

We need real reform in indigenous public schooling

The starting point for any honest discussion about indigenous education must be the admission that it is, with few exceptions, a massive disaster, and it has been so for a long time.

This disaster is explicable using the familiar market framework of supply and demand. The supply-side concerns the provision of good teaching. It is not just a quantity issue, about how much teaching is available, but perhaps more importantly, the quality of that teaching. The demand-side concerns the desire for learning amongst the community, parents and students.

The supply-demand framework explains why the schools that supply education to the most privileged classes in our society provide much higher quality education and achieve better “outcomes”. Private schools supply good teaching because they have a strong demand from fee-paying parents.

This direct supply-demand market relationship between parents and the school in the private system is absent in public education. Instead, demand has traditionally come through the government, acting in the interests of parents and communities to ensure that quality education was available for their children.

But the government is also the supplier of public education. In indigenous education in particular, but also in public education more broadly, the majority of resources in recent times have been devoted to the self-interest of this supply side. There has been a proliferation of initiatives regarding recruitment, professional development and support.

Our experience in Cape York has been that these supply initiatives have mainly focused on quantity - even then with mixed success - and have not given adequate attention to quality. The few success stories seem to be directly traceable to inspirational leadership at the school level, usually from the Principal, rather than government programs.

I believe that sustainable and widespread improvements in quality cannot come from this supply-side alone. Instead, governments need to take their demand-side role seriously again.

There is an urgent need for renewed commitment to school inspections, universal tests and other devices to ensure standards and to make schools accountable. In addition, high quality educational leadership must be given the opportunity to flourish, rather being mired in strategies, policies and forms to fill out.

This also needs to be backed up by serious demand for learning from communities and parents. Unfortunately, this has often lacking in Cape York due to wider social dysfunction, largely caused by alcohol addiction and passive welfare. For too many of our people, this has made the educational attainment of our children a low priority, if not an irrelevance.

However, dysfunction must not become a catch-all excuse for poor educational outcomes. Even in the worst situations, there are parents who are committed and who send their eager child to school with homework done and bellies full.

Yet we still aren't seeing positive educational outcomes from these children. The current educational system is still failing them.

We have no choice but to improve the public system because it will remain the dominant provider of primary and secondary schooling to our children in the Cape. Universal provision of high-quality public schooling is critical to social and economic development in the Cape.

But to see real change, we need to address the supply and demand-sides of public education simultaneously. On the demand-side, as well as renewed real commitment to government accountability, we need strategies aimed at building the local demand for learning and demand for quality teaching.

Education needs to be exciting, and culturally engaging to encourage parental and community interest. But, if necessary, we need to be prepared to tie parental benefits to school attendance and involvement by their children.

We also need to continue to address the roots of social dysfunction, through continued support for Alcohol Management Plans, engaging families in money management and continuing to tackle passive welfare.

However, we cannot wait for the social situation to "fix itself" on the demand-side. We must believe that good schools can transcend bad social circumstances - and so we must also work on building up good schools.

To this end, we need government that is concerned with the quality of supply, not simply quantity. Government needs to commit to send the best teachers to struggling indigenous schools, and to reduce the current rapid turnover. I am convinced that educational leadership is the key here, but it needs to be demonstrated through commitment on the ground, not further repetition of fine policy theory.

Together in true partnership, communities and government have the capacity to address the crisis in indigenous education. It needs real commitment to reform – but we owe our children nothing less.

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The Cape York Institute is a new public policy organisation established in partnership between the people of Cape York, the Australian and Queensland Governments, and Griffith University. The Institute's aim is to drive new directions in the key economic and social public policy issues facing indigenous communities, and to promote indigenous participation in public policy debates at the regional, state and national levels.