in meeting the educational needs of our First Nations children, and seeks effective partnerships to see successes replicated and challenges met.

We do not seek to impose a particular model of boarding, or indeed to suggest that boarding is the answer to every learning journey for young First Nations people in remote parts of Australia - rather we are concerned to more effectively explore the evidence, and then to better engage with community.

One thing is clear: there is no single template that can be applied at large.

Whilst I'm been impressed with particular models, and I carry with me some powerful memories - such as from my visit yesterday to Cowboys House in Townsville - I don't believe it's the role of the Commonwealth to dictate how things should be done.

Our concern should rather be to enable and help sustain a range of options which work, including emerging models featuring stand-alone residential arrangements with schooling choice. And ensuring that options can be made available within regions.

In our primary role as a funder, we have maintained our consistent report for a sector-blind as well as needs-based approach to schools funding. This is critical for a schooling sector that is dominated by non-government providers.

More generally, whilst our course the national government does not have all the relevant policy levers, we recognise that there is a national interest at stake here, ensuring every child gets every chance to learn and thrive in school.

Specifically, supporting all those involved in indigenous boarding to secure better outcomes, and deeper engagement, has to be a significant part of our work in the schools portfolio.

Much work has been started, but which remains unfinished in this area. I'm conscious of a number of relevant reports, like Study Away, the Halsey review and the excellent and challenging report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee, which is yet to be responded to by government. Of course, we cannot ignore the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

The Education Council in 2015 adopted a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy, to build on the work towards closing the gap and recognising the national and sectoral collaborations required for us to make the difference required. This appears to have stalled

In Labor, we'd like to see this progressed, in partnership.

We want to hear from the sector - those here today- about how we can respond more effectively to address a number of critical questions.

Such as:

- what does the sector of the future look like? Can we agree upon a shared vision which is sustainable and which affords students an appropriate range of options that are culturally safe and affordable and which support their academic and wider needs?
- Can we develop, retain and share better data? That this holds policymaking back in 2019 is shocking. A particular issue of relevance is tracking information relevant to students moving between jurisdictions to board. We appreciate the challenge this presents to schools, especially here in Queensland.
- How can we continue to address issues with abstudy? And other Commonwealth payments and supports, so we are effectively addressing access, equity and viability. Scholarships alone can't be the answer when it comes to supporting First Nations kids from remote communities towards boarding options. We need support systems that work for schools, other boarding providers and, most importantly, for students and their families. Acknowledging some improvements in processing, there is clearly more to be done to ensure not just system improvements but to enable effective participation - so that students don't have their schooling held up by ABSTUDY delays.
- How can we more effectively engage family and community in schooling decisions, where distance is at issue? And ensure cultural safety? What steps can be taken to open up more

options that are closer to, and more closely connected to, community? Can we develop the role and influence of the Remote Indigenous Parents Association?

- In this, the UN year of indigenous language, how can we better manage language considerations in boarding environments?
- We must maintain a gender lens on our endeavours here, and see girls' boarding options given all the attention provided to those for boys.
- Issues of workforce development can't be forgotten, either - particularly in supporting more First Nations teachers.

Amongst many other thoughtful recommendations, the House of Representatives Indigenous Affairs Committee called for consultation to be led by the Commonwealth towards a National Indigenous Boarding strategy. This would involve the states, territories and indigenous leaders, and require facilities to meet the Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residences as well as a National Indigenous Cultural Standard, and account for the physical and mental health needs of indigenous students.

This seems to me a useful starting point, for a wider conversation, led by the Commonwealth, but not necessity driven from Canberra.

I note the support of Boarding Australia for such an initiative. This is important.

Our national interest in the future of Young First Nations people demands that we reject silos and instead accept a wider responsibility. That we work to secure enduring partnerships which recognise the extraordinary diversity in the First Nations communities in remote parts of Australia, and which build and sustain schooling options which reflect that diversity.

Let's celebrate and share the successes, and let's talk more frankly about where we haven't achieved as we would like to have done.

Let's build a stronger evidence base, and let's listen more closely to those with the biggest stake in this - young First Nations people and their families.