



# Major Impact Foundation

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## Closing the Gap: Avoiding Another Australian Aboriginal Policy Fiasco

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Major Impact Foundation  
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### **I. Introduction**

It is with mixed emotions that I have been considering the current Close the Gap initiatives. I am grateful for the concern and for the efforts being exerted by the current and past governments and I recognise that these efforts in training and employment are paying off in regional and urban areas.

I am deeply concerned, however, that once again these initiatives are not working in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island (ATSI) communities where statistics in employment and education continue on the decline. I fear that unless some serious issues are addressed, the initiatives could actually contribute to the ongoing fiasco of Aboriginal policy in remote communities.

In this paper, I look at how government policies are assessed and implemented. I reflect on how the policies impact on individual lives of ATSI people in remote Australian communities and make recommendations on how to improve them.

### **II. Close the Gap Policy and Program Assessment**

Government assessment of policies and programs with goals to overcome ATSI disadvantage has had a common characteristic until now: political need over analysis. Too many quality assurance processes measured what I call 'politically strategic variables' that do not actually calculate whether or not a program is effective in changing lives. I call them 'politically strategic' because bureaucrats and politicians can use these variables to make it look as though something is happening whether it is effective or not.

In bureaucratese, government assessment has focused on "outputs" rather than "outcomes". Outputs are generally represented by numbers such as how many meetings were held in a project, how many participants showed up, or how many people attended a workshop. Counting outputs is easy yet artificial. Participation or attendance in an event says nothing about whether or not change actually occurred as a result.

Outcomes are measured by whether or not lives are changed. For example, outcomes measure if a person who was illiterate becomes literate. Or, outcomes would measure whether a training program was actually effective enough to give graduates the skills required to get jobs.

My work involves measuring both outputs and outcomes. My experience, however, is that when outcome data are presented to government departments that identify evidence of where problems exist in policies or programs and when an analysis is conducted and solutions are suggested, that data and those solutions are too often neglected. In fact, at times, they are actively resisted.



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### III. What is Required?

My own experiences of living and working in remote communities (primarily in Cape York) along with the data I and my team have collected reflect six absolutely critical criteria if Close the Gap initiatives are to be effective:

- 1) Primary school education must be improved.
- 2) Specially downgraded training courses for ATSI people should be abolished.
- 3) Standardised, independent academic skill testing needs to be given to assess if an individual has the requisite skills required to complete a course successfully.
- 4) Training subsidies should be awarded for training only if an individual's test results reflect the individual has the skills to study at the course applied to.
- 5) An alternative education pathway to gain at least a year 10 academic skill set is required for individuals who score low on their assessment test. These individuals need education and not just literacy and numeracy.
- 6) Independent, cross cultural mentoring and counselling support must be provided to both employment and training service providers and remote ATSI clients.

Including these measures in Close the Gap policies and programs will help the nation invest in actions that will enable ATSI individuals from remote areas to have the skills, knowledge and resources to break inter-generational cycles of poverty and disadvantage. They will have access to what they need to establish financial independence for themselves and their families. Breaking these cycles is good for the individual as well as for taxpayers.

### IV. The Problem with Current Close the Gap Training Initiatives

Current training initiatives for ATSI people focus on providing skill training for individuals 16 years old and over.

The concept is lovely, but the fact is that for several decades skill training has been the focus of funding yet it has not been effective.

Figure 1 contains data collected from the Australian Bureau of Statistics' website. It shows that unemployment in regional areas and major cities has been decreasing. However, in remote communities, unemployment has been increasing.

Why aren't the training and employment programs working? Individuals from remote communities who are put into training courses often do not have the prerequisite skills to do the course.

In my estimation, the unemployment problem starts with primary school. Unless children receive a good education in primary school, they will struggle all their lives to have employment and life choices that allow them to live financially independent lives for themselves and their families.

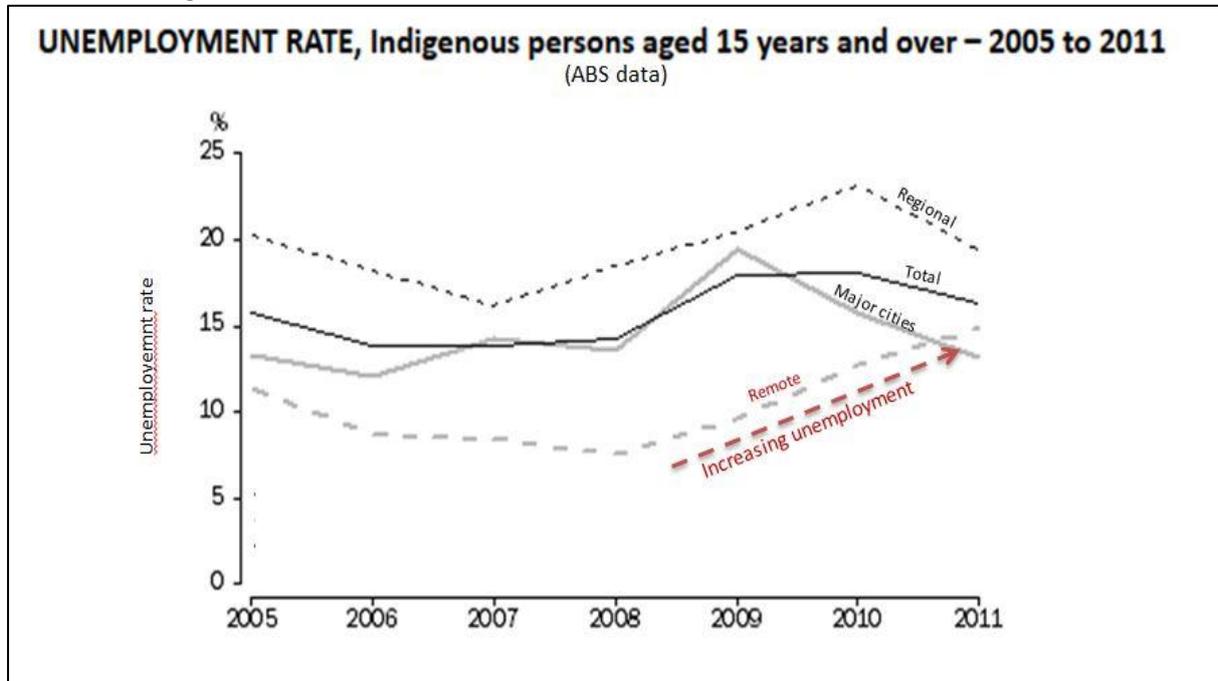


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**Figure 1: Data show increasing unemployment rates in remote communities and decreasing rates in cities and regional towns.**



Source: <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/6287.0~2011~Chapter~Unemployment>. The ABS measures employment as those who worked one hour or more a week during the survey reference week. It includes individuals on CDEP, unemployment and other welfare support schemes (see the definition of employment and unemployment in the ABS Explanatory Notes). If these schemes were not included in the count, then unemployment is estimated by some experts to be over 80% in remote communities.

### V. The Problem with Primary Schools in Remote Communities

Children in primary school in remote communities do not, for the most part, receive the same quality of education as those of children in Australian cities and towns. I base this conclusion on a review of NAPLAN results across Australian remote communities. NAPLAN results show that the majority of year 7 children in remote ATSI schools have academic skill levels at about a year 2-3 level.

#### V.1 NAPLAN Results in 4 Cape York Communities

As my work has primarily focused on remote communities in Cape York, Queensland, I will focus on the performance of four remote schools there. Figure 2 presents a chart comparing NAPLAN results of remote community schools in Cape York with the average for all Australian schools. The results were startling. Year 7 students in remote communities are reading at a Year 3 level and have the writing skills of the average Year 2 student.

#### V.2. Parents Understanding of NAPLAN

Having conducted numerous workshops in remote communities where I examine the community's NAPLAN results with parents, I find that parents are not at all familiar with NAPLAN results and the performance of their children. In fact, they are shocked at the



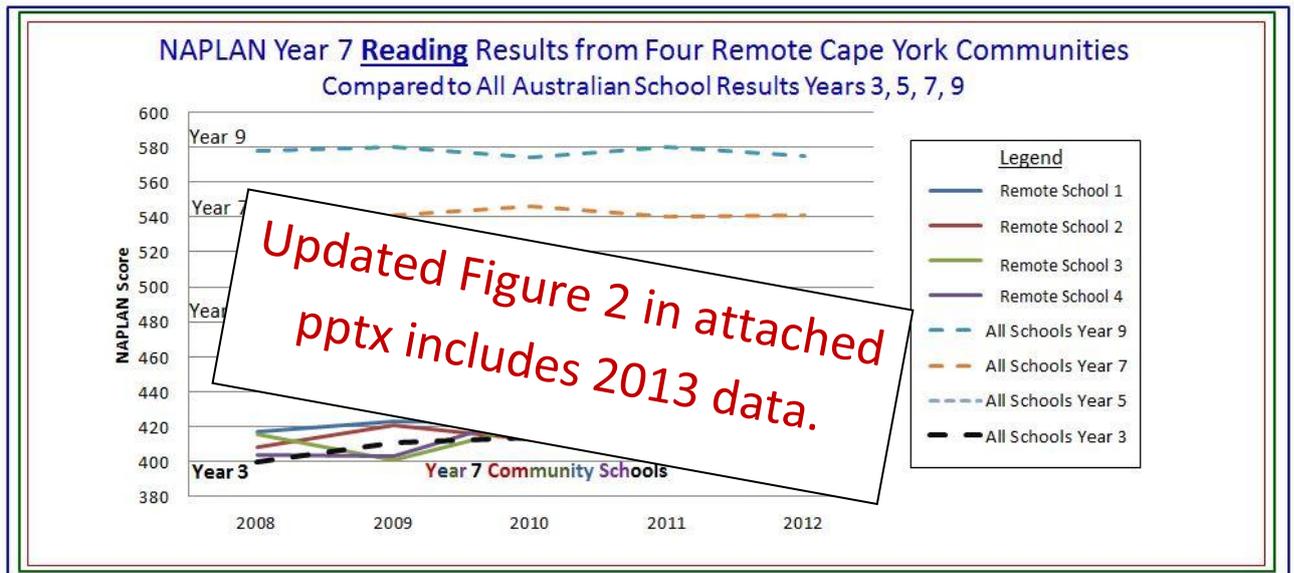
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results I show them in these graphs. They live in isolated places and believe that their children are doing as well as any other child in the remote community. They do not recognize that as a whole, their entire community is disadvantaged in the education being provided.

**Figure 2: NAPLAN Year 7 Reading Results from four remote Aboriginal communities (solid lines) compared to All Australian School Results (dotted lines).**



Source: Queensland Studies Authority, NAPLAN 2008 – 2012 Outcome Reports

### V.3. Impact on Children

The impact on children hits hard because a majority of remote communities have schools that only go to year 7. This means for year 8, these 12-13 year old children must leave their homes, family, culture and language to attend boarding schools in more mainstream urban and regional towns. These new settings and cultures are unfamiliar to them. In these boarding schools, the assumption is that the children who have enrolled have the skills required to successfully complete year 8. Most of their students who are reared in towns and cities have these requisite skills.

The children from remote communities, however, arrive for year 8 with year 3 basic skills. They don't have a chance in classes designed for children educated in cities and towns. This discrepancy in skills is difficult for teachers, abusive to students who have the skills to move forward, and emotionally destructive to children from remote communities.

ATSI children interpret their inability to perform at the level of the other children as their own ineptitude, or more frankly, their own failure.

At mainstream schools, these 12-13 year old ATSI children also face direct racism for perhaps the first time. Furthermore, they come to the startling realisation that they are



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financially poor. In their communities, they were like everyone else. In boarding school, however, they do not have money for school trips, weekend breaks, books, uniforms and the occasional weekend pizza. Ultimately, we have remote Indigenous children who, with families far away, are left struggling with fear, loneliness, and shame in a world much bigger and scarier than they had ever imagined.

### *V.4. Lost Youth*

What happens to these children? My experience on the ground in remote communities is that many of them find reasons to leave school and return to the security of their family and community. Some say they must return home to provide care for the sick or frail. Many children purposefully cause trouble so that they are expelled from school.

Efforts to re-enrol these students into a different school usually have outcomes where the problem is repeated and the result once again recurs.

An interesting factor to me, however, is if you ask state or federal government departments responsible for administering programs affecting these children what happens to the children who leave school, they cannot tell you and, to their credit, they tell you so.

The integrity of their quality assurance systems are compromised by the lack of objectivity in data collection. Government departments leave reporting in the hands of employment and training service providers and schools. Conflict of interest is inevitably an issue.

Based on information I have collected in my work on the ground in remote areas, I have found that there is a significant population of children who are between the ages of 12-16 who are wandering their communities without education support of any kind.

Elders in one community with a population of 900 identified 47 children over 12 years and under 16 years of age wandering the streets. The Families Responsibilities Commission of that same community identified "as many as 90" of these children. Numbers like these are repeated across remote communities.

I call these children Australia's "lost youth." School programs are supposed to support them at least until they are 16 years of age or complete year 10. At 16, there are a number of education and training programs that kick in that offer youth a range of education and training options. Remote community children who leave school before the age of 16 become lost to education and, more importantly, to themselves and their futures.

All these children's lives are impacted simply because our public schools in remote communities are not being held accountable for the education of the children in their care. The measurements are there to support this conclusion.



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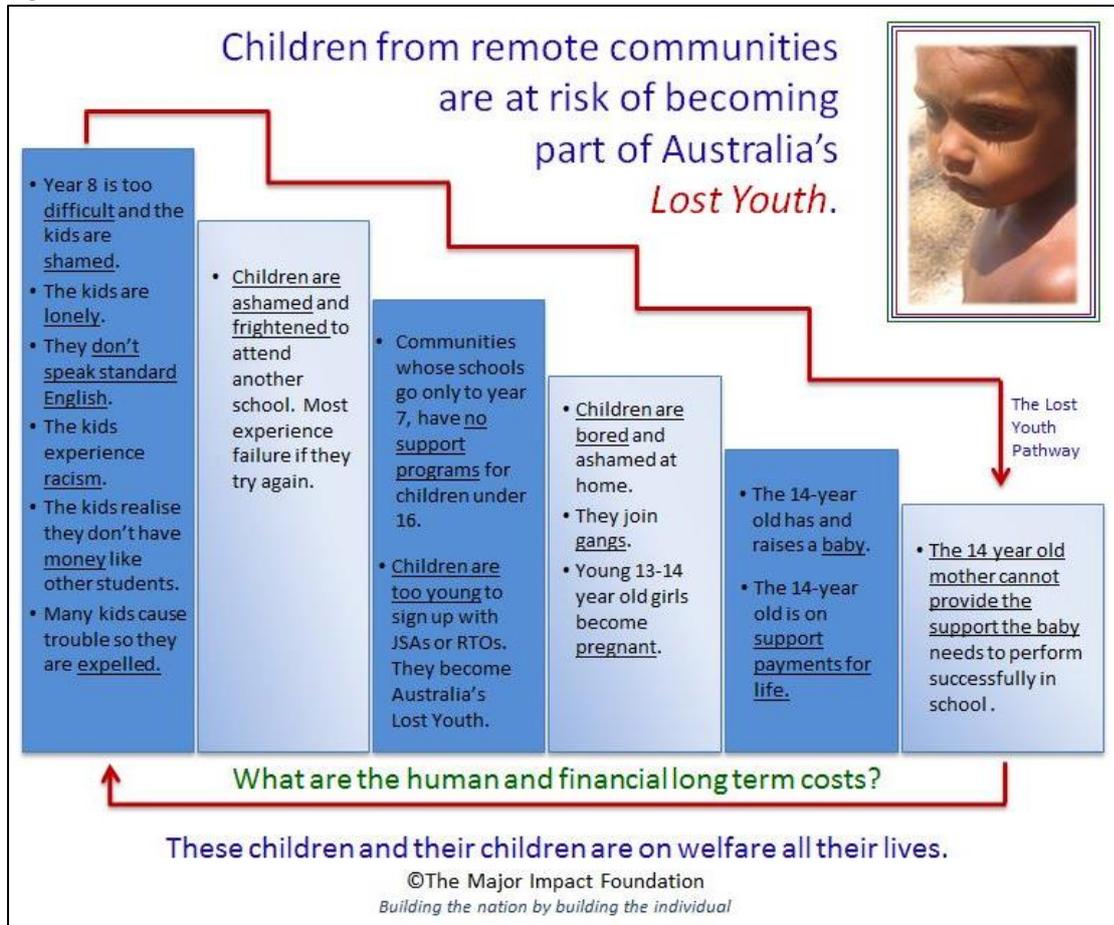
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There is another tragic outcome emanating from the experiences of these children: they learn to fear education, training, and learning. To them, these are not opportunities but rather threats that have left them humiliated and insecure in their own abilities.

Figure 3 reflects the cycle these young children fall into. Rather than go back to school, they wander the streets, form gangs, and inevitably for young girls, become pregnant and have babies. As their babies grow, these young parents do not have the education, maturity and knowledge they need to support their own children's academic development. They know only one thing: they want to protect their children from the pain and suffering they themselves experienced at school. The best way to do that, many reason, is to not send their children to school. If compliance frameworks push them to send their children to school, they send them with no expectation of a positive outcome.

**Figure 3: Australia's Lost Youth**



### VI. The Problem with Compliance Driven Initiatives

In government education initiatives, including Close the Gap, compliance programs are being financed to enforce obligatory attendance of children in school. Compliance driven



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programs will not be effective if parents and students do not have a fundamental belief that attendance at school will lead to a better life.

They also will not succeed if schools do not understand how to connect with students and communities.

Showing up at school, often referred to as 'bums on seats' is only another politically strategic government output, as far as I am concerned. Learning should be the outcome that is measured and focused upon.

There is scepticism by parents about the value of the learning that occurs in remote schools because most parents have some education yet still have not achieved employment and most do not read or write well. Their experience does not match the rhetoric put out about education.

High attendance, as I personally know from my years in a remote school, does not mean skills are gained at a level required to be successful in boarding school. It was only due to intense efforts from my boarding school teachers, counsellors and principal and the independent cross-cultural mentoring provided from my community to me, my family and school staff that I was able to have the fortitude and knowledge to commit to the hard work required to catch up with my boarding school classmates.

### **VII. Making Compliance Initiatives Effective**

Compliance-driven initiatives would be far more effective if they started by first recognising why parents do not send their children to school in the first place. Keeping children away from school is not usually driven by laziness on the part of parents; it is driven by the age old need that parents have to protect their children against the pain and disappointment they have experienced themselves in life---and in this case, in school. Cross-cultural mentoring and time will help overcome these issues.

#### *VII.1 Cross-cultural Mentoring*

Compliance driven programs need to be complemented with independent cross-cultural mentoring. Independent mentors are required because the evidence shows that when mentors are employed internally by employment and training service providers, those mentors tend to work toward the benefit of the service provider's products and services more so than to the needs of clients.

My experience as an independent cross cultural mentor and educator is that by working with parents who have suffered from a poor education to help them understand their past and their childhood experiences, I can assist them to recognise why they struggled in school and what they can do to support their children at home and in school so their children enjoy the experience. Once parents have an understanding of their critical role in childhood development, they generally embrace the positive steps they can take.



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It is equally important to have mechanisms in place to provide cross cultural mentoring to teachers and school staff. Too often teachers, principals and staff do not understand the underlying reasons for poor school attendance. As a result, they are frustrated in their own efforts to provide high quality education and eventually give up. They usually blame parents and the community. However, with cross cultural mentoring, teachers begin to understand the painful backgrounds parents have had with schools and therefore are better equipped to empathise and work with parents and children to evolve a school that celebrates learning across the community.

### *VII.2 Time*

Another important factor that government programs overlook is that personal change takes time. Changing one's life patterns and beliefs is not a smooth road. Too often, government funded programs are subsidised for short periods of time and rarely over a year.

Discouraging setbacks are a part of life whether a person is a child, parent or teacher. It takes time to pull through a setback. It is also critical during these times of setback that independent cross cultural mentors and counsellors are in place who can help individuals work through the issues so that progress again can continue.

Independent mentors and counsellors who work outside agencies providing services are critical because their focus is the client and the needs of the client. Employment and training service providers too frequently provide mentoring biased toward the services they provide. Independent mentors also can provide mechanisms for cross-referencing effectiveness of programs with service providers.

### **VIII. What About Employment Training?**

Training for employment has been the response of government to unemployment in remote communities over the last few decades. Yet, from the NAPLAN data, we know that many remote ATSI youth go into adulthood lacking basic academic education. It follows that individuals who have low academic skills will not have the knowledge required to be successful in certificate courses requiring minimally a year 10 education.

In fact, in a small study I and my team undertook (see Figure 4), we found that individuals from four remote Cape York communities who took standardised, independent basic skills tests performed an average of five years lower than the academic year they had supposedly completed. We have found the results can be generalised across Cape York remote communities. Lack of education is a lifelong burden.

We also know that training is at the heart of most Closing the Gap programs. Though the thrust of the initiative is well meaning, the implementation of it means ATSI people experience again an education environment where the potential for failure is high.



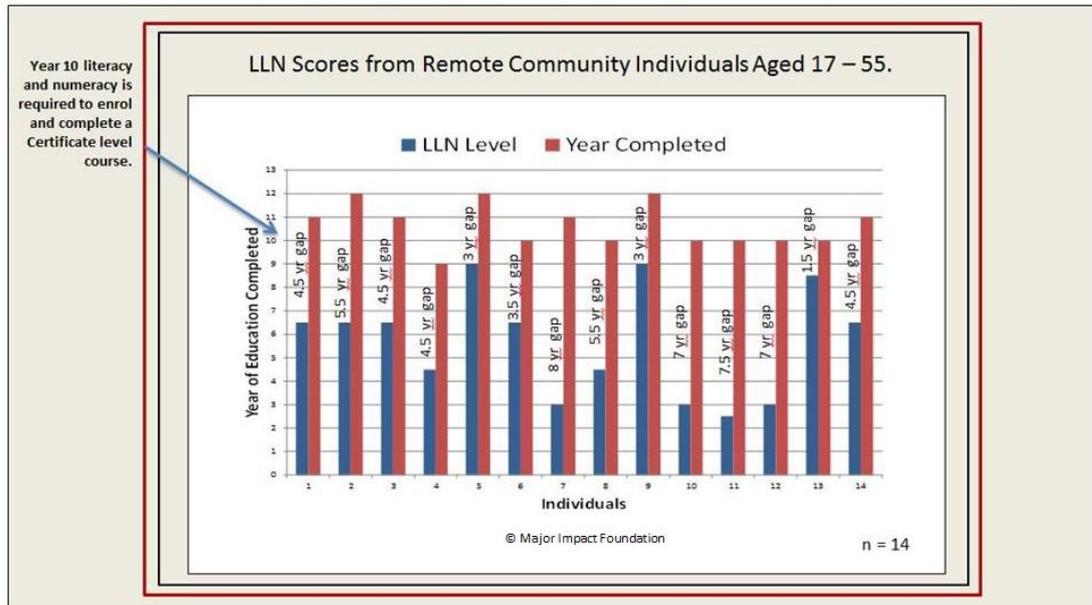
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I feel deep sadness when in remote communities, for example, I see hopeful youth being enrolled for pre-apprenticeship courses such as construction where basic algebra and geometry is required. I know from workshops I have given that these youth cannot perform basic addition and subtraction. I believe many of these hopeful youth are being set up to fail.

**Figure 4: Adults averaged skill levels 5 years below the school year they had completed.**



### IX. Impact from the Lack of Effective Government Quality Assurance Processes

Issues of ineffective training initiatives can be addressed by improving the quality assurance processes that government has in place.

The current process rewards providers for signing up students for courses and for the completion of those courses. That's it. There is no mechanism in place that says before government funding is given for any student, the student must prove by means of a standardised, independent test that they have the knowledge and skills required to take the course. And, there is no process that confirms whether a training course has actually been effective in getting individuals the skills they need to gain employment.

Yet, the data also show that thousands of ATSI people have "completed" courses "successfully". If students are not academically prepared, how does this happen?

### X. Counterfeit Certificates

The answer to why students without requisite skills 'succeed' in certificate courses is that specially designated and content-downgraded courses for ATSI people have been given approval by certifying bodies that allow individuals who do not have the most basic of skills to achieve up to Certificate 3 level training status.



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In other words, courses are run that do not require even the most basic reading, writing and maths. The course and its testing are greatly simplified so that ATSI students will finish the course 'successfully' and therefore employment and training service providers will be paid.

I believe the certificates awarded from these ineffective courses are the equivalent of counterfeit currency. Employers I have spoken to agree.

Where is the logic in downgrading education to levels of illiteracy and then declaring that training should lead to jobs? There should be one standard of courses for all Australians and it should be a standard that assures employers that they are hiring people educated for the job that needs to be done.

### **XI. Fixing Training**

My recommendation to government on its quality assurance programs around training has been:

1. Any taxpayer dollars used to subsidise training for employment should be used only for mainstream courses available to all Australians. Get rid of the designated ATSI employment courses which cost taxpayers millions and are ineffective.
2. No government training money should be given out unless independent, standardised testing proves that an individual has the skills to undertake the course successfully. Spending money on testing would save millions of dollars currently spent on counterfeit training.
3. Until state and federal governments actually hold schools accountable for quality education, funding is required to re-educate individuals who did not receive the education they were entitled to. Holding schools accountable would save many more millions of dollars.

These recommendations, from what I can ascertain, are not being taken. In fact, providers of these ineffectual courses and the government departments that back them argue extensively for the counterfeit courses. They say that many jobs do not require an education. Common examples they provide include forklift driving or being a barista.

My response? Industrial employers require forklift drivers to read orders, write comments, perform and record maintenance measures, and follow strict OHS regulations. Any restaurant requires baristas to do the same kinds of chores. Both jobs require familiarity and confidence in working with computers, calculations and communication in English.

In today's world, jobs that do not require an education are rare. Reading, writing, maths, history and science knowledge enhance problem solving and are critical to having options in employment.



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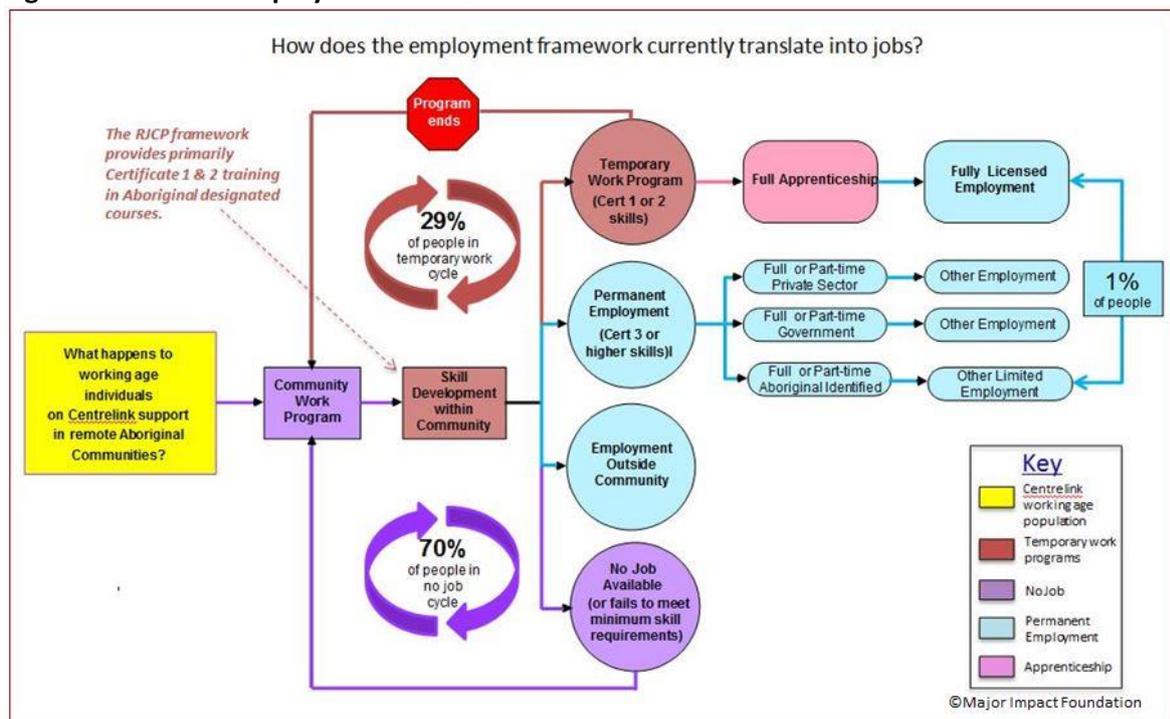
Certificates that are awarded without the requisite skills they represent imprison individuals in a restricted world of welfare support. This not only costs the taxpayer, it also sacrifices the individual's sense of self-worth and their ability to contribute to the larger society.

What is the cost? The cost is twofold: 1) to taxpayers subsidising systems proven to be ineffective, and 2) to ATSI Australians in remote communities caught in a poverty maze they cannot find their way out of.

### XII. Employment and Training Service Providers Have Concerns

I have worked with a group of individuals from training organisations, government departments and schools who have wanted to help me understand the world as they experience it. I asked them, what happens in remote communities when these under-educated adults go through the employment/welfare system to try to get jobs?

Figure 5: How the Employment Framework Works...Or Doesn't



Estimates show about 1% of remote individuals will get full time employment in the current system.

They told me that generally one of three things happens (Figure 5):

1. About 70% of individuals will never get a job. They will be enrolled in course after course, hold multiple certificates, but never have the skills required to actually get a job.
2. About 29% of individuals will gain enough skills in a training program to be able to participate in specially funded government programs such as mending fences or painting buildings. These jobs are funded by government projects and end with the completion of the project. Thus, individuals are not employed by an employer, as



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such, but rather by a short term government program. Once the funding is done, the individual is unemployed again because they do not have the skills required for “real” jobs.

3. Less than 1% of remote ATSI people signed up on welfare will achieve long term employment.

It is important to recognise that the employment and training service providers caught in this system are frustrated with it. Most want to help people change their lives. The government systems, however, instead reinforce meaningless outputs. Unless providers play by the rules, they cannot earn the income they require to provide any services at all. They are as caught in the welfare cycles of dependency as the people they serve.

I suppose the only good thing about the system is that at least all the Australians who work for these agencies and for government have long term jobs themselves.

### **XIII. Conclusion**

Our current systems too often contribute toward maintaining a state of welfare dependency in remote ATSI communities (see Figure 6). The programs fail because, from the very start, they do not acknowledge that children are not provided a primary education equitable with that provided in towns and cities and that the cost of this lack of education carries on through their lives and the lives of their children. State schools in remote communities need to be held accountable.

Government programs, too, do not recognise the cross cultural need for mentoring that is independent from employment and training service providers’ own services. Providing that funding to service providers inevitably leads to a conflict of interest as their own ‘mentors’ feed the clients into their own products and service lines.

I have shared my own data measuring the importance of monitoring individual’s steps toward change with bureaucrats. The data reflects that the number of extreme crises that occur in people’s lives decrease significantly with each year they receive mentoring and guidance on how to control their own lives. With control over their lives, ATSI people in remote communities not only begin to understand how and why to break welfare dependency, they also teach their children to do the same.

A few years funding good cross-cultural mentoring is an investment in giving individuals skills to be financially independent. In turn, they teach their children these skills. It also improves the quality of outputs of service providers. In the end, everyone is more satisfied, independent and fulfilled and the cycle of welfare dependency can be broken.

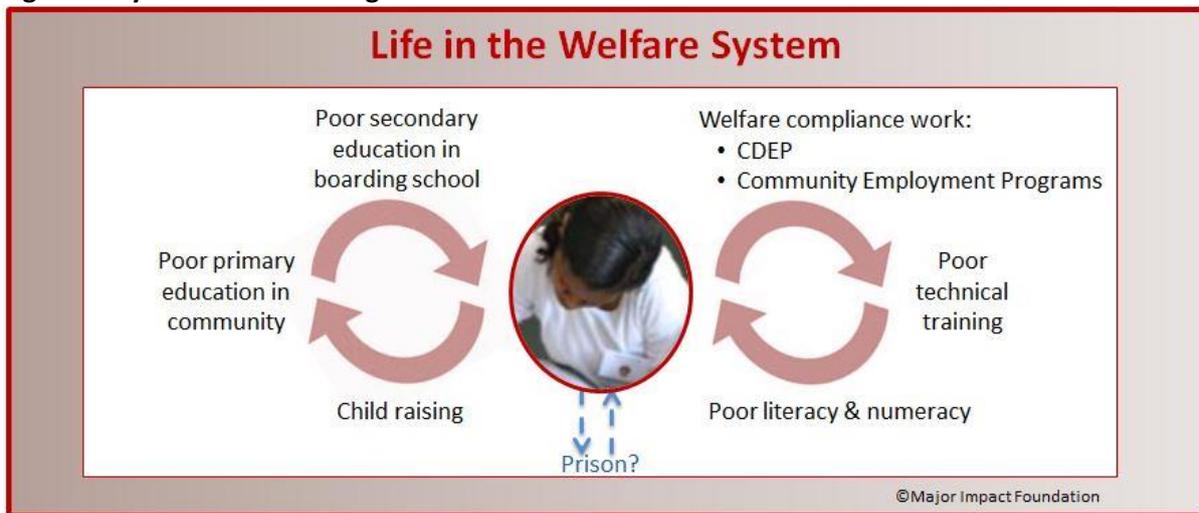


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Figure 6: Cycles of Disadvantage



Based on my data and time spent working directly in communities with people, I believe that a high quality, independent cross cultural mentoring service combined with a good re-education program offered over the next 5-years would significantly help to reduce intergenerational, long term welfare dependency and save the Australian taxpayer many millions of dollars.

The fiasco behind the policies and funding of ATSI affairs we have experienced over past decades must end.

The current review of policies being undertaken gives our nation the opportunity to revise our thinking and set directions that will make a difference to remote ATSI Australians and to taxpayers.

Let's use this opportunity to move forward together to make us all equitable partners in the development of our nation.