

Excuses fail our neediest students

Good schools do make a difference to vulnerable young lives in remote communities, says Kirsten Storry

IN remote community schools, children often miss one or two days of school a week. Most cannot do maths or read at their age level, and few learn to do so beyond the level of an eight-year-old. As many as half do not make the transition to secondary school and only a handful obtain a Year 12 certificate.

Too often, schools make excuses. Some say that even well-managed schools with good teachers have little influence over attendance, are unable to disguise the plain hard work involved in phonics and times tables, and have little chance of overcoming the destructive consequences of family dysfunction, violence and chronic poor health.

Yet some good schools report much higher rates of attendance, achievement and retention.

So, what is working in good schools in remote indigenous communities? Can good schools make a difference to vulnerable young lives?

Some good schools enrich the supply of quality education. Evidence-based remedial skills programs, secondary school readiness programs and secondary boarding schools are among the initiatives that have shown the potential to achieve results.

Take evidence-based literacy programs, for example. Research has shown that whole-language instruction alone is not effective for 20 to 25 per cent of children. They need intensive, systematic instruction in decoding the printed word.

Ken Rowe of the Australian Council for Educational Research is co-authoring an evaluation of literacy methods in Northern Territory schools. "If you give kids basic skills via explicit instruction," he says, "they take off like rockets."

Some good remote schools are seeing the results.

A scheme called Scaffolding Literacy was piloted in the Pilbara, Kimberley, and southwest of Western Australia. After one year, it halved the percentage of non-readers and more than tripled the percentage of children reading at Year 4 to Year 7 levels.

A program called Making Up Lost Time in Literacy was recently trialled at Cape York, Queensland. After half a school year, it brought the children, on average, from more than three years to one year behind the age-appropriate reading accuracy level, and from nearly four years to less than three years behind the age appropriate comprehension level.

Other good schools are boosting community demand for quality education. School readiness and attendance initiatives have shown promise, at least in the short term.

Children in remote communities often start each school day unprepared, be it through lack of sleep, food, or other material goods. Basic school readiness initiatives provide for their daily needs. At the more sophisticated level, some school readiness programs are helping to develop the positive parenting behaviour needed for children to achieve desired results.

Again, some good schools are already seeing results.

Kuranda District State School has been recognised for its Families as First Teachers project. When the school discovered many families believed that education started with formal schooling and not in the home, a team of community workers and teachers started weekly literacy and numeracy workshops in homes.

Together with other school practices, the project more than halved the percentage of Year 2 students who needed additional literacy support. It reduced by 75 per cent the number of students who needed numeracy support.

To be sure, many of the school-side initiatives at good schools are remedial and many of the community-side initiatives only boost demand in the short term. The best results come from a combination of good teaching and management on the school side, teamed with support and determination on the community side.

At Warrego Primary School in the Northern Territory, for example, the school principal used horsemanship creatively to teach subjects as diverse as maths, health and oral language.

Community elders attended school every day and helped with discipline, while the school offered support. All of the children attended every day and achieved literacy and numeracy benchmarks. The school has successfully translated good attendance and achievement into successful transitions for five children to secondary education at regional and urban boarding schools.

Good schools can and do make a difference. We need to stop making excuses for poor school education in communities and to start learning from what is working inside and outside communities.

Kirsten Storry is a policy analyst on the indigenous affairs research program at the Centre for Independent Studies. Her paper *What is Working in Good Schools in Remote Indigenous Communities?* is released today and available online at www.cis.org.au.