

# IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## PERTH ICC REGION



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM VOLUME THREE OF  
THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL CHILD HEALTH SURVEY

This booklet summarises information from the third volume of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People*. The purpose of this profile is to provide information specific to the Indigenous Coordination Centre (ICC) region of Perth. ICCs have recently replaced ATSIC Regional Councils now that ATSIC no longer exists. However, for statistical continuity, information in this profile is based on ATSIC geographical boundaries.

To protect the confidentiality of individuals and families, the information provided in this profile can only be given at the ICC region level. Unless otherwise stated, data in this publication refer to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in the Perth ICC region.

## About the survey

**T**HE Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (the Institute) conducted the survey in conjunction with the Kulunga Research Network to obtain information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged from 0–17 years. The aim of the survey was to provide evidence to develop strategies that promote and maintain healthy development and the social, emotional, academic and vocational wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The survey was divided into three parts:

- ❖ household survey that visited 2,000 households and obtained information on 5,300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0–17 years, their carers and other relatives living in the homes
- ❖ youth self report survey for young people aged 12–17 years
- ❖ schools survey where information about students was obtained from school teachers and principals.

## Consultation

**A**LL phases of the survey, including its development, design and implementation, were under the direction of the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey Steering Committee. The Steering Committee comprises senior Aboriginal officers from a cross-section of agencies and settings, and has the ongoing responsibility to control and maintain: the cultural integrity of the survey methods and processes, employment opportunities for Aboriginal people, data access issues and communication of the findings to the Aboriginal and general community and appropriate and respectful relations within the study team, with participants and communities, with stake holders and funding agencies and with the governments of the day.

“The information provided by Aboriginal students, principals, teachers and parents is rich in detail and provides a wonderful opportunity for change through developing strategies for engaging in a whole of government approach to the early years of life and learning. The findings of this report provide an opportunity to re-engineer existing programmes, strategies and student support services, realign resources and redefine the role of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers to focus on the foundation of early childhood education and re-engaging Aboriginal parents as educators of their children and young people.”

(Professor Ken Wyatt AM, member Aboriginal Steering Committee)



## Measuring academic performance

**T**HREE measures were used by WAACHS to measure how well Aboriginal students were doing at school. Firstly, teachers rated students against other students in three areas of performance: literacy, numeracy and overall academic performance. Secondly, two standardised tests were given: a test of non-verbal performance (the 'Matrices' test) and a test of English language reasoning (the 'Word Definitions' test). Thirdly, with permission from parents and carers, test scores from the West Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) were obtained from the Western Australian Department of Education and Training — these data provided an independent measure of performance.

The main measure of overall academic performance used by WAACHS was the teacher ratings. To check whether the teacher ratings were accurate they were compared with scores from non-verbal and English language tests. The results from these comparisons showed that teacher ratings were a reliable measure of academic performance.

### Teacher ratings of academic performance

Teachers were asked to rate each Aboriginal student in the survey in comparison with other students of the same age. This was done for the key learning areas of literacy and numeracy along with their overall academic performance. Each student's performance in each of these areas was rated on the following five-point scale:

- ❖ Far below age level
- ❖ Somewhat below age level
- ❖ At age level
- ❖ Somewhat above age level
- ❖ Far above age level

Students rated as either 'far below age level' or 'somewhat below age level' are referred to as having *low academic performance*.



### Accuracy of the estimates

**A**LL figures in this booklet are careful estimates because not every family in the region was included in the survey. As such these figures may be different from those that would have been obtained if everyone had been included in the survey. The data have been calculated at a 95% level of confidence. This means that there is a 95% chance that the full population figures would be within the range shown by the confidence interval. In a graph the extent of confidence in an estimate is presented by means of vertical confidence interval bars (  $\bar{\square}$  ). The bars show that there is a 95% chance for the true value for a data item to lie somewhere between the upper and lower limits of the bar. Sometimes, where the populations might be very small, it may not be possible for accurate estimates to be made. In these cases, the graph will have very large confidence interval bars. The smaller the confidence interval bar the better the estimate.

When comparing two data items in a graph it may appear that there is a large difference between the two, but if the confidence interval bars for these items overlap it is possible they are the same. We can only be sure of a difference if there is no overlap of confidence interval bars. For example in the lower graph on page 3 there appears to be a large gap between Years 11 and 12 but because the confidence interval bars overlap it is possible that the true value could be the same for both. On the other hand, the bars on Years 10 and 11 do not overlap so we can be confident that they are indeed different.



**A**t the time of the survey 19,600 Aboriginal students aged 4–17 years were attending 750 schools in WA —7,350 of these students and 470 schools were in the Perth region. Over nine in ten (92%) Aboriginal students in the Perth region were attending Government schools, 4% were in Catholic schools, and 4% were in independent schools. In WA as a whole 85% of students attended Government schools, 12% attended Catholic schools and 2% attended independent schools.

### School attendance

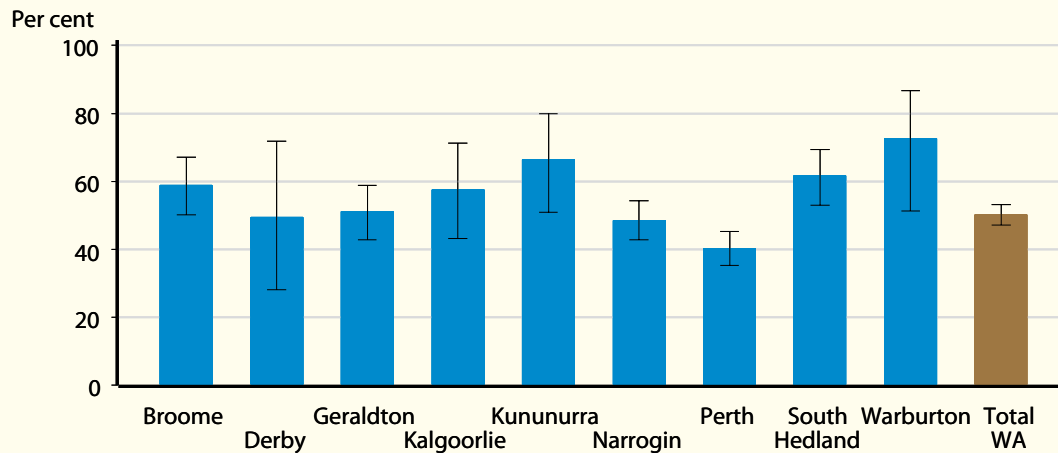
**O**NE way to compare school attendance of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students is to compare the median number of days absent (i.e. the number of days of school missed by half the students). In WA half the Aboriginal students missed 26 days or more of school per year compared with 8 days or more by half of the non-Aboriginal students. Only 18% of Aboriginal students had less than 8 days absence from school.

In this profile, missing 26 days or more of school in a year has been referred to as poor school attendance.

#### School attendance and ICC region

In the Perth region, 40% of students had poor school attendance. This was significantly lower than the state average, as well as the more remote regions of Broome, Kununurra and South Hedland.

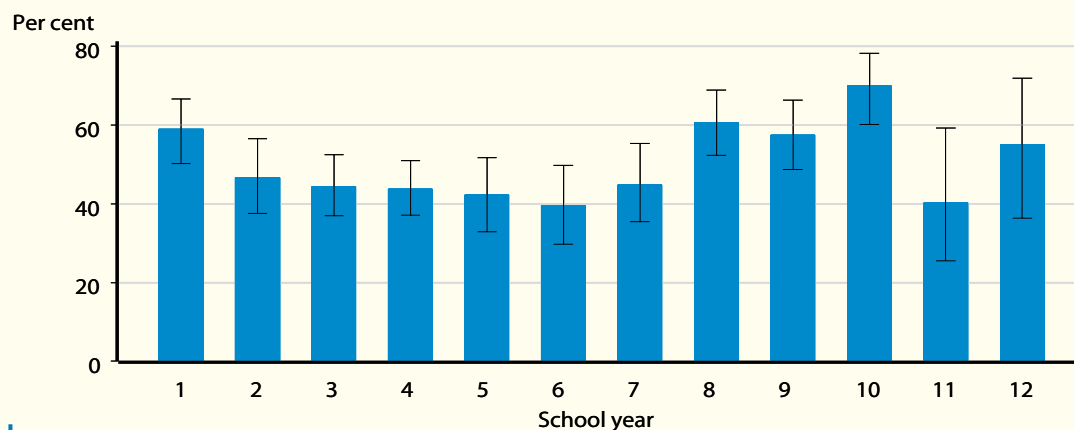
#### Aboriginal students with poor school attendance, by ICC region



#### School attendance and school year

Poor school attendance in WA was highest among Year 10 students (70%). This was much higher than primary school students from Year 2 to Year 7 and students in Year 11.

#### Aboriginal students with poor attendance, by year at school



## Factors common to students with poor school attendance

**T**HE survey found 14 factors associated with missing school. These factors didn't cause children to miss school but children who missed lots of school had these factors in common with each other. For example, many children who missed school were assessed as being at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties, had trouble getting to sleep or lived in families that had a high level of stress in their lives. Not every Aboriginal child had these issues but the children who missed 26 days or more were more likely to.

### Socio economic disadvantage

Poor school attendance was more likely among students at government schools in areas of least socioeconomic disadvantage than among students in government schools in the most disadvantaged areas.

### Age of student

Students aged 4 to 7 years were more likely to miss 26 days or more of school than students aged 8 to 11 years.

### Day Care

Students (4 to 11 year-old students only) who had never been in day care were more likely to have poor school attendance than students who had been in day care.

### Trouble sleeping

Students who had trouble getting enough sleep were more likely to have poor school attendance.

### Language spoken in playground

Poor school attendance was more likely where Aboriginal English or an Aboriginal language was spoken by students in the school playground than if English was spoken in the playground.

### Risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties

Students assessed from teacher responses to a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire as being at moderate or high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties were more likely to have poor school attendance than students at low risk.

### Carer need to see school principal

Where the student's carer had needed to see the principal because of problems the student was having at school students were more likely to have poor school attendance.

### Primary carer education

Missing 26 days or more of school was more likely if the primary carers had not been educated beyond Year 9.

### Primary carer labour force status

Poor school attendance was more likely if the student's primary carer was not in the labour force (i.e. was not employed and not looking for work) than if they were employed.

### Looks at book with student

Students who did not have someone from their household to look at a book with them every day were more likely to have poor school attendance.

### Life stress events

Students who lived with families that had experienced 7–14 life stress events in one year were more likely to have poor school attendance than students in families with less than 3 life stress events.

### Housing tenure

Students are more likely to have poor school attendance if they are living in rented accommodation than in homes that were owned or being bought.



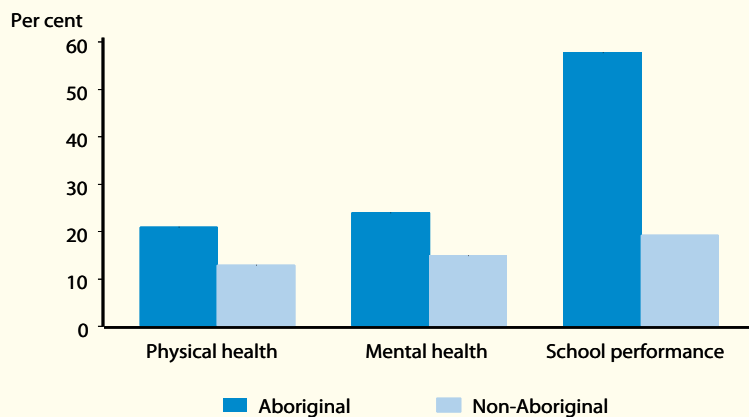
### Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer (AIEO) at the school

AIEOs were in attendance at 38% of schools in WA, at 79% of schools in areas of high or extreme isolation and at 77% of schools where at least 10% of the students were Aboriginal. Students at these schools are more likely to have poor school attendance.

### Academic performance

**D**IFFERENCES in education measures between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are in the order of 30 to 40 percentage points, much larger than any differences observed in physical and mental health measures. Differences in the academic performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are evident from the earliest years of school and affect Aboriginal students regardless of where they live.

#### Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children — differences in health, mental health and education



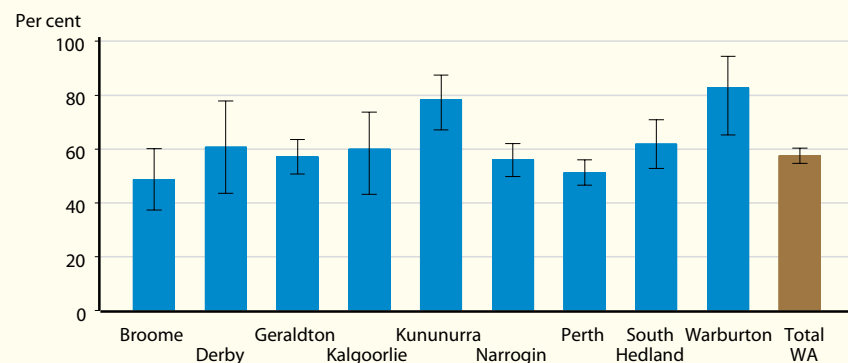
### Participation and retention

Aboriginal children are less likely to be in the school system, beyond the compulsory school age. Only one in four Aboriginal students who start Year 8 make it to Year 12, compared to three in four non-Aboriginal students. In the Perth region, 39% of Aboriginal 15–17 year-olds were no longer at school. In WA, 47% of Aboriginal 15–17 year-olds were no longer at school.

### Overall academic performance

At the time of the survey, about half (51%) of the Aboriginal students in the Perth region were rated by their teachers as being at low academic performance compared with almost six in ten (58%) in WA. For WA non-Aboriginal population the proportion was much lower (19%). As shown in the graph below, with the exception of Kununurra and Warburton, there were no statistically significant differences between the proportion of students at low academic performance in the Perth region and other regions of the state.

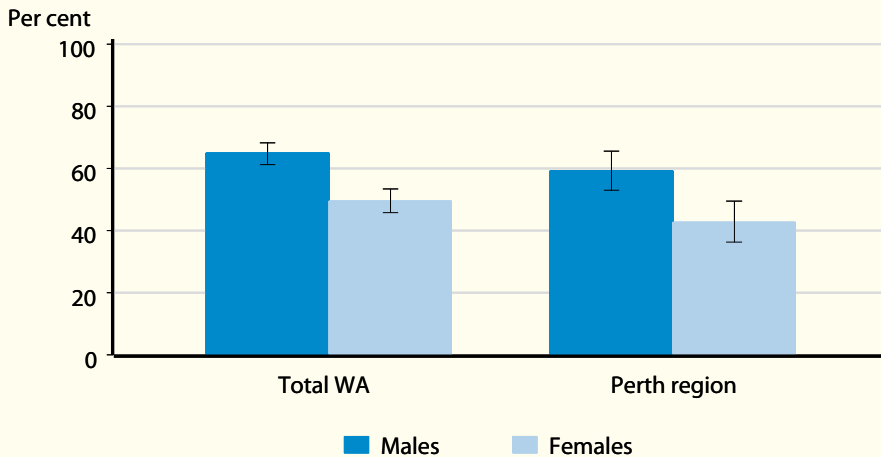
#### Aboriginal students at low academic performance, by ICC region



### Overall academic performance by sex

In WA, almost two-thirds of males (65%) were at low academic performance compared with half of females (50%). This was similar to the Perth region where 59% of males and 43% of females were at low academic performance. In the non-Aboriginal population there was little difference in the academic performance of males and females.

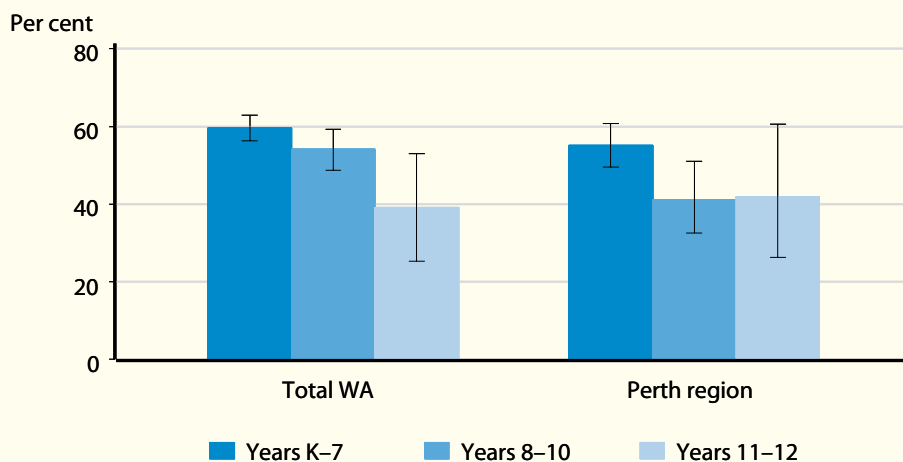
#### Aboriginal students at low academic performance, by sex



### Overall academic performance by year at school

For all Aboriginal students, the proportion at low academic performance varied by year at school. Students in years Kindergarten to Year 7 (Years K-7) were more likely than students in Years 11 to 12 to be performing below age level at school (60% compared with 39%). For students in Years 8 to 10, 54% had low academic performance. In the Perth region the trend was similar although there was no significant differences between school years. The lowest proportion at low academic performance were students in Years 8 to 10 (41%). About 55% of students in Years K to 7 and 42% of students in Years K to 7 had low academic performance.

#### Aboriginal students aged 4-17 years — Proportion at low academic performance, by school year



## Factors influencing academic performance

**A** NUMBER of student, carer, family and school related factors were examined for their contribution to poor academic performance. It is worth noting that among the range of health factors examined, very few were found to be independently associated with academic performance.

The three main indicators of poor academic performance among Aboriginal students:

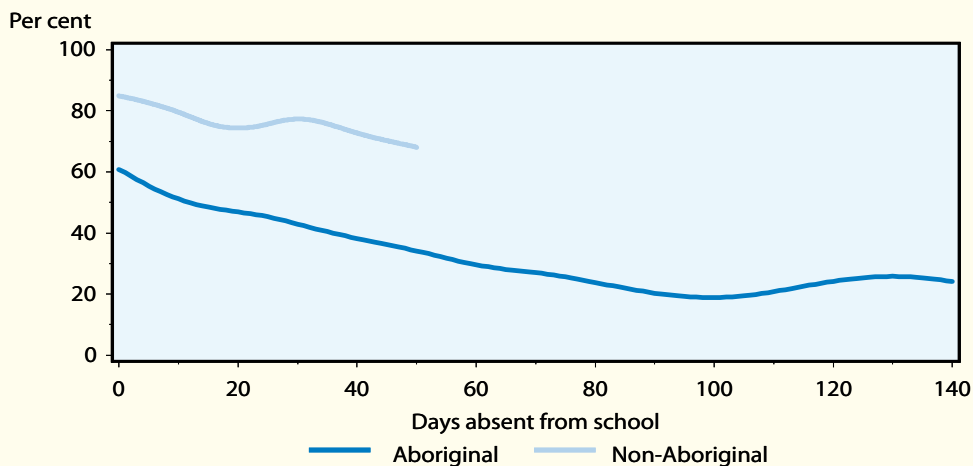
- ❖ school attendance
- ❖ primary carers level of education
- ❖ risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties.

### School attendance

While almost all Aboriginal children attend school, how well they did at school was influenced by how often they attended. The graph below shows that, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, as the number of days away from school increased the proportion of students who did well at school decreased. For example, it shows that for Aboriginal children who missed no school, 60% had high academic performance while those who missed over 100 days of school, only 20% had high academic performance. For non-Aboriginal students in the 1993 WA Child Health Survey who missed no school, about 85% had high academic performance. This fell to 70% where 50 school days were missed.

An obvious difference between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students is the maximum number of days absent over a given year (over 140 days compared with about 50 days). However, regardless of the number of days absent the proportion with high academic performance was always higher for non-Aboriginal students than Aboriginal students. This suggests that attendance is not the only cause of poor school performance.

### Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at high academic performance, by days absent from school



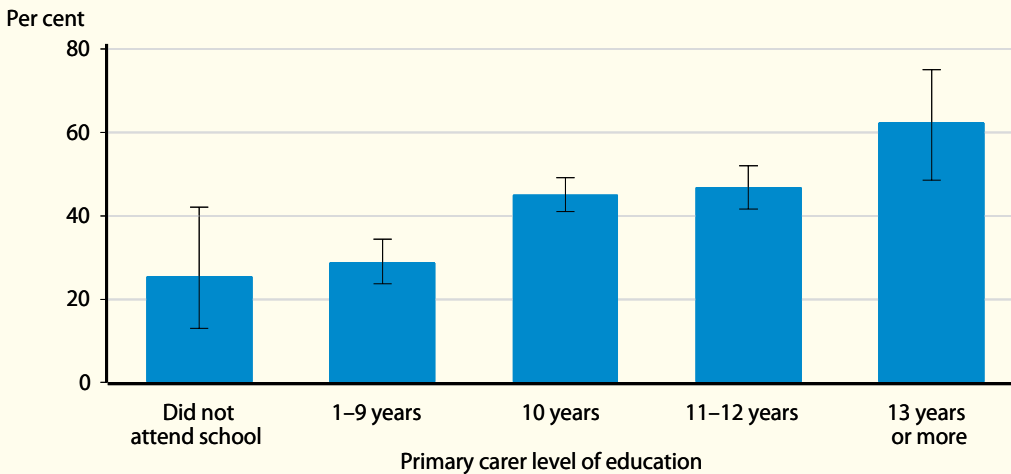
### Primary carer level of education

Throughout WA, the proportion of students with average or above average academic performance increased with increased levels of education of the primary carer. Where carers had not attended school, only 25% of students had average or above average academic performance. In contrast, where carers had 13 years or more education, the proportion of students with average or above average performance was 62%.





**Aboriginal students at average or above average academic performance, by educational attainment of primary carer**

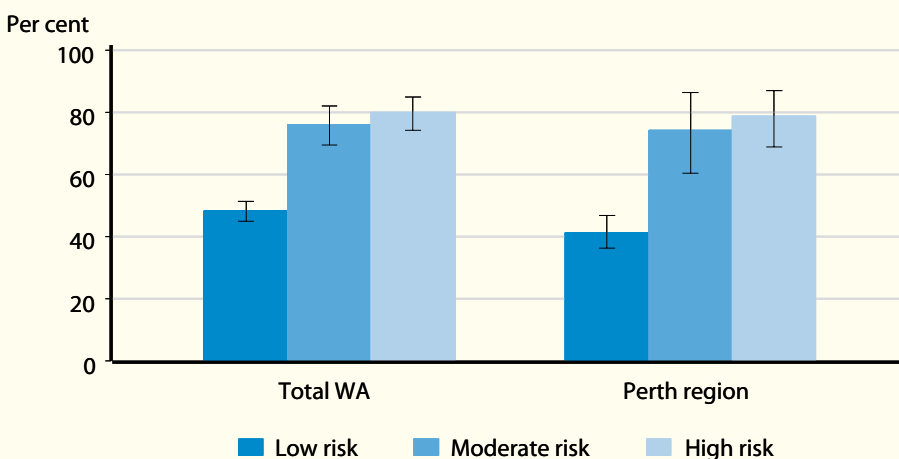


**Risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties**

Teachers were asked to complete a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to see whether the student was at low risk, moderate risk or high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. WA students at moderate and high risk were more likely to have low academic performance. Eight in ten (80%) students who were at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties and 76% of students at moderate risk had low academic performance compared with less than half (48%) of the students at low risk of such difficulties.

Similarly in the Perth region, 80% of the 1,110 students at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties and 74% of the 960 students at moderate risk were at low academic performance. Among the 5,280 students at low risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties a much lower 42% were at low academic performance.

**Aboriginal students at low academic performance, by risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties**



## Other factors influencing academic performance

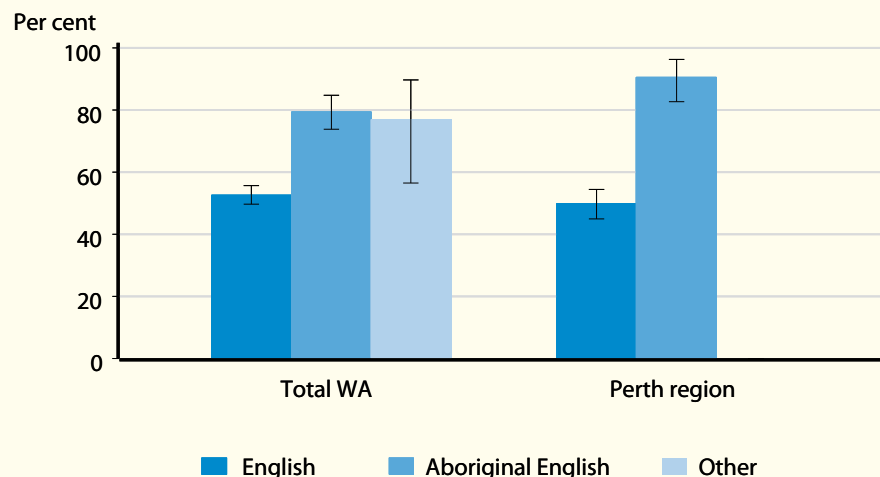
WHILE carer education, student risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties and school attendance were the three main indicators of academic performance a number of other factors were also found to have some influence.

### Aboriginal English as the main language spoken in the classroom

Students who spoke Aboriginal English in the classroom were at a disadvantage in terms of academic performance. They were more likely to be rated at low academic performance than students who spoke Standard Australian English.

At the time of the survey, 4% of students in the Perth region spoke Aboriginal English in the classroom, compared with 15% of students in WA. Of the 280 Aboriginal students in the Perth region who spoke Aboriginal English in the classroom 250 (91%) were rated by their teacher at low academic performance. This was significantly higher than for students who spoke Standard Australian English in the classroom where 50% were rated at low academic performance. The story was similar in WA where 80% of the 2,950 Aboriginal students who spoke Aboriginal English in the classroom were rated by their teacher at low academic performance compared with 53% who spoke Standard Australian English.

### Aboriginal students at low academic performance, by language spoken in the classroom



### Primary carer having seen the class teacher in the last six months about a school problem

Students whose carers had needed to see the class teacher in the last six months about a problem the student was having at school were more likely to be rated at low academic performance than those students whose carers had not needed to see the class teacher about a problem.

### Trouble saying certain sounds

Students who had trouble saying certain sounds were more likely to be rated at low academic performance than those without this type of speech difficulty. In WA, 12% of students had trouble saying certain sounds and 69% of these students were rated at low academic performance. In the Perth region, 13% of students had trouble saying certain sounds and 66% of these students were rated as having low academic performance.

### Labour force status of primary carer

The students of primary carers who were not in the labour force (not working or not looking for work) were more likely to have low academic performance than students whose primary carer was employed. In WA, 47% of Aboriginal students had a primary carer who was not in the labour force. This was slightly lower than in the Perth region where the primary carers of 52% of students were not in the labour force.



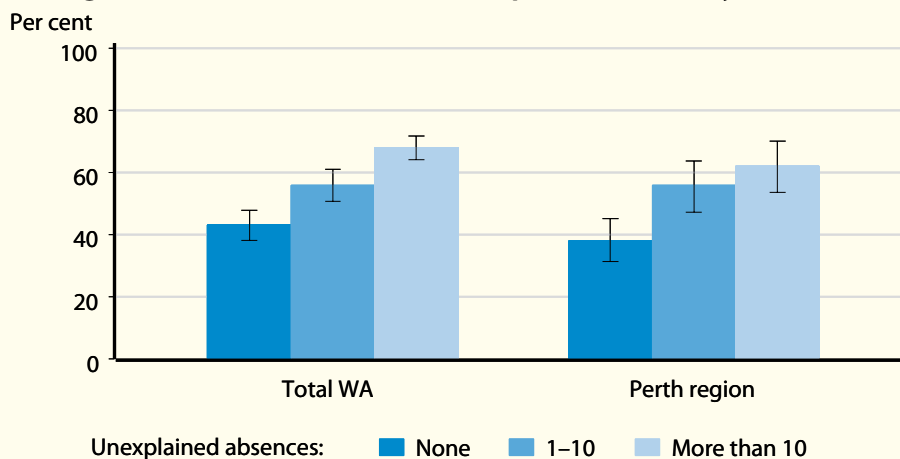
## Attendance at Aboriginal funerals

Students whose primary carer had attended an Aboriginal funeral in the last 12 months were more likely to be rated at low academic performance than students whose primary carer had not attended an Aboriginal funeral. Over half (58%) of students in the Perth region had a primary carer who had attended a funeral, much less than for students throughout WA (70%).

## Unexplained absence from school

Students who had more than 10 days of unexplained absence (i.e. where the school had no satisfactory explanation for the absence) were more likely to have low academic performance than students who had no unexplained absences. About 2,820 (38%) of students in the Perth region had more than 10 days of unexplained absence and 62% of these students had low academic performance. This was similar to total WA, where 48% of Aboriginal students had more than 10 days of unexplained absence of whom 68% had low academic performance. As shown in the graph below, for WA and the Perth region there is clear relationship between low academic performance and the number of days of unexplained absence.

### Aboriginal students at low academic performance, by number of unexplained absences from school



## Living in households where gambling caused problems

Students living in households where gambling was a cause of problems were more likely to have low academic performance than students living in households where gambling did not cause problems.

## Number of homes lived in since birth

The 71% of Aboriginal students in WA who had lived in fewer than five homes since birth were more likely to be rated at low academic performance than students who had lived in five or more homes since birth. In the Perth region, 63% of students had lived in fewer than five homes and over half (54%) of these students were rated at low academic performance.

## Schools with lower student to teacher ratio

Students attending schools where there were less than 10 students per teacher were more likely to have low academic performance than students attending schools where the number of students per teacher was either 10-15 students or 20 or more. In WA, 1,980 of the 2,810 students (71%) who attended schools with less than 10 students to each teacher were rated at low academic performance. In the Perth region, 220 of the 300 (72%) students in schools with less than 10 students per teacher were at low academic performance.



## School suspension

Students suspended from school at least twice, were three and a half times as likely to be performing poorly at school than students who have never been suspended. In the Perth region, 260 (4%) students had been suspended at least twice.

## Repeating a grade

Students were more likely to have low academic performance if they had ever repeated a school grade. In the Perth region 2% of students had repeated a grade.

## Comparison of effect of factors contributing to low academic performance among Aboriginal children in WA and the Perth region

The table below lists the factors that influence low academic performance and their prevalence in both the Perth region and total WA and the degree of their effect. For example in the darker blue columns it can be seen that in the Perth region, 52% of students were males and that 59% of these male students had low academic performance. In WA (the light blue columns) it can be seen that 52% of students were males and 65% of these male students had low academic performance. The table also shows that there is little difference between the Perth region and total WA in the factors and the degree of their effect academic performance.

	Factor		Low academic performance	
	Perth	Total WA	Perth	Total WA
	%	%	%	%
Students are males	52	52	59	65
School year (K to 7)	71	70	55	60
Absent from school for 26 days or more	40	50	63	68
Carers education less than Year 10	18	23	60	72
High risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties	15	17	79	80
Aboriginal English spoken in classroom	4	15	91	80
Carer needed to see class teacher in last 6 months	32	23	59	62
Trouble saying certain sounds	13	12	66	69
Primary carer not in labour force	52	47	56	63
Primary carer attended funeral in last 12 months	58	70	57	62
More than 10 days unexplained absences	38	48	62	68
Gambling problems in household	3	4	70	73
Living in less than 5 homes	63	71	54	60
Suspended from school at least twice	4	3	92	87
Repeating a grade	2	3	79	83
Homework done in homework classes	14	16	76	73
Severe functional limitation	3	2	84	84



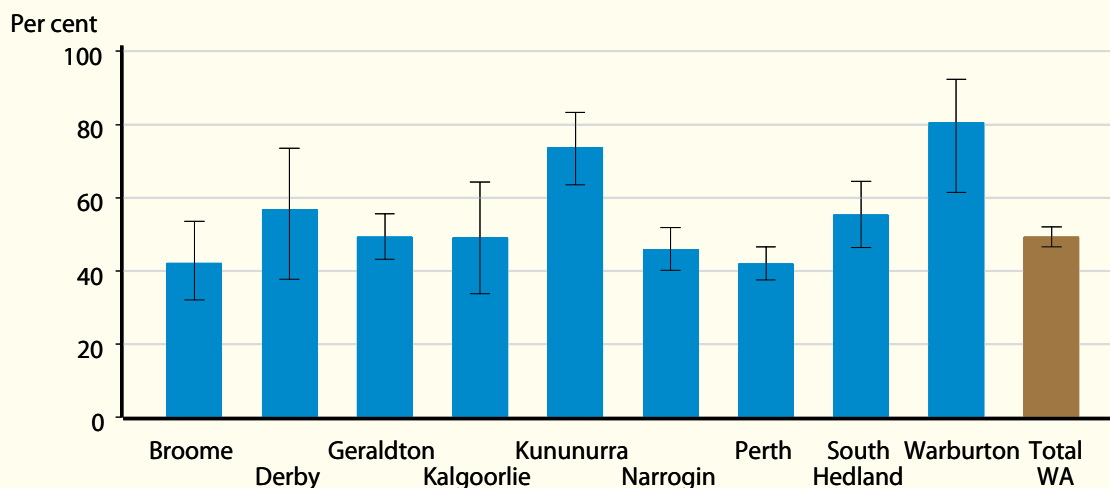
## School and Carer Engagement

**D**URING the consultation period of the survey most carers of Aboriginal children said that a good education was very important for their child. They were asked a range of questions about the school.

The carers of most (95%) Aboriginal students said that they felt welcome when approaching the school and were confident in being able to sort out problems that may arise with the school. The carers of four in five (80%) students were happy with how the school was performing. However, despite their high degree of satisfaction with the school environment, other findings from the survey indicated that primary carers were not fully aware of how their children were doing at school academically. For instance, primary carers of nine out of ten (90%) Aboriginal students reported the student to be doing OK with their school work. However, school teachers rated 58% of students as having low academic performance.

As shown in the graph below, almost half (49%) the Aboriginal students in WA were rated by their carer as doing OK at school, although rated as having low academic performance by their teacher. In the Perth region, a similar proportion (42%) of students were rated by their carer as doing OK at school although teacher said their academic performance was low.

**Aboriginal students rated by primary carers as doing OK in their school work although rated by their teacher as having low academic performance, by ICC region**



## Factors influencing differences in carer and teacher ratings of school work performance

**O**UTLINED below are the factors found to be associated with differences in ratings of school work performance between carers and teachers.

### Primary carer speaks an Aboriginal language

Differences between reports of academic performance between primary carers and teachers were more likely where the student’s primary carer spoke an Aboriginal language. In WA the primary carers of about 3,520 (18%) students could have a conversation in a Aboriginal language much higher than for the primary carers of 290 (4%) students in the Perth region.



### Primary carer's level of education

Ratings of student academic performance by primary carers who had education of 13 years or more were more likely to be consistent with ratings of academic performance by teachers. This level of schooling was completed by the carers of 7% of students in the Perth region and 6% of students in WA.

### Primary carer's employment status

Students whose primary carers were employed were less likely to have their academic performance rated differently by carers and teachers than students whose carers were not in the labour force.

### Students at risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties

Differences in ratings of school work performance between carers and teachers were less likely if the student had been assessed as being at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties by both their carer and teacher than by their teacher only.

### Unexplained absences

As the number of unexplained absences from school increased, primary carers were more likely to differ from teachers in rating the child's school work performance. In the Perth region, 38% of students had more than 10 days of unexplained absence, much lower than the state average (48%). One in five (19%) WA students had 1–10 days unexplained absence similar to the Perth region (23%).

### Primary carer had been forcibly separated from their natural family

Where the primary carer had been forcibly separated from their natural family there consistently appeared to be a greater difference between carer and teacher assessments of student school performance. In the Perth region the primary carers of 11% of students had been forcibly separated, similar to WA as a whole (11%).

### Importance of religion/spiritual beliefs

Students whose primary carers reported that their religion/spiritual beliefs were very much important in their lives were almost one and a half times more likely to have their academic performance rated differently by carers and teachers than students whose primary carers said that religion/spiritual beliefs were not at all important in their lives.

Carers of 37% of students in the Perth region regarded their religion/spiritual beliefs as 'very much' important — similar to the proportion reported across the State (40%).

### Overcrowding

Where students lived in an overcrowded home, carers and teachers were more likely to differ in their assessment of student performance. The proportion of students living in overcrowded conditions was much lower in the Perth region than in WA (14% compared with 25%).



## Discussion

THE WAACHS is the most comprehensive study ever conducted describing the many factors that contribute to the educational disadvantage of Aboriginal students. The findings highlight the gap in educational outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students — differences in education measures in the order of 30 to 40 percentage points. These differences are larger than any observed in physical and mental health measures. Very little progress has been made over the past 30 years to effectively close the gaps in education resulting in limited access to lifelong learning, employment and economic benefits and the need for all education stakeholders to reconsider the types of strategies and programs to overcome this disparity.

This profile shows the extent to which educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in the Perth region differed to those for all Aboriginal students in WA. In terms of overall academic performance, students in the Perth region were comparable with students in WA (51% of students in the Perth region at low academic performance compared with 58% in WA).

The survey highlighted a wide range of child, carer, household and school environment factors that affect educational outcomes. The most significant of these were lower levels of academic achievement of carers of Aboriginal students; low levels of school attendance; and higher proportions of Aboriginal students at moderate and high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties. These factors show the greater need for schools and carers to work together to improve educational experiences of Aboriginal children. Actions taken to address disparities in these factors, in both Aboriginal students and their carers, can have important flow-on benefits for the education of students.

The survey findings also highlight strong links between mental health and educational outcomes, making it important for education systems, health systems and family services systems to work together to provide appropriate support and assistance to students with mental health needs.

The WAACHS findings suggest that there are two key principles that should underpin efforts to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

- ❖ The need for schools to engage carers and communities to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage between generations
- ❖ The need to improve early childhood and early school learning for Aboriginal children, to prevent children falling behind in the crucial early years of life.

These principles form the basis of the 15 recommended actions for moving forward to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal children (see attached). They also encapsulate the themes of prevention and early intervention, aiming to ensure that there are far fewer Aboriginal children with excessively low levels of readiness to learn at school on arrival into Year 1.

“Aboriginal communities and governments must work in partnership and share responsibility for achieving outcomes and for building the capacity of people in communities to manage their own affairs.” (Ken Wyatt)

For further information about the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey or to purchase a copy of the report *Improving the Educational Experiences of Aboriginal Children and Young People* (\$82.50 (GST included) plus postage & handling)

call our information line on (08) 9489 7777, or  
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**The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey  
was made possible by funding from:**



**Australian Government**

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**Department of Health and Ageing  
(Coordinated through the Office for  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Health)**

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**Department of Education, Science  
and Training**

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**Office for Indigenous Policy  
Coordination**

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**Attorney-General's Department**

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**Department of Family and  
Community Services and Indigenous Affairs**

**Department of the Premier and Cabinet  
Department of Education and Training  
Department of Health  
Department for Community Development  
Disability Services Commission  
Department of Justice  
Department of Housing and Works  
Western Australia Police  
West Australian Drug Strategy**

