

# Strong leadership, not motherhood statements, will improve indigenous education results

Government can set policy but it needs to work with business on implementation

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FEDERAL School Education Minister Peter Garrett recently read the riot act to states and territories, demanding they dramatically lift their performance under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, warning they are not on track to meet their Closing the Gap targets.

This action plan was signed off by all governments three years ago and set out their strategies for improving indigenous education

outcomes for the period 2010 to 2014.

It comes as no surprise to see that little progress has been made. Three years ago the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation made a public submission on the draft action plan, saying "the plan has too much business as usual, with too much reliance on implementation by existing industry players and the proliferation of the service industry that exists at the heart of indigenous disadvantage, and nowhere near enough innovation. What we need is bold new approaches, coupled with hard-headed implementation, driven by business acumen. Serious people with serious capability."

Now we find ourselves three years on as a nation barely having



made any progress on indigenous education inequality. That's three more years of a lost generation in a policy area that politicians and commentators on both sides have described as the greatest moral challenge of our time. Seriously.

In those same three years, the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation went from a start-up to raising more than \$40 million in joint venture with the federal government and the private sector towards AIEF's target of providing scholarships to educate 7000 indigenous kids at some of the best schools in the nation, and achieving a school retention and Year 12 completion rate which is the highest of any program in the country.

Our politicians talk about education revolutions, but then go and

sign up to action plans that are the opposite of revolutionary — they are business as usual. This is evolutionary not revolutionary. It is incremental not transformational.

We need to be bold and audacious in our approaches. An indigenous education revolution will not be achieved with lofty rhetoric or generic motherhood statements. It will take bold leadership from those brave enough to refuse to accept failure, to challenge the status quo and implement reforms with transparency, accountability, good governance, robust strategies, measurable outcomes, targets and time frames.

This is why it is so vital to involve the private sector. When leading companies see a challenge they focus on a solution and an outcome, put their best people in charge and hold them accountable. Governments do not.

Instead, despite good intentions, the dead hand of bureaucracy means governments get bogged down in process and inputs,

looking busy and making lots of noise with big funding announcements but not achieving results.

Governments are much better off putting policy settings in place, funding proven and scalable programs, and providing leadership and imprimatur while enabling nimble, innovative and efficient organisations to do the implementing.

Fortunately, there are many companies and chief executives who like many Australians understand that all of us are responsible for the current predicament in indigenous Australia and want to be part of the solution; and there is plenty of evidence of success where government and the private sector work hand in hand.

At AIEF we actively identify and target the best corporate partners like a business targets the best customers. But unlike a business, which rightly targets customers who will drive the best returns, as a non-profit but impact-driven business, AIEF targets potential cor-

porate partners for different reasons.

AIEF partners with companies with strong leaders and iconic brands that can use their brand, capabilities and reputation to create shared value, where their commitment goes beyond words or slogans and the company actually lives those values and the business leaders are personally involved. Serious people with serious business and serious capability, such as Ian Narev at Commonwealth Bank, Alan Joyce at Qantas and Jimmy Wilson at BHP Billiton, to name a few.

They have the same commitment to creating shared value in the communities where they oper-

ate as they do in creating profits for their shareholders: they see the two outcomes as symbiotic and mutually inclusive.

When AIEF identifies business leaders and companies like this we want to partner with them if they share our vision for indigenous children.

One of the unique things about AIEF is that we work with only one company in each sector. This is because we want to build deeply engaged and long-term partnerships where we work together to achieve strategic objectives and a sense of common purpose.

This way both organisations add value to one another, and create shared value in the community that is greater than the sum of the parts.

For AIEF the benefits of building this type of long-term and trusted strategic partnership are obvious, just as they are obvious to leaders in the private sector.

AIEF is achieving a 90 per cent success rate in retention and Year

12 completion for indigenous students, which is not only nearly double the national average for indigenous students but also higher than the Year 12 completion rate for non-indigenous students; and this past performance is a solid indicator of future success.

Lifting our funding base by an additional \$100m would help AIEF educate 7000 indigenous students. This type of investment would be revolutionary and transformational and give us a real possibility of helping to Close the Gap on indigenous education inequality because while the funding is vital, what we're really passionate about are the results.

Regrettably, a government-led action plan, which is in fact a plan for continued inaction engulfed in a bureaucratic morass, doesn't stand a chance.

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