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consult members of the local school community to determine their preferences and assess their capacity to contribute to the success of programs of work in Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

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NEWS: ATSI Education on the Agenda

From the DG's Desk

Frank Peach, Director-General of Education

Why did I make education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children one of the three major priorities for our Department?

Most of my teaching career was spent in schools — Cairns, Bamaga, Inala — with large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, so I know at first hand the challenges facing both the staff in schools and the students and their families.

I am also aware of the improvements that have occurred over the last 25 years; however, there is no doubt that these improvements are in selective areas. Most of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families are, as a group, significantly disadvantaged in our education system.

As a nation we are moving towards a process of reconciliation; as teachers and leaders we must reflect this through action in our schools — action that must above all bring meaningful improvements in student learning and achievement.

Let us look at and celebrate the improvements

that have occurred.

ATSI student retention to Year 12 has grown from around 2 per cent in 1970 to more than 40 per cent in 1995; the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers has grown from five in 1975 to 170 in 1995; and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers in our schools (counsellors, aides, support and ancillary staff) have increased from a handful in 1975 to around 190 in 1995.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior officers in one department has grown from nil in 1975 to six in 1995.

Our Department has assumed the responsibility for the provision of education in all Aboriginal Communities and Torres Strait Islands; parents have been made to feel welcome in schools and they have become more involved.

We have developed a range of curriculum materials and teaching/learning approaches, established the Statewide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Support Centre and included an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sub-program in our departmental program structure.

However, we need to balance these improvements

against other facts.

While these students are only 2 per cent of our school population, they account for more than 20 per cent of suspensions and exclusions, their attendance is significantly less than the average and their results as a group appear to be significantly lower.

The Year 12 retention rate of 40 per cent is still only half of that of all students in our schools.

The absolute numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and other employees are still low.

Generally we are still not including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies across all our key learning areas, sending a message that their culture is not valued in our Australian society.

What can be done to improve the situation?

I believe there is a range of strategies to effect change that we can use in schools and in all locations of our support services — school support centres, regional offices and central office.

In a later edition of *Education Views*, you will see a plan that takes the spirit of the 20 goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Project and presents them in the framework of the departmental vision of excellence in education.

I see some aspects of this as crucial.

Schools need to develop their inclusive curriculum practices to take account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, student background and learning approach, and the reconciliation process; develop their supportive environment to

demonstrate their commitment to an inclusive approach to students and parents; look at their current outcomes in terms of learning achievement and behaviour and devise strategies to improve these to at least the average for all students.

Support services need to provide support to schools in identifying needs and outcomes; assist in developing plans and strategies; ensure that available resources are targeted to areas of need in schools; and monitor state trends and provide leadership.

We have much cause for pride in what we have achieved in our schools and I see much cause for confidence in what we shall achieve in the future.

I believe schools understand and accept our responsibility to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

We have the opportunity to provide future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to stand more equally within a more understanding and accepting Australian society.

We could not make a more significant contribution to the national reconciliation process.

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