

Attendance at pre-school key to literacy, numeracy



Earling learning educator Browyn Feilding with Tayshaun Haines ,4, Ethel Impu ,3, and Elijah Arabie, 4, at the Pre-School Readiness Program, in Alice Springs.

- **AMOS AIKMAN**

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A study of more than 60,000 children born in the Northern Territory since 1994 has found that boosting remote preschool attendance could increase their chances of meeting Year 3 minimum standards for writing and numeracy by up to 70 per cent.

The study, which connected data from health, education and other government services, revealed socio-economic disadvantage and poor living conditions were the most significant barriers to children regularly turning up for tuition.

A child in a remote and overcrowded house with English as a second language and changing schools at least once in 12 months could be expected to attend school on 61 fewer days out of a 200-day school year than a child facing none of those challenges.

Almost 40 per cent of Aboriginal children in the NT are believed to start school severely developmentally vulnerable and in need of extra help. This study is part of a “data linkage” project aimed at evaluating which policies will help close the gap.

Menzies School of Health Research professor Sven Silburn, the study's lead author, said getting children ready to learn when they first walked through the school gate was a crucial step towards improving attendance later on.

“Current policy efforts to improve Aboriginal school attendance have had such limited success because they are not addressing the roots of the problem,” Professor Silburn said.

“Our study findings show that longer-term patterns of school attendance are established very early in a child's school career.

“Attendance in the early years of primary school is also highly dependent on the child's developmental readiness for school learning, which in turn is an outcome of their early-life health and social circumstances.”

More investment in maternal and child health, early learning services and preschool programs could deliver “substantial improvements in Aboriginal school attendance”. Maintaining attendance through the early years of school was also crucial.

Professor Silburn said only 32 per cent of Aboriginal children starting school in the NT could be expected to reach national minimum standards for numeracy in Year 3, but sending all remote kids to preschool could raise that share above 50 per cent.

It comes as the federal government begins a renewed push led by indigenous envoy Tony Abbott to fix school attendance problems. Mr Abbott will evaluate the Remote School Attendance Strategy he introduced in 2013 and which critics say is failing.

Central Australian Aboriginal Congress chief executive Donna Ah Chee called on the NT to follow the example of NSW in funding two full years of preschool for all children. “We really need to do the same thing,” Ms Ah Chee said.

CAAC, a healthcare provider, runs Preschool Readiness Program that helps youngsters and parents begin the earliest stages of learning.

Bronwyn Fielding, an early learning educator in Alice Springs, said children needed help with the basics like getting used to sitting quietly and listening.

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