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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Closing the Gap

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Husic, Ed, MP

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Mr HUSIC (Chifley—Government Whip) (11:39): When the Prime Minister gave a statement on Closing the Gap last month, she delivered a report card that showed the government was well on its way to reaching its targets. In fact, in her speech the Prime Minister was able to tick off the first of these Closing the Gap targets—that being providing access to early childhood education to all four-year-olds in remote communities. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd outlined this ambitious plan in 2008 and set the target for early childhood education to be achieved in five years. The year 2013 marks the fifth anniversary of the Closing the Gap plan. I am proud that our government has been able to bring this part of the plan to fruition. Providing early childhood education to Indigenous children will have generational benefits. It will help us to achieve longer-term targets like halving the gap in Indigenous year 12 achievement and closing the gap on life expectancy.

Chifley, which sits within Darug lands, has one of the largest urban Aboriginal populations in the country. I have seen firsthand the benefit that early childhood education has brought to my local community through the assistance of the Gillard government. Last month I attended a sod turning for a new Aboriginal child and family centre in Mt Druitt, called Yenu Allowah, which will replace their temporary premises. Yenu Allowah will bring together a range of early childhood health and family support services to improve the overall health and wellbeing of children and improve support for their families.

The Australian government has provided New South Wales with more than \$74 million to set up nine Aboriginal child and family centres across the state. Now that we have achieved access to early childhood education for Indigenous children, supporting regular school attendance and engagement will be the challenge of the coming years, building upon this solid foundation.

Chifley electorate has historically suffered poor high school completion rates, not just among Indigenous students but across the broader population. That is why it remains important that we fully implement our national plan for school improvement. In 2008 the Prime Minister set us the challenge of halving the gap in year 12 attainment by 2020. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged between 20 and 24 in 2006 only 47 per cent had achieved year 12 or equivalent at qualification. In the 2011 census that figure had risen to 54 per cent, putting us ahead of schedule in meeting this Closing the Gap target. In that same period I have seen similar improvements in high school completion across the broader student population. I can point to the opening of a number of trades training centres across Chifley as having helped to start building on this figure.

While we have achieved great improvement in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students completing school, the gap remains nonetheless, so there is clearly more work to be done. Among all students the gap remains between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and that can only be properly addressed through our national plan for school improvement. Last month the Prime Minister reported that another target was within sight. That was to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade, which is probably our most significant of all targets. This has been brought about by significant investment in improving antenatal care, access to public health services, immunisation and neonatal intensive care. Is there a more critical target than this one?

Progress is being made to halve the gap within a decade in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The 2011 census figures showed that the number of Indigenous Australians in mainstream employment has risen from 42.4 per cent to 44.7 per cent. Frankly, that is only a slight improvement. Although it is heading in the right direction again, we have to do a hell of a lot more there. There can be no greater role model for young Indigenous children than having a parent, caregiver or older sibling engaged in mainstream employment, with the routine and commitment that goes hand in hand with this. I want to talk about this later.

Given the economic conditions of the past five years and the employment pressures right across the economy, these employment participation results are perhaps much better than they seem. It shows the cost-benefit of having specific Indigenous employment programs and a dedicated minister overseeing them. I applaud the efforts

of everyone involved in these programs, which are helping to close the gap. I am extraordinarily proud to be part of a government that is delivering such life-altering results.

Last year I was particularly pleased to showcase a terrific local community organisation named Marist Youth Care to the Minister for Indigenous Employment and Economic Development, Julie Collins, who visited the Chifley electorate. I have had a lot of dealings with Marist Youth Care over many years, and I have a great deal of admiration for the work they do. They are engaged in a broad array of programs aimed at improving circumstances for local Indigenous youth. We had the opportunity to meet with graduates of their Aboriginal Trainee Support Worker program, which is designed to provide guaranteed employment to between eight to 12 long-term unemployed Aboriginal people per year with low education and skill levels. The training program provides Certificate IV training in community services plus on-the-job paid work experience across Marist Youth Care's own services. In-house mentoring is offered to each trainee to overcome barriers and to assist with staying on track. Once the participants have completed their training they are offered permanent employment with Marist Youth Care, which is fantastic. So it is not just the training but the fact that they are then given an opportunity to go into employment within Marist Youth Care. Again, it is a terrific organisation. It is headed up by Cate Sydes and is located in Blacktown, but it also has premises and operations in Whalan in the Chifley electorate. Over the last four years 29 trainees graduated from the program. Nine new trainees started in November 2012 and of those 29 trainees, 23, or 78 per cent, remain employed with Marist Youth Care or have taken their talents as youth or support workers to other organisations. It is a perfect example of the work being done to close the gap in the electorate. Anecdotally, too, when the graduates completed their training and started working with Marist Youth Care, this then helped in families where some of these trainees had seen intergenerational employment firsthand and were now becoming role models. As I mentioned earlier, they are now showing others what can be done with the application of training to improve their skills. Their parents and even their grandparents are finding motivation through the success stories that had been triggered as a result of the fantastic work Marist Youth Care have been doing.

As much as there is good news, there is other news on the other targets that is not so good. We need to redouble our efforts to address these. Halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children within a decade has frankly produced results. The Prime Minister gave the example of year 3 writing, where 78 per cent of Indigenous children reached or exceeded the national benchmark in 2012, a gap of 18 percentage points compared with non-Indigenous students. However, the year 9 results were disappointing, and there is no sugar-coating that: the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, at 35 per cent, is almost double that of year 3 students.

The Prime Minister reported that some results, such as year 3 reading, actually declined in 2012 after improving between 2008 and 2011. Also, only three out of eight indicators in reading and numeracy are tracking as expected, and the other five will need more work. I think the fact that we are able to frankly and transparently report on success and also on areas where we are not doing so well is absolutely critical in giving people confidence about the way in which government initiatives are operating. I certainly commend the fact that it is so transparent and that Closing the Gap statements are delivered by prime ministers who will seek to hold government departments and other organisations accountable, including ourselves, in reaching success.

In a similar vein, last year I was involved in the inquiry into Indigenous languages in Australia. So many Indigenous languages in this country are just disappearing from day to day and it is a matter of concern. I was involved in the inquiry as a member of the House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. The inquiry found overwhelming evidence that giving recognition to Indigenous languages and incorporating them into mainstream education has an impact on literacy and numeracy learning outcomes for students. While we saw great work around the country in this area, again, more can be done to promote Indigenous languages. The chair, the member for Blair, reflected upon this during his contribution in this section of the discussion. I want to reinforce his words. He said that to keep alive some of the oldest cultures in the world and to better engage Indigenous students there is value in being able to promote Indigenous languages and also see placenames in Australia embrace Indigenous names more and more—as much as you do see this from time to time—so that we can help in our own way to keep languages alive.

The other thing is that the ability to keep these languages alive is important insofar as it provides a critical bridge between generations and also ensures that cultures remain alive. You cannot underestimate the value this plays in being able to maintain identity and ensure engagement with the broader community. I certainly encourage

the government to better resource the teaching of Indigenous languages, because you will see the benefits flow from that.

I commend the Prime Minister on the statement and the efforts we are making to help close the gap.