

IEUA
Independent Education Union of Australia

Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh

April 2018



Comments

1. The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the discussion about a refresh to the Closing the Gap strategy.
2. The IEUA is the federally registered union that represents workers, including teachers, principals, and school support staff, in Catholic, other faith-based and community independent schools across all the states and territories of Australia. While the majority of members of the IEUA are teachers, the membership of the IEUA also consists of workers engaged as teacher aides, administrative staff, gardeners, cleaners and caterers.
3. This submission looks at the views of members who answered a survey on the questions provided in the Closing the Gap Refresh discussion paper and website. As could be expected with a large and diverse membership group there was a wide range of responses to the questions.

Do you have any general comments?

4. IEUA members see it as important to listen to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, include the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communicate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is also necessary to avoid criticism, judgement and having a negative approach to this sensitive culture.
5. One option proposed that constitutional recognition, a treaty and strong representation in both houses of parliament would help influence and change attitudes when policies are being formed and implemented.
6. Further, IEUA members emphasise that Closing the Gap issues specific to education require consultation and discussion with teachers, staff and

teacher unions so that strategies to be implemented can be localised and endorsed. Too often, decisions are forced on communities and schools without the necessary negotiations and then these plans fail because they lack local support.

7. One member is particularly concerned about the new Child Care Package as part of the Jobs for Families policy due to commence in July 2018 and the effects it will have on the Aboriginal children that attend her multifunctional Aboriginal children's service (MACS) child care centre.
8. At present the centre charges a small fee of \$15 a day but under the new package the member sees this rising to \$70 or \$80 a day.
9. Many parents of children attending the centre will not meet the activity test requirements in the new package meaning their children will have access to just 24 hours of child care per fortnight. In reality, because childcare centres charge on a per day basis, this means one day of early childhood education and care (ECEC) per week.
10. MACS centres were part of the Budget Based Funded Program and this is now being phased out. These centres are able to apply for supplementary funding through the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) but as of Friday 20 April 2018, just two months away from the start of the new package, the member's centre had not received notification if its application had been successful or not and, if successful, the amount of supplementary funding. This is deeply worrying when budgets need to be finalised and new fee structures put in place.
11. Further concerns about the new package relate to the amount of paperwork parents/carers will need to complete to receive assistance. In particular, the member sees this having a big effect on children where grandparents are the principal carers.

12. The member believes that the new child care package will cause a widening of the gap because young Aboriginal children will not receive a sufficient amount of ECEC to assist them to be well prepared for mainstream schooling.

13. The importance of early learning and preparation for mainstream schooling is highlighted in *Through Growth to Achievement – Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools*, which was released in late April 2018. The first group of recommendations in the report is based on laying the foundations for learning and involves promoting high-quality early learning and seamless transitions into school, the engagement of parents and carers as partners in children’s learning and developing the tools and resources to support this. These very aspects are likely to be in jeopardy for the Aboriginal children who attend the member’s MACS centre.

What does Closing the Gap mean to you?

14. IEUA members see Closing the Gap from a number of different views ranging from programs attempting to close the educational, attendance and retention gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through to total opposition of special funding programs, such as Closing the Gap, that are seen to be favouring one group of people over other groups in Australia. However, it is the view of the IEUA leadership that strategies focused on Closing the Gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are not only necessary but demanded.

15. Closing the Gap is also seen to be coming from the inference of a deficit model and that strategies are imposed on communities by ‘do gooders’ without true consultation. It is also thought that governments make their own decisions on what they think is best and disregard the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

16. Other members see Closing the Gap as a strategy to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a standard of living that mirrors the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. As part of this, it is important, the outcomes and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples be met and sustained.

How can governments, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and business work more effectively together?

17. The key answer to this question is seen as communication. By sitting and listening, by truly hearing what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are saying and what they asking for is how these groups will work effectively together.

18. One solution suggested by members is for all parties to use the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a starting point for this dialogue. After reading and agreeing on the declaration the parties will be able to create a working environment that benefits the country. It was recommended that constitutional recognition and a treaty might help bring this to fruition.

19. Further it is important not to make rash decisions that apply to all communities, as issues are different in each community, and it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are included in the decision making process. Visits to a number of communities are necessary to gain an understanding of local issues and to build relationships with the local people. Inclusion involves respect and cultural sensitivity.

20. Members also stressed that short term plans or contracts do not provide certainty to communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

require plans that move from the grassroots level through to long term developments that evolve with the needs of the community.

How could Closing the Gap targets better measure what is working and what is not?

21. IEUA members think more use of informal discussions with communities is required to be better able to measure targets. At present not all impacts of strategies are being able to be measured effectively.
22. It is also thought that systems currently in place require long-term support so sustainability can be created and best practices identified. These practices can be adopted/adapted to support lesser systems.
23. At the education level it was stated that it might be better to concentrate on the circumstances outside of school. Many issues at home or within the dynamics of families and communities may be affecting the overall expectation to close the gap. If these issues are examined then, perhaps, the targets will show what is working and what is not working.
24. This interdependence of issues has a strong influence on the achievement of targets. Therefore, it is essential that school leaders, teachers and school staff not be blamed for education targets failing to be reached as it is for doctors, nurses and medical staff not to be blamed for health targets not being met.

What indicators should governments focus on to best support the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

25. A wide variety of indicators were put forward by IEUA members for governments to focus upon. These included the circumstances of home life, struggles, community, remoteness, opportunity and direction of support that is not being offered.

26. Once again communication was seen as key to understanding the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is necessary to consult with Elders to identify what is happening in their communities and to create an awareness within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that others understand their plights and are willing to support the journey. Again, it was suggested that constitutional recognition and a treaty would assist in achieving this.

27. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be provided with positive opportunities that will allow them to feel adequate in asking for help and speaking out. Many fear rejection and many are disengaged in the workplace due to management and endemic racism that they encounter. These workers have very different perspectives of programs than that of the management who are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Should Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated into the Closing the Gap framework? How?

28. It is seen as important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture be incorporated into the Closing the Gap framework, as it should be the underlying driving force of the strategy. This is one way of ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples take ownership of the initiative and of acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

29. In education, evidence suggests students are more engaged when they see themselves reflected in the classroom. This is done through the use of culturally appropriate and culturally safe resources. Therefore, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students it is important that local culture plays a strong and relevant role in their school life.

What do you think are the key targets or commitments that should be measured in a refreshed Closing the Gap agenda?

30. IEUA members see some key targets that a refreshed Closing the Gap should concentrate on. These include long-term employment and the industries Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples are involved in, housing and the sense of safety and permanency this provides, incarceration rates of children and transition to adult detention, and issues surrounding school attendance and family engagement with schools.
31. One option proposed that the Closing the Gap refresh involve working through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples because this document identifies all the Closing the Gap targets and more. By acting on this document it is believed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lives will be improved.
32. The IEUA strongly believes that Closing the Gap needs to continue; refreshed definitely but not abandoned. Measureable improvements have been made for some targets e.g. four year olds enrolled in early education and Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates, and it is important that strategies continue to be implemented to achieve further and build upon these successes.



Chris Watt

Federal Secretary

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