

Union vows to escalate push for conditions to improve Aboriginal students' outcomes

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Federation has committed to intensifying its efforts to close the gap in Aboriginal education outcomes, with a set of comprehensive policy objectives endorsed by a decision of Federation's Annual Conference yesterday.

Acting Deputy President Henry Rajendra told delegates that the unmet needs of Aboriginal Australians are as pressing as they have ever been and "the campaign to close the gap must intensify".

The 2019 Closing the Gap report presented by Prime Minister Scott Morrison detailed the failure of Australian governments to close or narrow the gap; five of the seven targets are not on track to be met.

The depth of this failure was masked in real terms by the fact the Federal Government pushed out the goal dates and lowered target expectations midway through the 11 years of the Closing the Gap strategy.

"It's a very grim situation when we look at the Closing the Gap Report," Mr Rajendra said. "And for a country, unlike some other countries that are developing, this country has a lot of wealth ... but we're lacking a lot of political will."

He expressed dismay at the incarceration rate of young Indigenous Australians, considering Aboriginal people make up 2.8 per cent of the population. They are 26 times more likely to be in youth detention than non-Indigenous Australians and 59 per cent of 10 to 17 year olds in youth detention are Indigenous.

"It's hard to not feel that ache in your chest when you see stats like this because it's not just about that moment in time," Mr Rajendra said. "Because this is the critical gaze that teachers have when we look at stats like this."

"You know what happened before. You just don't wake up one morning and say 'I'm just going to commit crime today'. These are our most disengaged young people — that have been neglected, whether it's their own poor health circumstances, whether it's disability, whether it's violence at home — the interventions were not there."

"We actually know what interventions we can put in place but we just don't have governments prepared to provide the resources and structures to do it. I'm not going to say it's an easy fix but we can make a massive difference to the lives of so many ... if we got in really early — pre-natal, at hospital, preschool, diagnosis, early interventions like speech, OT and physiotherapy."



He said that while rectifying the situation would provide a challenge, Federation was finding a will within the Connected Community Schools area of the Department to address the divide.

“It’s a challenging task but I can confidently say there is a common set of values between us and the Department, the people that we work with, that we want this to work,” he said.

“The Department have recently met with us and agree with us that the use of the additional [funds] — many of these schools have a huge amount of money because of the number of loadings that do apply, and so they should, to these schools — but again it comes to what we talked about in [the] staffing [recommendation] it’s very difficult to trace how that money is being spent.

“The Department has agreed, in principle, that we have to look at a more structured and systems approach to spending that money.”

Mr Rajendra’s recommendation to Conference tied the Uluru Statement from the Heart and reconciliation to the efforts to close the gap. “The goals detailed in the Statement from the Heart 2018 Annual Conference decision remain central to this task,” it stated.

“Achieving constitutional recognition and establishing National Voice enshrined in the Constitution, a ‘Makarrata Commission’ to facilitate ‘agreement-making’ and ‘truth-telling’ are fundamental to reconciliation and closing the gap in education, health, infant mortality, life expectancy and employment between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.”

Some of the issues from the raft of policy and campaign topics that were endorsed include:

- ending the underfunding of public schools and TAFE
- additional permanent teaching positions, especially in Connected Community schools
- employment of additional Aboriginal teachers
- expanding the provision of public preschools, early intervention units and early intervention strategies, and urging the Department of Education to formally work more closely with other government bodies such as the Department of Health
- expanding the provision of teacher professional learning and student wellbeing programs to assist all Aboriginal students and those with disability across all settings
- broadening and strengthening curriculum offerings for Aboriginal students with disability
- achieving the goals within Federation’s policy Aboriginal Education — 25 Year Approach: The Way Forward
- greater support to rebuild Indigenous languages and a deeper understanding of the importance of culture
- returning highly qualified public education teachers to work in every gaol within the NSW prison system. This will include identified Aboriginal teaching positions
- a review of Federation’s Aboriginal education policy and 25 Year Approach plan in time to present a recommendation to the 2020 Annual Conference.