

Talk

WITH KIRSTEN STORRY

Stop excuses on indigenous education



LAST month, Treasury secretary Ken Henry said Australia would not have managed its current prosperity well unless it improved areas of chronic policy failure, such as indigenous policy.

He said the "severe capability deprivation" of indigenous Australians was a problem that "might demand solutions that are simply too confronting to command widespread community support".

After 30 years of "self-determination" and 10 years of "practical reconciliation", the terrible incarceration, health, education and myriad other statistics are confronting. Yet Mr Henry is absolutely right that the future of indigenous policy may be even more confronting. Yet confront the "inconvenient truth" we must. We need to face the reality that deprivation in remote indigenous communities is far greater than disadvantage in urban communities. There is no denying that, on average, indigenous Australians have much lower education and health outcomes than non-indigenous Australians. But there is also no doubt statistics underrepresent the disadvantage facing the 120,000 Aborigines who live in remote communities.

While national literacy and numeracy tests show indigenous children perform below their non-indigenous counterparts, the situation is most concerning in remote areas. Four out of five children in remote communities in the Northern Territory are leaving primary school (and in many cases the school system) with less than a Year 5 literacy level.

A recent conference on diabetes heard up to one in five indigenous Australians are estimated to have type 2 diabetes. But the extent of diabetes is much worse in remote communities. In the Torres Strait, 30 per cent of Islanders - including children as young as six - have this lifestyle disease.

We also need to accept there are no "magic bullets". For children in remote indigenous communities who want a better future, there is no substitute for at least 10 years' rigorous school edu-



HOW SOUTH AUSTRALIA FARES

■ Indigenous children in South Australia are not gaining the education they need to share in Australia's prosperity.

■ In SA, about nine out of 10 children achieve the national minimum benchmarks for English literacy in Years 3 and 5. But only seven or eight out of 10 indigenous children achieve these benchmarks in Year 3, and only six out of 10 in Year 5.

cation. A recent Australian Council for Educational Research report opined "education provides the key to self-determination and active and equal participation in society". It is good that indigenous children learn their kinship languages. But they also need English literacy and numeracy.

They need teachers with high expectations and persistence, principals with autonomy to

■ On the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, children do not attend school regularly enough to succeed. They attend, on average, three out of every five days in a school week.

■ Good literacy instruction practices in schools are one step in school reform needed to turn around educational achievement in SA's remote communities. Others need to tackle low attendance rates and poor retention rates.

make important decisions, and communities who support their education. On Cape York, Noel Pearson has been tackling the hard education issues.

His Cape York Institute runs the Higher Expectations Program to give potential high educational achievers across the cape access to quality secondary education at city boarding schools. His Cape York Partnerships is running the

Every Child is Special Project that is working with Coen State School to improve education and lift demand for schooling by students, families and the community. We also need to confront the reality that making excuses will not get one more child to attend school, read and write, or go on to secondary school.

Children in many remote communities experience trauma but this does not excuse the failure of our school system to turn out literate and numerate students.

Many leading indigenous Australians are stolen-generation children who have participated admirably in the nation's social and economic life.

We need to reform the school system to stop education funding being wasted. Greater autonomy for principals, evidence-based English literacy instruction, high expectations and better rewards for good teachers are urgently needed first steps.

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