

BOOST INDIGENOUS LEARNING WITH CLEARLY DEFINED GOALS

Progress can be facilitated by establishing distinct aims and plans for achieving them

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In the debate about lifting educational attainment outcomes for indigenous students we need to be clear about what we mean, so that we can properly define success.

If we don't define success properly our chances of achieving it rely more on luck rather than on strategy.

A lot of commentators start with the issue of teacher quality, but I prefer to talk about quality teaching. It's a subtle but important distinction.

Reference to quality of teachers runs the risk of stigmatising or judging teachers personally and

individually, potentially alienating them in the process. A positive approach should refer to improving teaching quality rather than an inference that teachers will be classified as a good or poor quality teacher.

When we talk about quality teaching we encompass a holistic community approach encompassing teachers, principals, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers, community leaders, families and parents. We also encompass the structural environment in which teaching occurs, including government, universities and employers.

Quality teaching helps to engage students and families, which in return helps to influence school attendance and educational outcomes.

One of the challenges for the teaching profession is to define what we mean by quality teaching.

If we are ambiguous about what we mean by that term, the strategies we adopt to achieve it will most likely be wrongly targeted — and therefore will fail.

The definition needs to be objective and capture the range of academic, technical and human resource qualities that education professionals and others bring to schooling. Significantly, we also need to be able to measure it. If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.

Teacher tenure is often described as one of the biggest challenges for indigenous education in remote areas, and we hear a lot of talk about incentives to attract and retain teachers in remote schools.

Tenure is clearly an issue. According to Andrew Forrest's report on Creating Parity, teachers in remote community schools in the Northern Territory stay an average of seven months. However, the greatest challenge is to create quality teaching in such schools, and quality does not result from tenure.

Anyone who has seen the film *Waiting for "Superman"* will know that tenure in itself is a significant

cause of inferior performance in some of the world's worst performing schools.

So incentives for attracting teachers to remote areas need to be targeted at attracting and rewarding high-quality teaching and the educational outcomes the teachers achieve. Incentives should not be available to retain or reward inferior teaching or tenure by itself.

Another term that gets thrown around a lot is educational attainment, but we also need to be clear about what we mean by that. School attendance per se is not an educational outcome but rather a vital input towards educational attainment. Parents don't believe the purpose of the education system is for their children merely to show up at school.

While school attendance is necessary to facilitate educational outcomes we need to ensure that the definition of educational success and the outcome we are working towards is to lift educational attainment more broadly. If we don't define success correctly, it's hard to achieve it.

Educational attainment should be defined as an objective

and measurable outcome in its own right — such as achieving Year 12 completion and/or a measurable increase in the academic skills of a student in literacy or numeracy.

The range of methods to achieve educational attainment may be different at each school, depending on factors such as the existing level of achievement within the school, community engagement, and social and economic issues in the community. Stakeholders should work together to identify and negotiate measurable educational attainments to define what success looks like and how it will be measured.

Once we are clear about what outcomes we are seeking to achieve, it is important to have a plan that allows educators to get there. In dealing with any social challenge, the greatest mistake we can make is to do nothing because we can't do everything.

On the other hand, a fast track to failure is to try to do everything at once.

The sweet spot of success is in between — start small, fail, learn and build on success to scale.

A common characteristic of

many successful programs is they start small, experiment, learn and adapt. A lot of trial and error is required to get it right. Entrepreneurial and creative leadership adapts quickly, learns from failures and builds on success.

Hence the entrepreneur's mantra — "fail cheap, fail fast, and fail often". Building on the foundations and lessons of a trialed, implemented and successful approach allows lessons to be drawn to enable a more successful large-scale rollout in order to achieve a more profound and far-reaching impact in the long term.

If we take this approach it helps us resist short-term solutions so we can take a longer-term view by investing in innovative and creative models on a smaller scale in order to learn from failures and build on successes that can be replicated and scaled further for more effective long-term impact.

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