

# Low expectations must be lifted

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**THE strong reputation of NSW schools has been tarnished by an alarming report on Aboriginal literacy.**

Despite spending tens of millions of dollars a year, we appear less able to teach indigenous children to read and write than we were 10 years ago.

The lack of progress was detailed in a report by NSW Auditor-General Peter Achterstraat released yesterday. Rather than meeting policy goals of closing the gap between Aboriginal and other students, the audit found that on some measures such as Year 3 literacy, the percentage of Aboriginal students below the minimum standard had worsened from just above 20 per cent in 2001 to 25 per cent in 2007. Similar problems have been identified in other states.

Mr Achterstraat found that while some schools with high concentrations of Aboriginal children were doing well, the lack of systems to track and assess children at risk had contributed to the overall poor performance. Low attendance rates among Aboriginal students, who miss out on four to five weeks of schooling a year on average, and more in some NSW towns, were another major problem.

It is clear that "culturally appropriate" learning programs have hampered rather than helped Aboriginal children learn reading, writing, spelling and grammar. As Macquarie University education professor Kevin Wheldall points out, comprehensive research in Sydney and Darwin by the phonics-based MULTILIT (Making Up Lost Time In Literacy) program showed that Aboriginal children learned the same way during intensive literacy instruction from 2009 to last year and reaped the same significant gains as other children.

Aboriginal students would also benefit from higher expectations. From his experience as a student and as a principal who transformed Cherbourg State School northwest of Brisbane a decade ago, Aboriginal educator Chris Sarra has shown that far from helping Aboriginal students, watered-down expectations and lighter workloads entrench mediocrity.

The audit is correct in recommending Aboriginal students who score low marks in NAPLAN tests should receive the best possible support to improve their literacy skills and they need to be tracked. Equipping children with the skills they need to take charge of their futures is not just culturally appropriate, it is a universal duty.