

## NEWS

# Sport can help close the gap

## Indigenous educational outcomes improved.



**RACING AHEAD:** Sport keeping Indigenous students engaged

**S**port can play a key role in lowering delinquency rates among Indigenous youth in regional and remote areas, according to a scholar of Aboriginal sport.

Professor Colin Tatz shared his decades of research with the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee for its inquiry into the contribution of sport to Indigenous wellbeing.

“Proof is sufficient to say that where sport flourishes in Aboriginal communities, especially those remote and rural, delinquency rates drop, sometimes to almost zero,” Professor Tatz said. “Where sport is not a presence, rates are alarmingly high.”

“Sport provides a sense of belonging, social cohesion and loyalty, almost a substitute for clan and kinship loyalties. Sport is the only activity in which horizonless and otherwise purposeless youth can pit their bodies and skills against others – without having to go to school, college or apprenticeships.”

Professor Tatz believes participation in sport reduces antisocial behaviour. His views concur with the experience of school teachers and mentors in central Australia, such as Samarra Schwarz, manager of the Girls Academy at the Centralian Middle School. The academy was established in Alice Springs three years ago primarily to keep Indigenous girls interested in school.

Ms Schwarz welcomed the parliamentary inquiry and believes the academy’s focus on sport and sporting role models is making a difference.

“I really hope they do realise it’s making a big impact,” she said. “Our girls’ attendance is averaging 75 to 80 per cent for the whole year. That’s massive – for 55 girls. It is making a difference and there’s a real need for it to continue. A lot of our girls don’t get the opportunity.”

Ms Schwarz said the academy gives structure and purpose to many children who live in otherwise very challenging circumstances.

“For some of them they get let down in their home lives on a daily basis,” she said. “So coming to us and seeing some continuity and knowing we’re always going to be here to support them and there’s this goal if they do well, it makes a hell of a difference.”

The Centralian Senior College is also part of the national Sporting Chance program and offers experiences beyond just sport, such as leadership, teamwork, grooming and deportment, art and craft, and music. The manager of the senior college’s Girls Academy, Beverley Angeles, said sport remains the main carrot dangled to get many of these girls to stay at school.

“It’s exercise, nutrition, leading a healthy lifestyle, and for those with the talent to go on and play at elite level, sport’s a big part of territory lifestyle,” Ms Angeles said.

“Schools go away on a lot of sporting trips and we support the kids, not just financially, but in other ways too.”

The senior college’s development officer Jessie White recalled when one of the teachers came up to her a few months ago.

“She said she can pick which girls are in the academy and which ones aren’t, because their confidence is growing, their self-belief is kicking in, their pride, participation in classes is a lot greater for those girls that are a part of the academy than those that aren’t,” Ms White said.

Committee chair Shayne Neumann (Blair, Qld) is aware of the importance of sport to Indigenous communities.

“Indigenous athletes enjoy a long and rich history of achievement in sport,” Mr Neumann said.

“Indigenous people are more likely to participate in some sports, such as Australian Rules football or rugby league, and Indigenous men participate in sport more than Indigenous women.

“We know that sport can contribute to promoting teamwork, healthy living and community cohesion in Indigenous communities. The challenge, then, is to increase participation in sport and remove barriers to participation. Sporting bodies, non-government bodies and the government all have a role to play.” •

### LINKS

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