13. Improving Indigenous Access: Three practitioner perspectives on citizen engagement

Adrienne Gillam, Ian Mackie and Michael Hansen

Adrienne Gillam: In examining improvements in Indigenous access I will discuss the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership Agreement, an initiative on which I have been working over the past couple of years. I will share with you some of the findings and lessons learned from this project, as well as outlining its aims and function. First though, I will provide some background to the initiative.

In 2006, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, threw out a challenge to Indigenous policy-makers and practitioners: if we were serious about improving Indigenous access and about citizen engagement with Indigenous people, we had to make the effort to talk to them about service delivery. One need only consider the substantial media coverage devoted to the recent consultation process concerning what will happen at the conclusion of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response to see that this issue looms large in the Australian consciousness.

Calma's words, though spoken in 2006, resonate just as strongly today as they did then. In 2009, spurred on by his challenge, the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership was founded upon the realisation that if the whole-of-government objective of closing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia is to be achieved, business would have to be done differently.

In the two years since, new approaches to improving Indigenous service delivery and access have been tried, with varying degrees of success. It has become clear that, if we focus on a specific location — a place-based approach — rather than pursuing a nationwide solution, it is possible to talk seriously about coordination and to do it properly. As a result, in the Northern Territory, 15 remote service delivery sites operate, and there are two in South Australia. There is evidence that these sites are effective.

The partnership has, therefore, focused on place. However, it is not being implemented everywhere. While there have been some failures, the South Australian minister for Indigenous Affairs has said: 'I want to test this methodology and if it works, then I want to roll it out more widely'. The specific nature of this approach makes it at the same time expensive, intensive,

innovative and tailored. It is co-produced, being a partnership between all levels of government, the state and territory jurisdictions, the Commonwealth, and the community sector — including business, the NGOs and not-for-profit organisations.

South Australia has benefited from being able to test this ‘place-based’ methodology with communities of less than 200 people. It is a bigger challenge in the larger communities of the Northern Territory. Regardless, it is clear that the methodology is already achieving results.

The key feature of the ‘place-based’ approach is that government comes to the community. In South Australia, the secretary of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet at the time of the program’s founding, Chris Eccles, ensured that for the two trial sites in South Australia, CEOs of 30 major departments came out to those communities and consulted with them, gauging their feelings, identifying their priorities and, more importantly, agreeing on what would be the actions in local implementation plans. These community-based plans are unique partnerships in the sense that Indigenous people in communities have devised, co-designed and co-produced all of the actions in the plans. Such a partnership, whereby everyone affected is a signatory, is unprecedented in an Indigenous portfolio. And, in the case of the Northern Territory government, the plan even goes to cabinet for approval and endorsement.

An important element of this methodology is that, in the communities involved, there is a single government interface — and a single coordinator. Indigenous people in the communities prioritise the sensible and seamless delivery of services ahead of which political party is in government, or what tier of government is involved (Commonwealth, state, local or shire).

As a consequence, in all of these sites in both states, a government business manager, who belongs neither to the state nor Commonwealth, operates locally. We also have Indigenous engagement officers who are the cultural ambassadors for their communities. These officers provide the links that are fundamental to doing business in these communities.

The fact that the business managers have a combined role can, however, be an area of tension. Sometimes Australian government agencies try and use a government business manager in a way that is contrary to their intended purpose. For example, the government business manager may be asked to deliver a program or run consultations for a particular government purpose. This tension must be finely balanced and we have attempted to achieve this by assuming that no one individual has the necessary skills to undertake all of the

requirements of the role. Local skills and cultural and language requirements of the position are addressed by the Indigenous engagement officers. They are a key part of the mix.

As often as possible, government officials go to the communities in combined groups from various jurisdictions; often our staff go out together with their Northern Territory equivalents as an active partnership. The board of management for the program is co-chaired and is also undertaken as a partnership. The government business manager is given the clear understanding that they belong neither to the state nor to the Commonwealth, but, rather, are responsible for the coordination of government services, whatever their branding.

How do we prepare our officers for their roles? Appointments are generally made of individuals from a multidisciplinary background, mostly with tertiary qualifications, if not with postgraduate qualifications. The current, best performing government business managers are those who were Canberra policy bureaucrats and who know the system, but have come to the conclusion that the only way to understand how Indigenous communities work is to immerse themselves in one for a year.

There has also been an evolution in the kind of government business managers that have been appointed. Following the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response (widely known as 'The Intervention'), instituted by a Coalition government under John Howard, we tended to have a lot of police or army personnel — people who were good at maintaining law and order or re-establishing functional governance in a particular place. But now we are moving on from that to attract a skill set which is more community-orientated.

We train personnel by immersion and support them *in situ*; there is no other way and we do not need to apologise for it. You do have to live in Wadeye to understand Wadeye's clans, and the same goes for every other community. We can read reports and even theses on local communities, but they are not substitutes for being there and understanding how they work.

Some induction training is necessary. In the past, people going into the communities have said to us: 'it would have been great if we'd had that training upfront'. We are now giving them some upfront skills during their induction. But we don't invest too much in cross-cultural training, because we think it is only useful to someone who is going to have very limited interaction with a community. Everything is so culturally specific to where you are placed. People tend to forget just how diverse Aboriginal Australia is: the 15 sites we service are distinct; there is no one size that fits them all, meaning there is no substitute for time with a particular community.

We have also learnt that we need to use skilled and trusted practitioners who have come through our tertiary institutions or have learned by working with practitioners who have spent time living in communities. All our South Australian staff involved in the partnerships undertake a Pitjantjatjara language course to be able to communicate effectively. I speak and understand the Pitjantjatjara language, and I expect all my staff who go out and do community work in Pitjantjatjara country to have an equal measure of proficiency in the language.

In the Northern Territory we have no hope of doing that, because there are 104 languages. So, where it is achievable, we have set out to learn the local language. When it is not feasible to learn the local language, we use a professional interpreter service in the Northern Territory to engage with the community. A good example of this recently was when we were conducting consultations about the Northern Territory National Emergency Response. A common theme of those consulted was a hatred of the BasicsCard system, whereby cardholders have their income managed and can only spend money at government-approved stores and businesses. But when we, with the help of interpreters, sat down with six or seven groups simultaneously and asked them what specifically it was about the BasicsCard they did not like (and bearing in mind the negative coverage it had received in the media) we found their concerns were relatively small irritations — like not being able to tell how much credit was left on their card and other such easy-to-fix issues.

So, through this process of community consultation with skilled practitioners, we discovered that it was not the policy initiative per se to which the opposition was directed. In fact, we found that many people actually like the system of income management instituted during the Northern Territory intervention, because it quarantines their funds from being utilised by other people (or from being accessed by other people, or from being spent on things that they would not have chosen to spend it on). And they liked the idea that it could buy food and clothing — they just did not like a minor informational aspect of the card. We were able to pass this finding on to our Centrelink colleagues and try and devise a scheme whereby people could access their card's balance before they go shopping. And, it turns out, there are various means of doing that.

While all this engagement on the ground may sound daunting, communities are great educators. I am always struck at how patient and how pragmatic they are. And truly, if I personally saw the endless parade of bureaucrats that come to these communities, I think my patience would be more limited than theirs. But they are always prepared to educate, to inform and to include you. This is a huge part of the education process.

Today, our partnership engagements are backed up by strong governance supports. We recognise, through a wealth of previous research that, if we do not have strong governance underpinning the national partnership — as well as the community — we face an unassailable challenge.

We recognise that our partnerships — between government representatives and specific communities — are ones between equal partners from unequal places. So, how do we make sure both partners in the agreement are equal? Firstly, we make it clear that the communities involved are indeed equal partners. In devising actions and priorities for local implementation plans, the relevant community will have a say in aspects of the plan and, in some instances, it has a bigger say than the government agencies. What gets into local implementation plans is contested ground. As a result, every development is critiqued and the final product can take a long time to be finalised. In the Northern Territory alone there are close to 3000 actions still waiting to be dealt with that we could not put in a local implementation plan because no consensus could be reached on the issues that were being addressed.

The bigger tests will be if the community does not do their part; what then is the penalty? Or what will happen if the other partners want to change the agreement? And we have had these things happen, forcing us to go back and renegotiate. But, because we have managed to develop a trustful relationship during the engagement process, we can go back and be honest with the communities and say: ‘Look, we said we were going to do those roads, but because of X, Y and Z, it’s not going to be achievable in that timeframe. So we need to renegotiate it’. Or we say: ‘What’s negotiable? What can we work with and what can’t we?’

In one example, the ink was barely dry on one of the South Australian local implementation plans when an agency wanted to withdraw something from it. It was such a long and negotiated process that I was astonished that anyone, at that point, would seek to withdraw it. But it is a measure of the agreement process we now have in place now that officials cannot just come along and say: ‘We’re taking out this thing now, sorry about that, and we’ll tell you about it later’. That is why a specific accountability measure, called a ‘local implementation plan tracker’, is in place. It reports to the board of management of every state, territory and Commonwealth agency. It does not matter if it reports things are on or off track, on time, on budget — they are all reported in implementation tracker. And, from my experience, this is the first time that we have had such a system of checks in place, enabling us to go back to the community and say: ‘Hang on, we’ve done our two things. We’ve built the childcare centre; we’ve put in the staff, now you’ve got to get the kids there every morning. That was your bit of the deal’. Moreover, we have a trusted, honest broker in town, who can have these tough conversations and tell the truth — and as one of my colleagues keeps saying: ‘You’ve got to tell the truth till it hurts.’

One of the immediate benefits of the National Partnership Agreement is that we have been able to do considerable work on mapping overall services that are going into communities, not just baseline provisions. We now know what goes into each community and, by understanding that, we can start to see some of the synergies, capping or duplication. The problem of duplication, after all, is a common one. People in the communities are continually saying to us: 'Don't send out another youth program. Don't send us another financial management program. You governments need to get your act together'. This is an important message. These communities do not want seven or eight separate programs coming in simply because someone external to the community decided they would be beneficial to the community. They want wraparound services suitable to their needs.

Slowly but surely, we are learning from the communities themselves what works and what does not. Though this approach — learning from service user feedback — may work in small communities, it is more challenging when dealing with a greater number of sites. For this reason we have local, on the ground participatory research to scrutinise, measure and report back to government which services are working, rather than merely congratulating ourselves for improvements we perceive to have made in, for example, education or health. The community has a set of measures and can decide for itself whether improvements have indeed been made.

Not only is this community appraisal important to us as a source of feedback, it is important because it allows us to summarise the trends and problems and then canvas the community for possible solutions. For instance, while we might have data that says 'school attendance is stagnant,' it is not as valuable as insider input. Local research, from local people who are trained and who know how to collect data and do surveys — quantitative and qualitative — can say, 'Well, actually, no, we've got some measurable improvements here in these years at these grades, or in these cases there are improved attainments'. So we get better quality information. Most importantly, the community can then feel empowered when they say, 'Gee, we are doing well on these counts. Whatever we have been doing in relation to A, B and C initiative is paying off.'

Finally, fundamental to an improvement in the provision of Indigenous support services is our ability to listen. Often, during consultations, we are told, 'You come out and you talk to us, but you don't listen'. Many communities have made that point. They say 'You claim to listen but really what you are doing is coming back and telling us; your ears are getting smaller but your mouth is getting bigger'. In our Indigenous partnerships, we have to be mindful of that and continually strive to have bigger ears.

Ian Mackie: Although this volume of essays is dedicated to citizens' centrality in policy-making processes, and citizens being in control of their lives, my daily work involves dealing with a political discourse that is focused on issues of dependency, intervention, welfare reform and fines for truancy. It strikes me that the subject of this volume and my daily experiences are two competing worlds. Perhaps this disparity is due to a stark social reality: there is an ideal public sector provision for white people and another for black people. This proposition forms the basis of my contribution, with my reference point being Indigenous education.

Consider those factors that might be called the 'knowns' of Indigenous education in Australia. First, we know that over the past 15 years there has been an improvement in the provision of Indigenous education. There is, however, still a significant gap in the learning achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians — a gap that becomes more pronounced from the point of Year 12 onwards. Attendance is considered a key reason for this disparity and is consequently a focus for future improvement in Indigenous education. Attendance matters for the obvious reason that, if you go to school, you might learn something. And if you do not reach and complete Year 7 or Year 8, your opportunities to become an autonomous learner will be limited.

A second 'known' is that younger people have better qualifications. According to the data, 15 to 35 year olds have better academic qualifications than the age groups above them. These findings defy the logic that suggests there was once a 'good old days' of Indigenous education that we should try to replicate. This is a myth: there is no such halcyon era to which we can return.

Further, we know that the more remote the area in which you live, the less chance you have of getting a decent education. Shockingly, only one-fifth of Indigenous people in remote locations have what we would all consider a basic education (Year 12 equivalent.)

We also know that, when it comes to the Indigenous population, if people do not have a decent education, they are not healthy. Nor does income seem to affect this correlation. Even people who benefit from what I call 'hyper welfare' conform to this trend. They might have a significant amount of money coming in by way of mining royalties; they might be able to buy a helicopter and new car every year; but they will still die of diabetes at 45, because there is a direct correlation between academic achievement and health.

One piece of good news is that, when it comes to labour market participation among holders of bachelor degrees, the Indigenous population outperforms the non-Indigenous population. That said, even if they hold a BA, Indigenous

people still tend to smoke and drink more than their non-Indigenous colleagues, though this might be more a reflection on public service cultures, the chief employer of university-educated Indigenous Australians.

Efforts are being made to attract more Indigenous people to the private sector, with Western Australian mining magnate Andrew ‘Twiggy’ Forrest and former prime minister Kevin Rudd announcing in 2008 a project aimed at creating 50,000 Indigenous jobs as part of a so-called ‘Australian Business Covenant’. In the Department of Education, we have set a target of about 900 additional employees, or 2.8 per cent of our workforce — the percentage of Australians who are Indigenous. This does not, however, reflect our actual client base (the number of Indigenous children in our schools, which is about 8 per cent). So we are a long way away from committing to having 8 per cent of our employees reflecting our student base.

The elephant in the room is the resources sector, and our potential to be an employer of choice for the Indigenous population. To date, what we are experiencing with our able and gifted Indigenous employees is that better money, conditions and, frankly, better jobs in the resources sector are drawing them away from public service. As a consequence, while we are trying to recruit more Indigenous people, we are doing so in a climate where there are other, preferred, employers.

I return now to my fundamental point: that the issue of Indigenous education is plagued by dichotomies. So, for example, the issue of school attendance tends to be expressed as a dichotomy — either a ‘truancy model’ or a ‘connectedness model’.

Bluntly, truancy models do not work. It might make us feel good that we identify truants, lock them up and punish them, but the ramifications are usually counterproductive. One need only consider what happened in New South Wales, where models of truancy only succeeded in causing Indigenous students to attend less and be more criminalised.

The connectedness model develops on the pre-existing notion of inclusion of Indigenous people in Australian society. Yet, we must move beyond this agenda and shift the focus to *belonging*. To make Indigenous Australians belong, they need to first be connected. The connectedness model is built around the notion of the ‘child at the centre’ (CAC), in which users (in this case, children) are the central focus, with schools and communities wrapping around them accordingly. But how do we integrate the community into the decision-making processes? We are, I believe, beautifully placed and, in some ways, beautifully challenged, because we have a shopfront in every community — the principal and the school. So, we have invested in developing the kind of entrepreneurial leadership that

would cut through bureaucratic impasses. When Tony Fitzgerald studied alcohol management in Cape York in 2001, one of the main recommendations he made was to suggest that a local champion (the director of nursing, the senior sergeant of police, or the school principal) should take a lead and formally coordinate government service delivery. To achieve this innovation is actually easier to do in small, remote communities than in the city context where principals have a disposition to consider their authority stopping at the school fence.

Whether it be alcohol management, welfare reform or remote community service provision, we are making significant inroads — albeit from a very low base. We are also seeing dramatic increases in participation at a community level. But above all, it is leadership that is required for citizen-centric advocacy for government service efficacy.

Finally, if we are to consider the difference between what is meant by ‘engaged’ and ‘connected’, we can see that the two are not interchangeable. Consider, for example, if we compare the statement, ‘the child is not engaged’ with ‘the child is not connected’. While in the first instance the child is portrayed as the problem, in the second, it seems the child is being failed by their educator; the emphasis is on the educator being connected to the child, not the other way around. So we should ask: is the educator connected to the child’s family and are they making decisions in the full knowledge of and in the interests of the child? And, bluntly, do our local educators know what they are doing and do they know what they stand for? In the final section, Michael Hansen will elaborate on this issue by looking at the case study of the school over which he presides, Cairns West State School.

Michael Hansen: One of our assistant directors-general always emphasised to principals the importance of teachers knowing the kids in their classes — knowing their data. As a practicing principal I need to know my own school, so that is where I will start.

Cairns West State School is a primary school in a low socio-economic area. In 2011 it had 600 pupils, 400 of whom were Indigenous. Only nine per cent of the students have English as a first language; the rest have it as their second language. Around 60 students are refugees and speak no English whatsoever. In the entire school, only four families — none of whom are Indigenous — have a mortgage. Perhaps 80 per cent of the parents are unemployed.

Other important statistics concern attendance and mobility. We enrolled 110 students in 2011. After the census date 75 left. That constitutes a huge mobility. If we do not address this issue we have a bigger problem, because those kids simply will not receive an education. As Australians, are we prepared to accept that as a given?

As well as knowing about the kids in my school, I also believe principals must know whom it is important to know. By this I mean that it is critical as a principal to be a people person. In my case, I have a clientele that, by and large, are very reluctant to engage with the system because, when they went to school, the system punished them. Consequently, it is vital that we become connected to our clients.

In a school like Cairns West, we need to be committed to doing our best for the pupils, but we also need to do more than that. In order to address the attendance issues we face, we need to also engage the parents. We have established that, if we continue the approach that educators have previously undertaken at schools like Cairns West, then we are only going to get more of the same. More of the same, for kids like that, is not good enough, because by and large these kids were failing.

Our new approach is what we call an 'academic success guarantee'. And what we guarantee is this: we will sign an agreement with the parents, not with the child, and the child can never be kicked off the program once the parents sign up to the agreement. The agreement we offer is that if parents send their children to school for 95 per cent of the time, then we will guarantee that they will meet or beat their year level benchmarks. No excuses. If an individual child does not meet the benchmarks, then they will be individually case-managed until such a time as they meet or beat those year level benchmarks.

We currently have over 200 students on this program. This means we have over 200 students who are attending 95 per cent of the time. And is it achieving demonstrable outcomes? It is. In 2008 only 32 per cent of the kids in our school reached minimum standards — not aspirational standards, just minimum standards. Last year we had 53 per cent of kids meeting minimum standards. We are not, in other words, even halfway through the journey of improving access for Indigenous pupils. Because, if these kids are not performing in school and they are not reaching minimum standards, then they are not going to be able to participate in society. That will merely serve to create another generation of welfare recipients.

Our parents are consumers like any other parent; except they do not have a lot of money. Most of them live day by day, from paycheck to paycheck, and often will send their kids to school because they have run out of money at home and have no food. But, like any parent, they want the best for their kids; I am yet to meet parents who do not want this. But, many of our parents do not know how to go about achieving the best. So, we have to market this idea of the 'academic success guarantee'.

Bearing this in mind, we went out into our community and said: 'If you keep your side of the bargain, we'll keep ours'. We cooked breakfasts, steaks, hamburgers and whatever it took to get them into school. And now, we get about 60 or 70 mums and dads who come in when we have our sign-up evenings, which take place every five weeks.

We are trying to give as many chances to the parents as possible. So, if some children only turn up, say, 60 per cent of the time for the first weeks (instead of 95 per cent), they would not qualify. But, after a few weeks of publicising the intention of the partnership, the kids are likely to turn up 95 per cent of the time. Their first five weeks are then wiped and they are now eligible for the program. They are given multiple chances over five week periods to improve attendance, and this message is reinforced at our regular big breakfasts.

Empowering the parents is a team effort. As a principal, my expectation is that our teachers, our teachers' aides and/or community members are out there working with the parents to help reach into the schools so that we can start to have conversations about improving their children's attendance rates.

While we undoubtedly have a long way to go to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learning outcomes, the data for our program is encouraging. In fact, kids between Year 5 and Year 7 who are involved in our program are improving at a rate that is faster than the vast majority of schools in Australia. Of course, our kids start from a lower educational base. But you can imagine how it makes out parents feel when you show them, at a school-hosted big breakfast, for example, that because their kids are going to school, they are improving faster than any other children in Australia. It provides them with something they can go home and talk about and be proud of, because they are part of the partnership we have with them. Our agreement with the parents is that if we work together, then we can bridge the gap, or even overcome it.

Interestingly, at our school, we do not have a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids. In fact, often our Indigenous kids outperform the non-Indigenous kids. A gap remains, however, between our school's student cohort and the cohorts of the rest of state and of Australia.

Part of our 'academic success guarantee' is that every five weeks we collect data on the kids and we report back to parents on their improvements. We started doing this two-and-a-half years ago when we rolled out this program. This year, at the statewide principals conference, our director-general talked about the importance of regular data on performance. So, we like to think that, up in Cairns, we are leading the state agenda in this respect.

But the real story here is that closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids is a non-negotiable aim for governments at a state and federal

level: it must be at the forefront of any policy for education. Because if we do not have that as our goal, whether it be me as principal of a school, or the director-general, or the minister, or the prime minister for that matter, then we are neither paying proper respect to the First Australians nor giving those kids, who are the descendants of those First Australians, an opportunity to participate in this wonderful country that we have.

Finally, as educators, how can we ensure that, were we to leave Cairns West State School, our partnership does not simply fall apart? Well, my responsibility is, and should be, that it is not a Michael Hansen-driven project: the implementation of this program is going to be an ongoing process. The program is going to be ingrained in the Cairns West culture. So, when anyone turns up at Cairns West State School, whether they are a parent, a replacement teacher or whether they come as the new principal, they have the 'academic success guarantee' to support them. Now other schools in our region are starting to embark on the journey that we have taken and, slowly but surely, the program will get down to Brisbane.

In conclusion, the traditional failures of schooling for Indigenous children in this country require that alternative approaches be implemented; chances must be taken. Undoubtedly, when we first came out with the 'academic success guarantee' model, it sounded like a harebrained idea. But, once we actually sat down and figured out the detail of the model, we had the confidence to take the risk of implementing this innovative approach. We had to put our feet on the ground and say: 'This is what we believe in. We have to do things differently.' And, because we dared to do things differently, we have now achieved a result that is starting to improve the education of our kids. That is why I turn up to work every single day — because those kids deserve more than my best; they deserve that I do whatever it takes so that, when they grow up, they can participate fully in society and their kids can become successful.