

A hand up, not handouts, is the solution

When tackling indigenous disadvantage there is no substitute for education, writes Kirsten Story

AT A recent social and economic outlook conference Treasury Secretary Ken Henry said Australia would not have managed its current prosperity well unless it took the opportunity to do better in areas of chronic policy failure, like indigenous policy.

Henry boldly continued that the "severe/capability deprivation" of indigenous Australians is one problem area 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. But Henry is absolutely

right that after decades of failed policy action, the future of indigenous policy may be even more confronting. Yet confront the "inconvenient truth", we must.

First, we need to confront 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 that aggregated statistics on indigenous disadvantage under-represent the disadvantage facing the 120,000 Aboriginals who live in remote communities. While literacy and numeracy

testing shows that indigenous school children perform below their non-indigenous counterparts, the situation is most concerning in remote areas.

A conference on indigenous diabetes this week was told that as many as one out of five indigenous Australians is estimated to have type 2 diabetes.

But it is much worse in remote communities. In the Torres Strait, it affects 30 per cent of Islanders — including children as young as six years old.

Second, we 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 of rigorous school education. It is good that indigenous children learn their kinship languages. But they also need English literacy and numeracy. In

Cape York, Noel Pearson has been tackling the hard education issues. His Cape York Institute is running a higher expectations program assisting

potential high achievers from across the Cape to get into quality secondary education at city boarding schools. The Every Child is Special Project is working with Coen State School to improve education and lift the demand for schooling by students, families and the community.

Third, we need to confront the reality that making excuses will not get one more child to attend school, read

There are no 'magic bullets'

and write, or go on to secondary school. Children in many remote communities do experience trauma, but this does not excuse the failure of our school system.

Michael Meleod is one indigenous Australian who has successfully fought his own traumas to become chief executive of Message Stick. His

indigenous telecommunication service provider has carved out a niche in a competitive industry reselling services to corporate and government agencies.

Meleod's message is that Australian business can best help indigenous Australians by doing business with them, not through business subsidies — a hand up, not a handout.

To open up possibilities for indigenous Australians in remote communities to share in Australia's prosperity, we need to stop taking what Henry would call the "soft options" on education.

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 an urgently needed first step.

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