

Lessons to be learnt in tackling truancy

Schools must offer something that no child wants to miss, says Kirsten Storry

Tackling school attendance in remote Aboriginal communities is clearly on the government radar. Earlier this month, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations released its report on the no-school, no-welfare trial at Halls Creek.

At July's Council of Australian Governments meeting, the States and Territories agreed to collect and share data on enrolment and attendance and the Federal Government agreed to establish a national truancy unit to monitor, analyse and report on the data.

Comprehensive and disaggregated reporting of attendance — ideally by schools — is an important step towards directing resources to the greatest need.

But what do we know about what actually works to improve school attendance in remote Aboriginal communities?

The Engaging Parents report on the Halls Creek trial largely discusses what does not work in improving school attendance. Having the 30 trial caregivers sign a voluntary agreement to encourage their children to attend school did not improve their children's attendance. Half of the trial children attended school less than half of the time.

But what the report does not say is that the original trial model did improve school attendance. And it did so significantly.

The original 16 trial caregivers risked having their parenting payments stopped if they failed to attend a Centrelink interview to discuss their child's attendance. Attendance reportedly shot up from 54 per cent to 80 per cent.

The original Halls Creek trial is not the only example that demonstrates that parents can get their children to attend school if the incentive is there.

Kowanyama Community Council at Cape York recently stopped fining parents for the second and subsequent unexplained absences of their child.

Instead, it started a system of banning both parents from the pub for two weeks. In nine months, the number of bans dropped by



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a factor of three. The stick approach is not pretty. Effectively "rewarding" parents with alcohol does not sit well because alcohol abuse in communities brings its own problems.

But the stick approach can work and there is certainly a role for creative thinking on new and better sticks.

The carrot approach has also shown promise.

Only last month, Storyline on SBS television shared the story of Warrego Primary School, outside Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory.

A Munglawurru community elder had approached the teacher with a deal: teach the kids to ride horses like I used to as a stockman and I will make sure they come to school.

Patience, plain hard work, high expectations, teamwork and vision have paid off for the amazing husband-and-wife team, the two female elders who attend school every day and the students.

Warrego Primary School is reported to stand out as the only Northern Territory government school with 100 per cent indigenous attendance.

Djarragun College, near Cairns in

Queensland, has found that providing a bus service to bring children to school has improved attendance.

The big difference, however, is between the high attendance rates of its boarding students and the much lower rates of the bussed-in day students.

The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association has similarly found that its family group homes project — where groups of 10 remote community children live in the care of a married couple in a suburban home while they attend secondary school in Darwin — has resulted in consistent attendance rates over 85 per cent.

No approach is perfect or easy. Stick approaches are heavy handed and carrot approaches are resource intensive.

Even very good schools, like Warrego Primary School and Djarragun College, are still looking for ways to translate good school attendance and achievement into successful transitions to secondary education or the workforce.

We know that very different approaches have worked to improve school attendance. We also know that approaches that work require vision, a clear strategy, hard work and persistence.

What we now need is for governments, schools and communities to start putting what we know into practice.

Noel Pearson's Cape York Partnerships is doing just that. Its rebranded Every Child is Special project will be used at Coen State School to improve education and lift the demand for schooling by students, families and the community. The project has a strong case management focus and a vision to achieve long-term behavioural change.

To tackle school attendance in remote Aboriginal communities, let's start with what is working. In the long run, the best and most sustainable way of improving attendance rates will be to offer a schooling experience that no child wants to miss out on.

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