

The Stronger, Smarter Way **Jeff McMullen**

Did you know that for every additional year of education Australia adds to a community of teenage Aboriginal girls we will add up to four years life expectancy to the life of their first child? Every additional year of education also reduces by seven to ten per cent the risk of that young mother losing her child through infant mortality.

Our community – principals, teachers, students and families – can play a role in improving life transforming education for Australia's 150,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Education is the stronger, smarter way to address the major Civil Rights challenge of our generation and achieve equality for every Australian child.

The confronting gap in Indigenous life expectancy that ranges from 11 years in urban communities to 20 years or more in some remote communities is linked to social determinants and on-going neglect.

All of us can help to meet the Australian Government's pledge that Indigenous four year olds should have access to early learning by 2013, that we halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018 and halve the gap in Indigenous year 12 attainment by 2020.

Most of the gaps have been growing worse. In 2005 only 46 per cent of Indigenous four year olds attended a preschool. Nineteen per cent of Indigenous students were rated as far below age level in academic performance. By Year 3 many lag 18 months and by Year 7 some are five years behind.

I have known whole zones of remote community education where illiteracy is as high as 93%, where bookless homes are the norm and communities still have no public libraries.

In 2008 only 47 per cent of Indigenous students continued their schooling from Year 7 to Year 12. With 54 per cent of Indigenous 19 year olds not educated to a Year 12 standard a majority are unemployed and welfare dependent.

I urge you to make this personal and support the 86% of Indigenous students in public schools as well as the 14 per cent in non-Government schools.

You may be able to fundraise to support the Literacy Backpack program led by *Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth* in 20 remote Indigenous communities (www.ianthorpesfountainforyouth.com.au.) The Literacy Empowerment program is supported by the Australian Government and first ensures that school libraries are adequate, before sending home books in Backpacks, reading for brothers and sisters, as well as for mum and dad.

You could also choose to support AIME (www.aimementoring.com.au) led by a young Aboriginal university graduate, Jack Bancroft. This remarkable peer driven education movement, *Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience*, now links about 800 undergraduates on eight universities as voluntary mentors for 800 Indigenous high school students from Years seven to year twelve.

Macquarie University and Sydney University have AIME programs as do other universities in Wollongong, Kempsey, Melbourne and Brisbane.

Learning more about Indigenous Culture and the longer timelines of Australian history is another important way to close the space between us. Teachers and students can organise essay writing, music or drama to highlight the unmet needs of Aboriginal children.

At school assemblies begin with the 'Acknowledgment of Country' and introduce stories based on local Aboriginal knowledge, encourage students to learn about the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land where your school stands and of their stories. Our whole community may care to join in this journey of discovery of the Indigenous knowledge system.

The value that binds all of these small contributions I propose is the same one that underpins the Peninsular Community of Schools' approach of "K to 12 and Beyond".

Let us work together to live our belief that every Australian child has the right to a quality education. If we work as a community all of our children will shine.

*Dr Jeff McMullen AM is an author, journalist and film-maker.
The former ABC foreign correspondent and Sixty Minutes reporter is now Honorary CEO of Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth and a Director of AIME – Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.*

*Ian Thorpe's Fountain for youth
PO Box 402
Manly NSW 1655*

*Ph: 02 9949 1356
Fax: 02 8214 3426*

*E: fy@fountainforyouth.com.au
W: www.ianthorpesfountainforyouth.com.au*