Chapter 1

Ngarrambi Nyaagaygamba

The Review Context
The translation of The Review Context in the Gumbaynggirr language is:

(Going) Around at what is seen
Background

In announcing a major Review of Aboriginal education in New South Wales in 2003, Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Training and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Andrew Refshauge, challenged the schools and TAFE NSW sectors to dramatically improve the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students. He stated, “I want Aboriginal student outcomes to match or better outcomes of the broader population – this Review will help us to achieve that goal.”

“Despite the many education initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth and NSW Governments over the past 20 years, Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia.”

Before the 2002 state election, the government announced its commitment to Doing Business Together with Aboriginal people and pledged a re-elected Carr Government would complete a major Review of Aboriginal education. It would include an examination of current approaches to attendance, retention rates and academic performance.

The Minister said that the Review would be undertaken by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET) in partnership with the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated (NSW AECG Inc). The Review would map current activity and work with Aboriginal communities to guide the development of a comprehensive statewide approach to improving outcomes for Aboriginal students.

The Director-General’s Aboriginal Education and Training Advisory Group was reconstituted as a Review Reference Group to provide regular advice on the Review process. The membership of the advisory group was expanded to ensure appropriate representation from peak organisations.

The Review Reference Group was supported by a Review Secretariat. A Board of Management co-chaired by Mr Charles Davison, President, NSW AECG Inc, and Dr Alan Laughlin, Deputy Director-General, NSW DET, was established to monitor progress and provide direction to the Review.

Aboriginal or Indigenous terminology

It is the policy of the NSW AECG Inc and the custom of government agencies in New South Wales to use the term “Aboriginal” rather than “Indigenous” when referring to programs, data collections and activities related to all Indigenous people resident in this state. Commonwealth agencies, however, use the term “Indigenous” in preference to “Aboriginal”. In this report, except where the context or a formal name specifically requires the use of the term “Indigenous”, “Aboriginal” is used to mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

2 Review scope, August 2003.
3 Review scope, August 2003.
Purpose of the Review

One of the most evaluated, reviewed and inquired about areas of education in Australia is Aboriginal education. Yet education systems around the nation have been unable to deliver the same levels of success for Aboriginal students as they do for other students. The gap persists despite the efforts of educators in schools and on TAFE campuses. There is reason to believe that what we are currently doing is not working. Put simply, it is time for a new approach.

The 2001 National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (Department of Education, Science and Training 2002b), while reporting better educational outcomes and progress against targets for schooling sectors across Australia, also identified gaps in attendance, literacy and numeracy skills. A major concern was that low achievement in the early years of schooling results in poor achievement and participation in secondary and further education.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Education Policy identified Aboriginal students’ social and economic disadvantage as key factors leading to their educational disadvantage. The report concluded that the relationships between the causal factors affecting educational outcomes for Aboriginal students are complex in scope, dynamic in nature and challenge existing power structures within schools, TAFE campuses and the bureaucracy.

Similar issues are identified in international studies. According to Rothstein (2004), addressing the achievement gap requires no less than a significant transformation of social and labour policy along with extensive school reform. Rothstein contends that a few inspiring, dedicated teachers will not do the trick. Nor will higher expectations, in isolation, yield big payoffs. He asserts that school reform itself must be supplemented by comprehensive support programs starting in the early years of school.

In an executive summary of the literature search conducted by the Strategic Research Directorate of DET, the authors concluded that Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia, with consistently lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of absenteeism and suspensions than among non-Aboriginal students.

These conditions persist despite initiatives that have been introduced by the Australian, State and Territory Governments in the last 20 years to improve participation in, and outcomes from, education among Aboriginal students.

At the broadest level, the poor outcomes that continue to disadvantage Aboriginal students in Australian schools have been too narrowly defined without sufficient regard for the broader social justice contexts within which these issues need to be viewed. Although there have been some absolute improvements in Aboriginal educational outcomes over the period 1986 to 1996, relative to the non-Aboriginal student

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population there have been little if any real gains. The Aboriginal population remains severely disadvantaged.

The executive summary also stated that “The literature search identified social, cultural, environmental, economic and health factors as contributing to Aboriginal students being alienated and not achieving.”

**Education outcomes and their relationship to other factors**

There are well-documented links between investment in education and training and improved returns for individuals and society in terms of economic, health and other social benefits.

Investments in education for Aboriginal people are particularly important as they impact directly or indirectly on key areas of disadvantage: unemployment, incomes, health and crime.

A number of studies show economic returns to be generated for every additional year of schooling completed and for further education. The consensus among international labour economists is that the private rate of return for a year’s extra schooling is typically between 5 percent and 15 percent (Temple, 2000).

Early intervention programs have also been shown to be particularly effective forms of investment for governments. Research shows returns on early intervention programs to be between $4 and $6 for every $1 invested.

**Relationship between education, employment and earnings**

Decades of data point to the clear links between educational attainment, qualifications and earnings. Research evidence in OECD countries shows that education is associated with an increased likelihood to participate in the labour market, better performance in the labour market in terms of employability, and higher earnings (OECD, 2002).

Evidence from Australia (MCEETYA, 2001) shows that there is a strong relationship between education and employment prospects for Aboriginal people:

- Completing Year 10 or 11 increases an Aboriginal person’s chance of employment by 40 percent.
- Completing Year 12 increases employment prospects by a further 13 percent.
- Having a post-secondary qualification increases employment prospects by between 13 percent and 23 percent.

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5 NSW DET (2003) literature search.
6 NSW DET (2003) literature search.
Socioeconomic status

Interrelationships between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes are also generally acknowledged in international literature.

Poverty rates in Australia among those aged 15 years and over decline sharply as educational qualifications increase, with the risk among those with university education being less than half that for those with no post-secondary qualifications. The risk of poverty for those with no post-secondary qualifications increased steadily over the period 1990–2000 (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004).

Improvements in education reduce the risk of poverty and its associated negative impacts on health, social status and crime.

Improving economic circumstances through education also improves intergenerational outcomes through the impacts of increasing socioeconomic status on children’s education. The Australian Council of Social Service (2003) reports that children from low socioeconomic status families exhibit:

- lower levels of literacy, numeracy and comprehension
- lower school retention rates
- lower participation rates in higher education
- higher levels of problematic school behaviour, eg truancy.

This effect flows on into labour market performance. In 2002 people in Australia who had not completed secondary school had an unemployment rate of 6.2 percent, compared to 2.4 percent for those with a bachelor’s degree. Those unemployed who had failed to complete secondary education were far more likely to end up as long-term unemployed (Productivity Commission, 2004, p. B16).

Health

The association between education levels and health is well observed in the literature and was recently summarised by Professor Tony Vinson in his report (2002) on public education in New South Wales. He notes the importance of education in increasing stocks of human capital and cites research findings on:

- the importance of completed years of schooling as a predictor of health – it is more important in this respect than occupation or income
- the link between education and lower infant mortality and the age-specific rates of morbidity, disability and mortality
- the positive association between education and children’s nutrition and (in adults) exercise, moderate drinking, weight control and non-smoking
- the fact that child abuse and neglect are associated with incomplete high school education.

The evidence of positive associations between education and health is compelling, and the authors of one major review of the available literature conclude a causative relationship, that is, that more schooling does in fact cause better health, although the mechanisms have not been fully identified (Grossman & Kaestner, 1997).
There is a close relationship between health and education outcomes for Aboriginal Australian children. Improvements in education outcomes appear to result in improved health outcomes and the converse also applies.

The most significant and undisputed finding of health transitions research is that the education levels of parents, and in particular of mothers, appears to have a powerful effect on reducing infant and child mortality. Caldwell reports that any kind of modern schooling reduces infant mortality levels. This phenomenon occurs in all parts of the Third World and the change is linear – with a reduction of child mortality of 7 to 9 percent for each additional year of maternal education and regardless of whether there are good health care facilities available (Caldwell, 1999). This appears also to apply – in a more complex and less linear way – to Aboriginal Australian communities.

There is agreement in the literature that poor health hinders many Aboriginal children’s school attendance and restricts their ability to learn. Two health issues are identified in the literature as having the most detrimental effect on the education of Aboriginal children. These are otitis media (inflammation or infection of the middle ear) and poor nutrition.

Crime

There is clear evidence of a link between low levels of education and the probability of being involved in crime. Higher levels of education make a person less likely to be involved in risk-taking behaviours such as crime (partially by increasing income and reducing the incentive to commit crime).

Australian and international evidence shows the links between education and crime.

Feinstein (2002) reports some of the more substantial exercises in empirically testing the effect of education on crime. In the context of the United States of America, Lochner and Moretti’s work (2001) allows an estimate that a 1 percent decrease in the school drop-out rate would produce a social benefit of between $0.9 billion and $1.9 billion (Feinstein, 2002). They contend that a 10 percentage point rise in the rate of high school graduation would cut the murder (arrest) rate by between 14 percent and 27 percent.

Research by Chapman et al (2002) and the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research shows a very strong positive relationship between criminal activity and the extent of male youth long-term unemployment. They also produce evidence of a negative association between criminal activity and high school completions, and positive associations between criminal activity and unsuccessful senior high school participation. They conclude that:

… elimination of long term unemployment amongst males aged 15–24 by direct job creation would result in close to a 7 per cent reduction in property crime in NSW per annum. Better still, if these individuals continued in formal education to the end of senior high school (increasing school retention by an extra 7000 individuals) the reduction in break, enter and steal over the course of a year would amount to almost 15 per cent. The results highlight the potential societal benefits in terms of crime reduction that might follow from the institution of policies that are effective in the reduction of long-term
unemployment and promote young people’s educational success (Chapman et al., 2002).

From studies such as these, it is clear that improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students would be of significant personal and societal benefit.

**Terms of Reference**

To guide the Review, Terms of Reference were developed and refined over a series of meetings and workshops. The Terms of Reference endorsed for the Review were:

a. to examine current approaches in the delivery of Aboriginal education addressing issues including:
   - attendance,
   - retention rates, and
   - academic performance.

To bring about improved outcomes in these areas through consultation with interest groups.

b. to review and develop comprehensive system-wide approaches to improving Aboriginal Education and Training and achieving quality learning outcomes for Aboriginal students.

c. to assess the extent that the principles of the *Aboriginal Education Policy* are incorporated in the education of all students, staff and school communities.

d. to incorporate into this comprehensive state-wide approach the Action Plan for Aboriginal Education developed under the *Two Ways Together* process.

**Data collection processes**

A range of qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies was used to gather information to inform the Review. A major component of the data collection phase was the consultation process. Consultation was regarded as an important and critical strategy in enabling the Review to hear the voices of Aboriginal people as well as those directly involved in Aboriginal education.

Fourteen field trips were organised across the state. Meetings were held at 407 sites to gather information from Aboriginal communities and organisations, educational leaders, teachers, parents and students. During this process 49 community and 7 AECG meetings were conducted. Meetings were also held with 33 community organisations, 26 School Education Area (formerly District) Office staff and the principals and selected staff of 260 schools and TAFE campuses. Overall, more than four thousand teachers, parents and students were interviewed.

Several sites were identified by Aboriginal education consultants as case studies. Visits to these sites were incorporated into the field trip itineraries wherever possible.
Consultations were also held with a range of key interest groups from the government and non-government sectors.\(^7\)

A total of 200 oral and written submissions was received from individuals and organisations.\(^8\)

Meetings were held with senior officers of TAFE NSW and DET having responsibility for Aboriginal education. Meetings and workshops were also organised with Aboriginal field staff employed by the Department of Education and Training and TAFE NSW.\(^9\)

Surveys were designed to collect data on attendance and suspension. A systematic random sample of 200 schools drawn from each School Education Area (SEA) was used to collect data on attendance over a three-week period in March 2004. Similarly, a systematic random sample of 400 schools, 10 from each SEA, was used to collect data on suspension for the 2003 school year.

Working Groups established for Data, Early Childhood, Curriculum and Pedagogy, and Personnel provided reports to the Review Reference Group. The full report of each group will be published subsequently as a series of technical papers.

An Academic Reference Group was established under the leadership of Professor John Lester, University of Newcastle. Noted educationalists with experience in policy development and research in Aboriginal education were invited to prepare a number of position papers to promote discussion on innovative approaches to Aboriginal education. Six stimulus papers were developed outlining proposals designed to bring about fundamental changes to structures and programs impacting on the delivery of Aboriginal education.\(^10\)

Professor Lester was also commissioned to review the implementation of the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP). This independent review involved four SEAs and a sample of up to 40 schools. This report will be published as part of the technical papers.

A program review of the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) was conducted by DET. As part of this process, the operation of the former District Aboriginal Educational Advisory Committees was reviewed.

The Strategic Research Directorate of DET provided contemporary research articles to the Review. In addition, a search was conducted of initiatives and reports from other Australian states.

DET’s Educational Measurement Directorate provided retention and performance data for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students drawn from the six external tests sat by students in New South Wales government schools.

\(^7\) See Appendix D.
\(^8\) See Appendix E.
\(^9\) Residential workshops were conducted with Consultants, Aboriginal Development Managers, ACLOs and ASLOs. AERTs and AEAs were also accessed during their residential conferences.
\(^10\) Those papers were presented to the Review Reference Group.
The Review context

The Review is part of a whole of New South Wales Government effort to improve education and social outcomes for Aboriginal students. The portfolios of Families and Young People, Education, Justice, Housing and Infrastructure, Health and Economic Development, and Heritage and Culture coordinated by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs have established common priorities and action plans. It is intended that the outcomes of this Review will be incorporated in an Action Plan for Aboriginal Education developed under the *Two Ways Together*: the NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan 2003–2012.

Major funding for initiatives to improve outcomes in Aboriginal education is provided by the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Science and Training. In April 2004 changes to its funding priorities were announced. The *Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program* (IEDA) assists education providers in partnership with parents of Aboriginal students to work together to improve learning outcomes. The main elements of IEDA are: the *Whole of School Partnership Intervention Strategy* and the *Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme*.

Demographic information

Based on current trends in fertility and mortality, the ABS reports that Australia’s Aboriginal population is projected to increase from 386 000 in 1996 to 469 000 in 2006 at an annual rate of 2 percent per year. The growth in the Aboriginal population in recent decades cannot be explained by natural increase alone. Much of the unexplained growth can be attributed to an increasing prevalence of persons identifying as Aboriginal on census forms.

The Aboriginal population is much younger than the rest of the state. Young people under 15 represent 40 percent of the total Aboriginal population compared to 20 percent in the total population (2001 Census). This has important implications for schooling. Education is the passport to improved life chances for Aboriginal people and the growing numbers alone make it imperative that we achieve better outcomes.

| Table 1.1: Enrolment in government primary schools: 1999–2003 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Full-time Enrolments | Level | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 |
| Aboriginal | K–2 | 8,243 | 8,535 | 8,905 | 9,323 | 9,393 |
| Non Aboriginal students | K–2 | 188,485 | 187,371 | 183,209 | 180,459 | 177,763 |
| Aboriginal | 3–6 | 10,233 | 10,771 | 11,256 | 11,810 | 12,234 |
| Non Aboriginal students | 3–6 | 248,047 | 249,237 | 249,256 | 247,890 | 245,464 |
| Aboriginal Total | | 18,476 | 19,306 | 20,161 | 21,133 | 21,627 |
| Non Aboriginal students Total | | 436,532 | 436,608 | 432,465 | 428,349 | 435,461 |

11 Department of Education and Training 2003b. (Demographic data in Tables 1.1-1.5)
There has been a 25 percent increase in Aboriginal enrolments in government secondary schools in the last five years. This significant increase was recorded in a period of decline in the overall population attending government schools.

If the current issues of poor performance, high absenteeism and low retention rates are not promptly and successfully addressed, growing social and educational problems can be anticipated as the number of Aboriginal students continues to increase in our schools.

Tables 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 show how Aboriginal students are distributed across schools in terms of their concentration of numbers. Most Aboriginal students go to schools where there are relatively few other Aboriginal students.
Table 1.5: Distribution of Aboriginal students across government central schools (K–12): 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Aboriginal students per school</th>
<th>Number of central schools</th>
<th>Total number of Aboriginal students</th>
<th>Proportion of all Aboriginal students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>5.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>3.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>7.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>15.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 100</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>36.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 100</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>31.83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In primary schools, nearly 30 percent of Aboriginal students are in schools with fewer than 20 Aboriginal students altogether (across all classes). In secondary schools, where total numbers are generally larger, there tends to be a greater concentration of Aboriginal students, with over 50 percent of Aboriginal students in schools with over 50 Aboriginal students.

**Academic performance**

Students in government schools in New South Wales sit for statewide tests of academic skills including:

- Basic Skills Tests (BST) in literacy and numeracy in Years 3 and 5
- Primary Writing Assessment in Years 3 and 5
- English Literacy and Language Assessment (ELLA) in Years 7 and 8 (with sub-tests in reading, writing and language)
- Computer Skills Assessment (Year 6)
- Secondary Numeracy Assessment (SNAP) in Years 7 and 8
- the School Certificate in Year 10 (including tests of English Literacy and Mathematics)
- the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in Year 12, including examinations in English and Mathematics.

This array of tests, external to the school, can be used to describe and monitor the performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students across the years of schooling, and often across time (although some of these tests are more recently introduced than others).

A problem in monitoring student performance across time is to determine some measure that is reasonably valid and reliable across different tests and different years. That is not easily achieved. A solution is offered here that allows some comparison, at least from Year 3 through to Year 8.

With the 2003 Basic Skills Test (BST) literacy results at Year 3, the current gap in the average performance of Aboriginal students compared with that of non-Aboriginal students is approximately 5 marks on the BST scale. This has been mostly the case for the years 1998 to 2003. *But what does a gap of 5 marks mean?*
An indication of the significance of this gap in educational terms can be inferred by comparing Year 3 BST and Year 5 BST results, as these have been developed to allow direct comparisons between them (they have what is called a common scale).

Across the years 1998 to 2003, the average change in literacy scores for all students between Year 3 and 5 is 6.7 marks. This might be taken as representing average learning progress in literacy across 24 months—from which it can be calculated that one mark corresponds to a little over three and a half months of learning. This correspondence can be used to reinterpret the gaps in BST performance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students into months learning progress. While some caution is needed, this serves a purpose of creating a measure that may be more meaningful to the average reader, better conveying a sense of the size of the problems revealed.

Using this information, it follows that, at Year 3, the 5 marks difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in 2003 might be thought of as roughly corresponding to 19 months of literacy learning: to catch up to where the non-Aboriginal students were in Year 3, Aboriginal students would need to improve their performance by an amount roughly equivalent to an average of 19 months worth of learning. In the meantime, of course, non-Aboriginal students will be further progressing. To equal those non-Aboriginal students by Year 5, Aboriginal students

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12 Figure 1.1 combines information from assessments for Years 3 and 5 Basic Skills Tests in literacy with Years 7 and 8 ELLA results for reading, plotting the gaps in performance between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students in terms of months learning progress. There it can be seen that the gap of 19 months in the BST literacy assessment in Year 3 increases to a gap of over 30 months in Years 7 and 8 ELLA. Similar results can be seen for numeracy (in Figure 1.2).

13 These estimates of months learning progress or difference have a technically calculated band of error around them, of approximately plus or minus one month of learning. However, they should only be used as indicative of performance “gaps” and their implications for Aboriginal education generally.
would have to catch up on the 19 months they are behind in Year 3 and then further complete the 24 months of learning otherwise expected between Years 3 and 5 – alternatively, to achieve in 24 months what might otherwise normally take 43 months.

Because other tests used to assess student academic performance are also developed to allow comparisons between academic years, gaps in those results can also be
recalculated into corresponding months learning progress. This is true for Primary Writing Assessment (PWA) in Years 3 and 5, English Language and Literacy Assessments (ELLA) in Years 7 and 8, and Secondary Numeracy Assessment (SNAP) in Years 7 and 8.

The gaps in performance for writing and language are even more startling: at Year 7 the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is so great that it corresponds roughly to as much as 58 months and nearly 60 months behind in writing and language skills respectively.

![Graph showing the average gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student outcomes in language expressed in terms of months behind in learning progress: 2003](image)

**Figure 1.4: The average gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student outcomes in language expressed in terms of months behind in learning progress: 2003**

This finding is of crucial importance in junior secondary education. Writing and language skills are particularly significant as they are the basis of instruction and assessment. The poor writing and language skills of many Aboriginal students must limit their ability to access the curriculum. When students are not experiencing success in their learning it is likely that they will disengage from learning, potentially exacerbating the problem.

While these results help develop a sense of the size and urgency of problems in Aboriginal education, it is important to recognise that Aboriginal students are fully capable of the highest levels of achievement, despite challenges they face that non-Aboriginal students do not.

In the 2003 BST for Year 3, approximately 18 percent of Aboriginal students achieved results placing them in the top two bands of literacy performance, and about 19 percent in the top two bands for numeracy. For Year 5, 23 percent of Aboriginal students were in the top two bands for reading and 19 percent in the top two bands for numeracy. For ELLA in 2003, 11 percent of Year 7 Aboriginal student results were in the band
designating high levels of proficiency, while for SNAP in 2003, 5.5 percent achieved at that level (see Figure 1.5).\textsuperscript{14}

![Figure 1.5: The proportion of Aboriginal students taking a test who scored in the highest bands (the top two bands for the BST assessments and the top band for ELLA and SNAP): 2003](image)

While recognising that many Aboriginal students have been highly successful in their learning, the difference from the success of non-Aboriginal students is one of strong contrast. For example, in 2003, 46 percent of non-Aboriginal students achieved that high level of literacy in Year 3, and in Year 7 reading, 36 percent of non-Aboriginal students were graded in the highest level.

\textsuperscript{14} What is identified as a high level of achievement is not directly comparable between the BST assessments and ELLA and SNAP, so the difference in the percentages between them should be regarded cautiously.
Attendance

While attendance data are collected from schools annually, they are not routinely collected separately for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. As attendance is specified as one of three key outcome measures for the Review, data on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attendance rates had to be specially collected. That was achieved through a representative sample of 200 government schools.

The results suggest that absenteeism for Aboriginal students is approximately twice the rate for non-Aboriginal students, and this is mostly true across all years of schooling. For both groups, attendance is fairly constant across the primary years but decreases substantially in junior secondary school.

![Figure 1.6: Attendance rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students from Kindergarten to Year 12](image)

In high schools the absentee rates for Aboriginal boys vary between 18 percent (in Year 7) and 26 percent (in Year 8), while for Aboriginal girls it varies from 16 percent (in Year 7) and 28 percent (in Year 10). A rate of 16 percent is equivalent roughly to 32 days a year missed, and 28 percent roughly to 56 days of school missed each year. These figures are unacceptable given the gaps in knowledge that result from being absent from school.

Research evidence links attendance with academic success (Bourke et al, 2000). Figure 1.7 is derived from analysis of the Review’s sample survey of attendance and shows that the higher the attendance rates in schools for Year 7, the better the average performance of Aboriginal students in the Year 7 ELLA test.
This graph could demonstrate a vicious cycle. Absenteeism results in poorer academic attainment. Poorer results lead to lowered student morale and self-esteem which results in even poorer attendance.

**Suspension**

Information on suspensions is something else that has not been collected consistently to allow up-to-date statewide comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. To provide this information for the Review, a representative sample survey of 413 schools was conducted, collecting suspension information during 2003. The suspension data collected is for the number of short suspensions within a school, where a short suspension lasts between one and four school days, and the number of long suspensions within a school, where a long suspension is one lasting from 5 to 20 school days.

The sample results suggest that suspension rates are still increasing. For all students, the average short suspension rate is 16 suspensions annually per 1000 students, compared with 12 suspensions in 2001, while the average long suspension rate is 3 per 1000 students, compared with 2.3 per 1000 in 2001.

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15 Figure 1.8 graphs the suspension rates for Aboriginal students compared with non-Aboriginal students by gender and stage of schooling. For example, for every 1000 Aboriginal males in Years 7 to 10 there are 629 short suspensions compared with 188 for every 1000 non-Aboriginal males.
Table 1.6: Suspension rates (annual number of suspensions per 1000 students)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>K–2</th>
<th>3–6</th>
<th>7–10</th>
<th>11–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Short suspensions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal male</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Long suspensions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal female</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Aboriginal male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.6 shows disturbing patterns in short-term suspension. Data collected during field trips flagged concerns about perceived increases in the use of suspensions, particularly in the early years of schooling. The survey results confirm those reports. From Kindergarten to Year 2, and then again for schooling Years 3 to 6, the rate of suspension for Aboriginal females is approximately nine to seven times the rate for non-Aboriginal females, while the rate for males is four to six times that for non-Aboriginal males. For long-term suspensions, the rate for Aboriginal females is six times the rate of non-Aboriginal females in Kindergarten to Year 2, and the rate for Aboriginal males nearly two times that of non-Aboriginal males.

Expulsion is relatively rare, but most apparent in the senior years of high school, a sorry outcome for students who have persisted with their learning for so long.
Suspension impacts on performance in much the same way as absenteeism. Unfortunately, many young Aboriginal people who are disaffected with school may perceive suspension as a reward – a day off school. Of great concern is the rate of suspension of students in the early years of schooling. If these young people develop negative attitudes to schooling, then their capacity for developing a positive self-image, self-respect and high expectations is severely limited.

**Apparent retention rates**

Retention rates are apparent as they do not track individual students through schooling. What they measure is the ratio of the total number of full-time school students in a designated year to the total number of students in an earlier designated year, that is, Year 12, 2003 compared to Year 10, 2001.

Table 1.7: The apparent retention rates for full-time students in New South Wales Government schools: 1999–2003 (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>96.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal students</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>81.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What these apparent retention figures do not include are students who have left government high schools in New South Wales but are either:

- continuing with their secondary education through TAFE NSW, which provides alternative ways of completing secondary education that might be preferable to some students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, or
- pursuing vocational education or training outside of school, which is recognised as equivalent to an education within school.

These alternatives might be particularly attractive to Aboriginal students.

Table 1.7 shows that apparent retention rates have not changed significantly over the last five years. Retention in schools to Year 12 is considerably lower for Aboriginal students than for all students. The Years 10 to 12 rate in 2003 was 36.3 percent for Aboriginal students compared to 68.1 percent for all students. Similarly, the Years 7 to 12 rate in 2003 was 29.2 percent for Aboriginal students, nearly 36 percentage points higher for all students.

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16 Figures for 1998 deleted and 2003 inserted.
lower than the rate of 65.0 percent for all students. This means that only three in ten Aboriginal students make it to Year 12.

Looking at the proportions of Aboriginal students that progress from any one academic year at school to the next sheds more light on retention. In Figure 1.9 the number of Aboriginal students moving from one year to the next is expressed as a percentage of the students in the earlier year. The percentages for the progressions from Years 6 to 7 and then Years 7 to 8 can be more than 100 percent as Aboriginal students move out of private schools and into public high schools. Particularly noticeable in the graph is that the first apparent drop in Aboriginal students is in the Years 9 to 10 progression—a full year before the first significant fall-off in non-Aboriginal numbers. Evidence presented elsewhere suggests that those leaving at the end of Year 8 may have been characterised with particularly high levels of absenteeism.

![Figure 1.9: Apparent progression rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students: 2001–2002. (Recalculated from data in New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003b.)](image)

**Figure 1.9:** Apparent progression rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students: 2001–2002.
(Recalculated from data in New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003b.)

Concluding comments for the schools sector

It is clear that, irrespective of the way performance is measured, Aboriginal outcomes continue to be at the lower end of the scale. Absenteeism and suspension have a significant effect on student performance. Gaps in knowledge resulting from high levels of absenteeism have a negative effect on student achievement and may lead to disruptive behaviour requiring remedial intervention. The low levels of literacy and numeracy skills possessed by many Aboriginal students, especially in secondary school, commit these students to failure. Their consequent disengagement with learning results in lower educational achievement which, along with low retention rates, translates to limited employment and life choices.

Given the growing Aboriginal population and the increased numbers of Aboriginal students in our schools, it is imperative that we redress these inequities effectively and
rapidly. Social dislocation, low self-esteem and negative attitudes are certain outcomes. Strong and urgent action is needed to redress these imbalances.

**Aboriginal students in the Vocational Education and Training and TAFE NSW sector**

Over the past five years, Aboriginal enrolments in TAFE NSW have increased by 25 percent, from 15,715 in 1999 to 19,632 in 2003. This represents 3.6 percent of total enrolments. This compares to a 19 percent increase for total enrolments.

Eighty-four percent of enrolments of Aboriginal students are in regional and rural areas. Although the greatest concentration of Aboriginal people lives around Sydney, metropolitan Institutes currently provide less than 20 percent of enrolments.

Age breakdowns for enrolments over the five-year period show increases across a range of age groups, with an 80 percent increase over the period for 15–19-year-olds compared to 25 percent for all students. There was a 13 percent increase in enrolments over the 20 to 24 year age group.

Over one-third of Aboriginal enrolments in TAFE NSW are in the Access Division. The number of Aboriginal students under the age of 19 enrolled in preparatory courses is about 1500— the equivalent of a large state high school. These students are spread across all TAFE NSW Institutes and colleges and in formal award courses ranging from Language, Literacy and Numeracy up to the Higher School Certificate.\(^{17}\)

TAFE NSW industry areas with significant Aboriginal course enrolments include Information Technology, Arts and Media, Community Services, and Tourism and Hospitality.

The enrolment of Aboriginal students in higher level award courses (AQF Certificate III and above) has increased threefold over the period with a 35 percent increase in Aboriginal enrolments in Diploma/Advanced Diploma courses from 2000 to 2001.

The average module completion rate for Aboriginal students in TAFE NSW in 2003, at 64.1 percent, has improved by some 7.4 percentage points since 1999. However, this is still significantly below the module completion rate for all students, which is 78.8 percent.

Adult and Community Education (ACE) Colleges also provide both general and vocational programs for Aboriginal people. The number of Aboriginal enrolments has increased from 2053 in 1998 to 6047 in 2003. As well there are several independent Aboriginal adult education colleges that provide nationally accredited vocational education and training.

Just over 39 percent of the Aboriginal population are employed compared with 55 percent of the total population. The Aboriginal unemployment rate for 25 to 44-year-olds is much higher that that for the total population (21.9 percent compared with 6.5 percent). Young Aboriginal people (15 to 24 years) have an unemployment rate of 32.7

\(^{17}\) Refer to the *NSW Indigenous Profile for Education and Training* (NSW DET 2003b, Table 7, p. 76) for details of courses undertaken.
percent compared with 12.8 percent of the total population. There is no sign that the
gaps between the Aboriginal population and the total population narrowed between

The total number of Aboriginal apprentices and trainees is 2822 out of a total number of
137 654. This represents 2 percent of apprentices and trainees.

The report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, released in
1991, drew attention to the link between poor educational outcomes and high rates of
imprisonment among Aboriginal Australians. Despite the recommendations of the Royal
Commission for more non-custodial sentences, Aboriginal people in New South Wales
continue to be incarcerated at greater rates than non-Aboriginal people compared to
their population share of 1.9 percent in New South Wales. As at May 2004 Aboriginal
males represented 18 percent of male offenders and Aboriginal women represented 19
percent of female offenders.

In 2003 the average module completion rate for Aboriginal students in Correctional
Centres was 76.1 percent, which is higher than the completion rate of other Aboriginal
students. However, the course completion rate was very low at 17 percent.

**Structure of the Report**

Chapter 2 of the Report outlines current organisation and major educational programs
and initiatives within DET and TAFE NSW supporting the delivery of programs for
Aboriginal learners.

The findings of the Review reveal that different factors have differential effects at
different stages of an Aboriginal person’s life. Chapter 3 organises these stages within a
convenient framework or “life course”, which Reviewers have called the process of
“Growing and Learning”.

In meeting the Review obligation to “map current activity”\(^{18}\), the writers of Chapter 3 of
the Report outline a number of current approaches to the delivery of Aboriginal
education during critical stages of an Aboriginal person’s learning. Chapter 3 identifies
approaches that appear to be successful and suggests where change is necessary.

The recurrent themes and Review recommendations are developed in Section 4 of the
Report.

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\(^{18}\) Review scope, August 2003.