

## **INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE**

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NEW SOUTH WALES

**AECG**

INCORPORATED

ABN 29 271 072 930

The Hon Ian West, MLC  
Committee Chair  
Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Legislative Council  
NSW Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr West

Please find attached the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's submission to the Inquiry into Indigenous Disadvantage in NSW.

The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG) is acknowledged by the NSW Government as the peak advisory group on Aboriginal education. The NSW AECG is a community based organisation made up of voluntary members from across the State.

The NSW AECG promotes respect, empowerment and self-determination and believes the process of collaborative consultation is integral to equal partnerships and is fundamental to the achievement of equality.

I look forward to our meeting in the near future.

Yours sincerely

Carlo Svagelli  
President  
NSW AECG Inc

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**SUMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS  
DISADVANTAGE  
IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage is not only essential for the future of Aboriginal people and communities but for Australia's future and its profile and reputation in an increasingly demanding global economy.

**"Australia's future depends on each citizen having necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. " *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty – First Century***

Australia currently has the worst record in terms of the life expectancy gap in comparison to NZ, Canada or the USA. While Australia's gap is approximately 17 years, NZ is 8 yrs, Canada 7.5 years and the USA 7 years (*A Fair Go for all Australians: International Comparisons, 2007 – 10 Essentials by Australian Council of Social Service*), we are clearly well behind other countries who have continually made progress in this area even when conservative governments have been in power.

Lack of education including access, opportunities and outcomes has an enormous impact on Aboriginal life expectancy. Jeff McMullen stated in his lecture *"Closing the Space between Us – The Rights of Aboriginal Children"* University of Newcastle 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2007;

**" Drawing on the work of Dr Fraser Mustard and others in Canada, we know that for every additional year of education we can add to a whole community of those teenage Aboriginal girls who will become young mothers we can add up to four years to life expectancy of their first baby. .... The Aboriginal scholar, Professor Ken Wyatt adds that every additional year of education also reduces the risk of Aboriginal infant mortality by seven to ten percent."**

Key reasons for this increase in life expectancy are that education provides the following:

- Potential to move out of the poverty cycle that many Aboriginal people and sometimes whole communities are trapped in through an increase in socio economic status
- Improved employment and life opportunities and therefore sense of place, purpose and optimism
- Access to information, knowledge, services etc and therefore empowerment to make satisfactory choices
- Avenues and potential to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for ongoing generational adaptation and survival in an ever increasing changing and



competitive world, while maintaining and strengthening identity, culture and heritage

- Inclusiveness both as Aboriginal people and active Australian citizens with opportunities to influence society without sacrificing their particular world view
- Opportunities and potential to educate all Australians on issues of social justice, human rights and the significant role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's past, present and future. This in turn provides a positive environment for the necessary changes required to close the life expectancy gap.
- To influence and impact on peoples lives throughout their lifetime – the importance of lifelong learning
- Opportunities to develop and sustain real partnerships between people, their communities and a range of educational providers including Aboriginal people and communities / organisations as key educational providers to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

Clearly then, improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal people will lead to improved life expectancy. However, within the education realm, a clear gap exists between the educational achievements for Aboriginal students compared to non-Aboriginal students thus compounding disadvantage. If education has such a high impact on life expectancy then one of the crucial issues is how do you encourage and support Aboriginal children to attend and stay on at school at least to the compulsory age but more importantly beyond this to senior and tertiary education. Significantly, the retention rate of Aboriginal students in schools continues to be poor.

There are many factors that impact on attendance, retention and achievement. Key factors are:

- Ensuring effective leadership at the school level creating an environment that is safe and supportive, free from racism and ensuring that teaching and learning is the focus
- The quality of the teachers and the quality of teaching. Teachers need to have a thorough understanding of Aboriginal history and their cultures so that identity is fostered whilst at the same time have high expectations of their Aboriginal students to achieve at the same level as other students. The pedagogy and curriculum needs to be relevant and engaging. Universities need to provide this in their teacher training courses and schools need to work with their local communities to achieve this.
- Curriculum support needs to focus on pedagogies that support all Aboriginal students learning which ultimately enhances all students learning. What is good teaching practice for Aboriginal students benefits all students. The reverse does not apply, good teaching practice for all students is not necessarily beneficial to Aboriginal students.



- The levels of literacy and numeracy needs to be comparable to that of non-Aboriginal students. As Aboriginal children go through the school system they need to have the levels of literacy and numeracy that enable them to engage in the rigorous secondary curriculum including the more challenging subjects in the HSC so as to move into professions and areas that give them a quality of life, informed choices and ultimately break the cycle of poverty and improve their socio economic status.
- Accessing both formal and informal "prior to school" services that prepare children for an equitable start to school. There are many barriers for Aboriginal families in accessing these services with the key ones being affordability and transport.
- Services that support Aboriginal families are often centred on regional and remote areas. Often funding is directed this way. Given that the largest populations of Aboriginal people are in urban areas there can often be a gap in service provision. The needs of Aboriginal people in remote and regional areas of NSW are different to those in urban areas. While there are some similarities we must be careful to ensure that one size does not fit all – that different communities have different needs and any intervention, support, service provision should reflect this. This especially relates to schools where, for example, issues surrounding Aboriginal identity amongst Aboriginal children in urban areas can be more complex than that in regional areas so that the teaching of Aboriginal culture plays a much more significant role in urban areas.

With the recent events, actions and commentary surrounding the controversial intervention in the Northern Territory that has attracted world wide attention, it is important to consider this in the NSW context as vague suggestions of similar plans have been alluded to. It is the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group's understanding that some elements of the Northern Territory intervention have already been implemented in parts of NSW.

We must be careful that issues around the lack of access and achievement in education are not seen as Aboriginal problems, but are in fact associated with levels of low socio economic status and multiple disadvantages. Significantly many Aboriginal people are affected as a result of past government policies and practices.

Forcing people to change their behaviours cannot bring about sustainable change. Sustainable change is brought about when people have ownership of the whole process and are involved in the decision making process. This is essential before any intervention is to take place.

We have surely moved past the mission manager mentality of non-Aboriginal people making decisions on what they consider best for Aboriginal people. It did not work in the past. History provides many examples and valuable lessons to support this.

For Aboriginal students to stay on at school and increase their life expectancy, parents need to be supported in ensuring their children reach their full potential at school. There are a number of reasons why many Aboriginal parents have difficulty

supporting their children at school. These include; the level of poverty that many Aboriginal people experience and the exclusion and segregation of Aboriginal people in NSW government schools up until the 1970's. The impact of this is immeasurable and ongoing.

There needs to be a whole of government approach that supports Aboriginal parents to better support their children in attaining a quality education. Health and education have always been intrinsically linked but housing and community services also play significant roles as Australia's increasingly deregulated economy widens the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

Further, the interrelationship between all the key factors impacting on the current life expectancy gap needs be clearly identified and explored to emphasise the importance of a holistic approach to improving the lifestyle chances of Aboriginal Australians.

NSW is playing a key role in attempting to do this under the Department of Aboriginal Affairs 'Two Ways Together Plan' which is the main strategy to support Aboriginal people in the NSW State Plan. A great deal of work needs to be done in facilitating agencies to work together through genuine consultation and partnerships to meet the needs and support Aboriginal people at all levels.

It is essential that throughout this process the most appropriate key stakeholders are actively engaged through consultation and negotiation and their expertise is respected on the same level as all contributors. This can only be done in partnership with Aboriginal people and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group is a vehicle in which Aboriginal communities can have a voice and keep agencies and government accountable.