

MEDIA RELEASE

13/11/08

MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITIES: POLICY PARTNERSHIPS NOT PEOPLE PUNISHMENT

DR CHRIS SARRA, INDIGENOUS EDUCATION LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

In this political climate demanding evidence-based policy, I find it strange that we hear calls to extend into other communities the unfounded and whimsical policies and processes such as those underpinning the NT Intervention and the Families Responsibilities Commission. Even the architects of such expensive processes acknowledge the dramatic failure of government to provide adequate education, health and justice services to remote Aboriginal communities. Lex Wotton, a well balanced family man with a passion for his children, was even prepared to do jail time to highlight this. So how come it seems we only get out the stick for Aboriginal people?

For all of the huffing and puffing about mutual responsibilities there has only been a one-sided approach to ensure 'functionality' in communities and that is to punish Aboriginal parents. This approach is too convenient for service providers who tuck themselves away in Aboriginal communities, because they know they would never survive in mainstream centres. If I'm an incompetent principal of an Aboriginal school, lacking in courage to challenge parents about why their children are not attending school, it doesn't matter. Aborigines get the blame. If I'm an incompetent teacher filling the school day with photocopied worksheets, videos and Nintendo, it doesn't matter. Aborigines will get the blame.

What disgusts me about these more recent approaches -- pretending to be innovative, but simply reflecting what life was like in the mission days -- is that they never seriously call into question the roles and responsibilities of such service providers. They also ignore the rights of Aboriginal people to quality service provision. Those providers, like teachers and principals, are paid

taxpayers' money to be in a very important relationship with Aboriginal children and parents, and as such, must be challenged to reflect on their attitudes, expectations and professional behaviours, and consider how these contribute to chronic non-attendance at school.

The notion of linking welfare payments to school attendance has never made sense to me. I am an advocate for respectful partnerships, not punishment.

In my 6 ½ years as Principal of Cherbourg school I visited many homes of parents who were struggling to get their children to school. I remember very well visiting a grandmother to say "Your grandson is missing a lot of school, and I am very worried that if he doesn't get with it he is really going to struggle at high school". As she holds one baby in her arm, tries to hush down two little ones fighting in the kitchen, and reaches over to stick a bottle in the mouth of a little one lying on the couch, she says to me, "I've been sending him along!" And I believe her absolutely.

Here is a lady that needs support, not punishment. Imagine what cutting welfare payments would do to her household.

As the community's school principal in this circumstance, I do not need to go to something like a Family Responsibility Commissioner to get the stick out. Like all school principals I have the authority to report her for breaching the Education Act which makes schooling compulsory for all children. I have exercised this authority on other occasions but it just didn't seem right here.

Instead I think to myself, "I am paid taxpayer's money to be in this relationship with you. I do not control what happens in your household and I should never seek to. I do have authority to control what happens in our school though and I have to reflect on my practice and the practice of my colleagues, to consider ways of getting your child to make the decision to come to school himself."

From there all of us in the school have to embrace the Aboriginal leadership that exists in the community to work in partnership with us, to create a school that the child wants to come to - a

place where people are nice to him. A place where he is challenged to be the best he can be in a highly structured and loving environment, and where the expectations are high and explicitly expressed by all.

Interestingly, before I ever went to Cherbourg I recall people telling me it was impossible to make educational progress because the community lacked human capacity. The commentary was the same as the diatribe I hear today about a lack of human capacity in Aboriginal communities. Yet on my arrival I found something tremendously different.

I was able to lead a team of committed educators that readily acknowledged that a strong and smart Aboriginal identity existed. With this belief established, we improved school attendance and educational outcomes by doing things 'with' the community and its people, and not 'to' them.

This approach, which acknowledges human decency and capacity in Aboriginal people, is one I share with school leaders across the country. Together as school leaders we actively ignore the ranting about how dysfunctional Aboriginal parents are, as it pretends to render our efforts as educators futile. We know that while some educators can be easily seduced by such rhetoric, because it lets them off the hook, hardworking and committed educators in Aboriginal communities can and do make a difference.

We know that getting children to school in Aboriginal communities is very, very hard work, yet not an insurmountable task. I know this because I did it with my team at Cherbourg, and I am watching it being done in schools throughout Australia.

At Cherbourg, our team reduced unexplained absenteeism by 94% within 18 months. We took real attendance at school from 63% in 1998, to 93% in 2004. When I challenged students to be strong and smart, and to act like 'Aborigines' instead of acting like delinquents, 105 children out of 160 had less than 5 days absent from school for the term.

The schools that we have worked with to develop and apply the Stronger Smarter Leadership philosophy also signal similar data. Glenroi Heights Public School in Orange, Menindee Central School in the Far West and Rutherford Technical College in Maitland, NSW; Mt Margaret Remote Aboriginal School in WA; Kubin Island Campus of Tagai State College in the Torres Strait and Mapoon Campus of Western Cape College in QLD; Murray Upper School in SA. All these schools - whether they are remote, rural or urban, primary or secondary - have worked with us and all have Indigenous student attendance currently at better than 90%.

All of these schools take their role as educators seriously -- believing they can make a difference and that a stronger smarter Aboriginal identity actually exists. We refuse to collude with watered down perceptions of who Aboriginal students are, and we refuse to collude with watered down policy approaches that say to Aboriginal people things like "You are so hopeless and despicable that we must send the army in to fix you" or "You are showing some potential; lets get you out of that community so you don't end up like the rest of them!"

The schools we create must be places that Aboriginal children and parents can connect with. They must be places in which it is ok to dream great things. They must be places that say to children "I believe in you!"

This is not some whimsical theorizing about a profession I know very little about. It is not some snake oil that I have bought because there was nothing else on the 'quick and easy policy' shelf. This is something that comes from exceptionally hard work, and an unyielding belief in the humanity of Aboriginal people.

For me the education revolution has started in Indigenous education. It has been started by educators remembering why we got into our profession in the first place; believing we truly can make a positive difference to the lives of children. From that point, what follows is that it is about doing things 'with' Aboriginal communities, and not 'to' them.

This is not something we do in isolation however. I challenge police and justice providers, health professionals and other service providers in Aboriginal communities, to exercise their existing authority, and own their part of this complex issue of supporting and respectfully challenging families and children to become actively engaged in positive schooling processes.

As Aboriginal Australians the challenge for us is to reflect on who we really are, and where we have come from, draw strength from our land and our respective communities, and really stand up for our children. Let our identity be defined by the unquestionable truth about us as the descendants of the oldest living human culture in the world, truly strong proud custodians of the land, and not by the years of controlled neglect. We have survived, and our children need us today more than ever.

As for government, sit down with people who know what they are doing, and let the next \$48 million be spent on a Services Responsibilities Commission, which scrutinizes the performance of service providers in communities and asks questions like "How can we support, develop and resource your agency so that you can seriously deliver service outcomes that you would consider acceptable for your own children and your own communities?"

It is a time for hope now, not a time for blame. Lets embrace together the challenges existing around this complex scenario and lets collude only with a stronger smarter Aboriginal identity. As Australians we can be better and much more sophisticated than this. This is something we can do.

Dr Chris Sarra is available for comment:
Mb 0439743959
Ph:(07) 5316 7462
Fax: (07) 5316 7423