

# Education the key to equality

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THE AGE  
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Quality schooling is the one essential ingredient needed for indigenous children.

**T**HE major difference between equality and inequality is very simple — education. Family circumstances and genetics play their part, but the be all and end all to eradicating inequality is a good education.

It is the one essential ingredient above all others that would raise the indigenous communities of northern Australia out of poverty and Third World conditions to an equal place with white Australia — equal health, equal wealth and equal status.

As indigenous leader Noel Pearson said recently, “indigenous education is a shameful failure”.

There is no colour divide in maths, physics, world history, geography or languages. Nor to the guaranteed opportunities education brings. The only barrier is the ability to deliver it quickly enough, in enough quantity and quality to make the transformation. And it does need to be done quickly — we are already 200 years behind time.

Pearson calls for two new methods of delivery: a change in the governance of indigenous schools; and a departure from centralised public education delivery in favour of independent publicly funded schools like those known in the United States as charter schools.

This is no easy solution. Cultural barriers, poverty, misunderstandings and a chronic lack of infrastructure are real problems, but they are all within our capacity to solve. If for no other reason, our pride as a nation should drive us.

We are justly proud of our athletes and sportsmen, our businessmen and women, our actors, painters and scholars. But while we parade our successes on the world stage, just a few words bring us crashing down: “You allow your indigenous people to live in poverty and ignorance. On that matter you are by world standards a huge failure.”

We are extraordinarily accomplished and generous in bringing many different cultures from around the world to live peacefully and successfully in this country, yet we cannot accommodate our own indigenous culture.

The delivery of well-educated, indigenous VCE students to universities and TAFEs can be achieved on two levels. Our top schools, both public and private, receive a fortune in government funding and commonly see about 90 per cent of their students enrol in university. They should take on the task of educating the brightest indigenous children.

I once chaired a lunch meeting at which principals made clear their embarrassment that our schools are educating students from cultures all around the globe, but not educating significant numbers of our own indigenous children. Tired of waiting for government policy, many top schools have embarked on their own scholarship schemes in an ad hoc manner.

It is estimated that by working with indigenous communities and with government, these schools could deliver 1000 indigenous university entrants each year without causing a ripple in their daily routines. The problems of culture shock and family support for students at such schools can be solved with the help of local communities.

The second level involves enticing children in the outback to school and providing them with quality teaching. Interactive technology means that teachers throughout the outback can work with the best “virtual” teachers in city schools.

School attendance might be a condition for joining the local football team, going to swim, or for mum and dad to collect their welfare cheque. If there is transport, a reason to turn up and a pay-off, children will attend. Initiatives in Cape York showing between 70 and 96 per cent attendance rates put paid to arguments by sceptics that high indigenous attendance in far north and outback Australia are unachievable.

Fresh thinking is called for in the delivery of education in outback Australia and it may be we will never get that from government bureaucrats. Is it time for private enterprise — the bastions of initiative and lateral thinking — to bring some of their energy and relentless determination to the table?

The initiative presently being considered in Queensland of an independent indigenous academy will have its critics, but it is the sort of bold move that is needed. It should attract private money from the many Australian companies and benefactors who support and sponsor important community causes. And what more important cause in this country could there be?

Private non-profit schools should collectively take up this challenge as well. With access to private foundations and innovative teaching techniques, and being experienced in providing accommodation and cultural leadership, they are well placed to deliver such focused education institutions.

I am damned if I know why Australia's determination, sense of fairness and ingenuity have not enabled us to overcome this major national failure — even if for no other reason than sheer embarrassment.

Dr Robert Dean is a barrister and former Liberal member of the Victorian Parliament.

Apologies made,  
time for action

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