

Setting readers to rights

Traditional approaches to education service delivery have failed, says Kirsten Storry

IN 1997, federal, state and territory education ministers agreed that "every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years".

Yet by 2004, four out of five children in years 3 and 5 in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory were still not achieving the minimum literacy benchmark, let alone the literacy they need to prosper.

The gap in literacy between remote and urban Aboriginal children was even bigger than the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

It is time to acknowledge that traditional education service delivery is not working, particularly in the smaller remote communities. It is time to trial innovative solutions.

Governments at the recent summit on violence and abuse in communities were stumped for a collective way forward to ensure that all Aboriginal children are enrolled in and attend school. Meanwhile, some community and private sector organisations have already come up with great ideas and have begun the task of tackling literacy in remote communities.

The Story Writing in Remote Locations project, the brainchild of Lawry Mahon at Victoria University, has been operating for the past decade. Student volunteers work with children, parents and elders to record their stories and put together books for the children and their local library to keep. The Yachad Accelerated Learning Program has been undertaking a three-year pilot targeting the lowest performing students with after-hours tutoring. Many mining companies in remote northern Australia also offer literacy and numeracy training as part of preferential employment schemes.

But how effective have these projects been? We lack readily available information and rigorous evaluation of them. In cases where projects are getting great results, we need to facilitate information sharing and make successful projects more easily replicable. A simple website could provide information on existing services and match up communities and literacy providers to form partnerships.

Even better, we could get behind innovative school models to stop the cycle of low educational achievement in the school system. Catch-up literacy training for adults is no substitute for at least 10 years of full school education.

Innovative school models exist but need to be championed by private sector sponsors. Those private sector organisations willing to be innovators should become involved in primary and secondary education in remote communities.

So far, private sector involvement in Aboriginal education has been mainly at the secondary and tertiary levels in urban centres. There are several examples of private sector sponsorship of successful scholarship programs for children to board at private schools, including the Cape York Institute's Higher Expectations program and St Joseph's indigenous fund. What is missing is private sector involvement in education at the primary and secondary school levels within remote communities. So what are the options for private sector innovators?

One option is for communities to partner with non-government schools to establish satellite schools or campuses. Non-government schools are well placed because they have established curriculums and systems and could staff a satellite campus by seconding their teachers or hiring specialist teachers. The schools could receive funding according to the existing state and federal entitlements, with additional funding for teacher housing and the necessary technology and facilities.

St Andrew's Cathedral School in Sydney is proposing to lead innovation in this area by establishing a primary school campus for Aboriginal children in the inner-city suburb of Redfern. High expectations and early intervention will equip children with the knowledge and skills to succeed at any secondary school and avoid the cycle of low achievement. The bold and exciting vision is to fund places at the school through private sector and individual sponsorship.

A second option is for communities to partner with another school, a community group or a private sector organisation to establish charter schools, if governments introduce enabling legislation. Charter laws can vary widely in their detail but, in essence, charter schools are independent of government schools. Charter schools are funded by, and accountable to, governments but have greater financial, operational and educational autonomy than normal government schools. In return, charter schools must meet the terms of their charter, such as achievement levels and attendance rates. Under charter laws, existing schools in communities could also have the option to self-manage or seek a management partnership with the private sector.

The bottom line is that four out of five children in remote communities are leaving primary school (and in many cases the school system) with less than a Year 5 literacy level. Governments have failed to provide this most basic service in many remote communities. Innovative school models are needed to close the educational gap and open up life opportunities for children in remote communities.

Kirsten Storry is a policy analyst with the Centre for Independent Studies. Her report, *Tackling Literacy in Remote Aboriginal Communities*, is released today and available at:

