

Benefits boost to close indigenous schooling gap



Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt. Picture: Kym Smith

Aboriginal parents with children at boarding school will be an average \$6000 better off under a push by the Morrison government to increase the high school completion rates of indigenous Australians.

As part of Scott Morrison's drive to make "practical" improvements in the lives of indigenous communities, the government will introduce a bill to parliament today that will increase support to more than 2000 Aboriginal families who have children who leave their hometown to go to school.

The measures will allow Aboriginal parents to continue to receive family tax benefits until their children finish high school, on top of direct payments to students through the ABSTUDY scheme.

Under the current rules, Aboriginal parents with children on ABSTUDY payments have their family tax benefits cut off when their children turn 16.

Social Services Minister Anne Ruston said the measure would provide the average eligible family with an extra \$5900 a year.

She said the extra money would help more Aboriginal children complete secondary school, as the government attempts to close the gap on education.

"Families rely on family tax benefits to assist with the ongoing costs of their children's daily incidentals while they are away at school, such as clothing, toiletries, medicines and pocket money, as well as their essential living costs when they are at home during school holidays." Senator Ruston said.

"This bill extends family tax benefits to indigenous families until students complete Year 12 and will help close the gap in educational attainment.

"This change will commence in January 2020.

“The boost in financial support will help these students to complete school, leading to better employment prospects.”

Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt said the initiative would align with the government’s objectives to increase school attendance.

Government data shows that 60 per cent of ABSTUDY students drop out of school between the ages of 15 and 17.

Indigenous children who drop out of high school are 30 per cent more likely to be on an unemployment payment after 10 years of leaving school, according to government modelling.

The Closing the Gap report released in February showed targets for indigenous school attendance were not on track to be met.

Attendance rates for indigenous students have failed to improve between 2014 and 2018 at about 82 per cent, lower than the 92 per cent attendance rate of non-indigenous students.

In remote areas, school attendance by indigenous students is lower and the gap with non--indigenous students is larger, with attendance being as low as 63 per cent in some areas.

However, Year 12 attainment rates have improved, with the gap narrowing from 36 percentage points in 2006 to 24 percentage points in 2016.

Indigenous children living in remote areas have experienced the largest gains in high school completions, with rates rising from 23 per cent in 2006 to 43 per cent in 2016.

The Prime Minister earlier this year said there needed to be improvements with achieving the Closing the Gap targets, created under former prime minister Kevin Rudd.

Exclusive

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