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# Transition From Primary to Secondary School: Igniting Attendance and Engagement Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students Through National Policy Reform

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## ABSTRACT

Australia's *Closing the Gap* reform aims to address disparities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There are specific targets focussed on key educational transitions; yet, the transition to secondary education is not a targeted priority. This is surprising given that this transition point is one in which student disengagement is notably high generally, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, intensified by historical, cultural and geographic factors. Secondary analysis of national attendance data indicates a significant drop in attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during this transition, especially in remote areas, signalling an urgent need for policy action. These data call for culturally responsive policy reforms addressing this precarious transition period. Implementing policies that conceptualise the problem as a relationship between school and student can mitigate risks of disengagement. Strategies should include fostering educational environments that respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and understand historical contexts, enhance connections with community and culture and promote community-led research to drive innovative and effective solutions. Addressing this oversight in the *Closing the Gap* targets is imperative in creating equitable educational opportunities that improve engagement, attendance and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across Australia.

## 1 | Introduction

Education and enriching learning experiences are foundational pillars for shaping lifelong pathways of health, well-being and social inclusion (Shonkoff 2012). There is a well-acknowledged understanding that achieving equitable long-term educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (henceforth respectfully referred to as First Nations) students in Australia necessitates a commitment to providing customised support and culturally responsive teaching and learning practices (Burgess

et al. 2019; Ockenden 2014). In a landmark move in 2008, the Australian Government launched the *Closing the Gap* initiative, setting seven ambitious targets to enhance health and educational outcomes. Since its inception, this initiative has led to notable progress in several educational outcomes for First Nations students (Biddle 2013; Commonwealth of Australia 2020). Specific targets are increasing early childhood education participation and boosting year 12 completion rates. However, recent policy reviews suggest a need for innovative and collaborative strategies, emphasising that '*more needs to be done, and*

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done differently' (National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*, 2020 [Preamble 1.3]).

In a pioneering partnership with the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations in July 2020, the Australian Government unveiled new and broader targets under the *Closing the Gap* framework (National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*, 2020). This partnership introduced 17 targets, aiming for advancements across health, education, safety, housing, land and waters, justice, language and social and emotional well-being. While the education targets have been largely maintained, focusing on the critical transitions into and out of school, there is an identified gap in policies addressing the middle years of schooling. Specifically, the transition from primary to secondary education warrants attention as a period recognised for an increased risk of educational disengagement, potential school refusal and eventual school non-completion (Dadi et al. 2024; Guenther et al. 2024; Hancock et al. 2013; *Closing the Gap* report, 2020—see Figure 3.2). In this paper, we examine national data to observe patterns of attendance from school entry to Year 10 as a proxy for student engagement. We explore the necessity of a policy target for the middle years, reflecting on potential policy adjustments and research initiatives to better support these crucial educational transitions.

## 2 | Reform Agenda for *Closing the Gap*—Is There an Educational Policy Gap?

The *Closing the Gap* reform embodies the Australian Government's dedicated effort to enhance the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through a constructive and respectful partnership. In July 2020, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), encompassing

federal, state, territory and local governments, united to refresh this commitment (National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*). This agreement was decided upon in collaboration with the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations, which comprises individuals from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-controlled organisations (Coalition of Peaks) who are representatives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their respective communities (National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*, 2020 [Preamble 1.4, 1.5 and 1.7]). This partnership has paved the way for a transformative national agreement, aiming for a culturally responsive, community-driven and evidence-informed approach to the *Closing the Gap* reform. It marks a significant milestone by actively involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as equal partners in Government decision-making. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' deep knowledge and leadership are acknowledged in shaping, executing, monitoring and assessing the initiatives under this reform, guiding their communities towards better futures (National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*, 2020 [Objective and Outcomes 3.17]). While the agreement is deemed a step in the right direction, the recent Productivity Commission report has highlighted that Governments have largely failed to meet their commitments, and the progress towards achieving the objectives and priority reforms has been weak (Productivity Commission 2024).

Within the broad array of targets outlined in the National Agreement on *Closing the Gap*, six specifically aim to elevate education and employment outcomes (see Figure 1). For early education, two targets (targets 3 and 4) concentrate on increasing engagement in early childhood education and ensuring children are well prepared as they start school. The other four targets (targets 5–8) focus on enhancing school completion rates and readiness for further education and

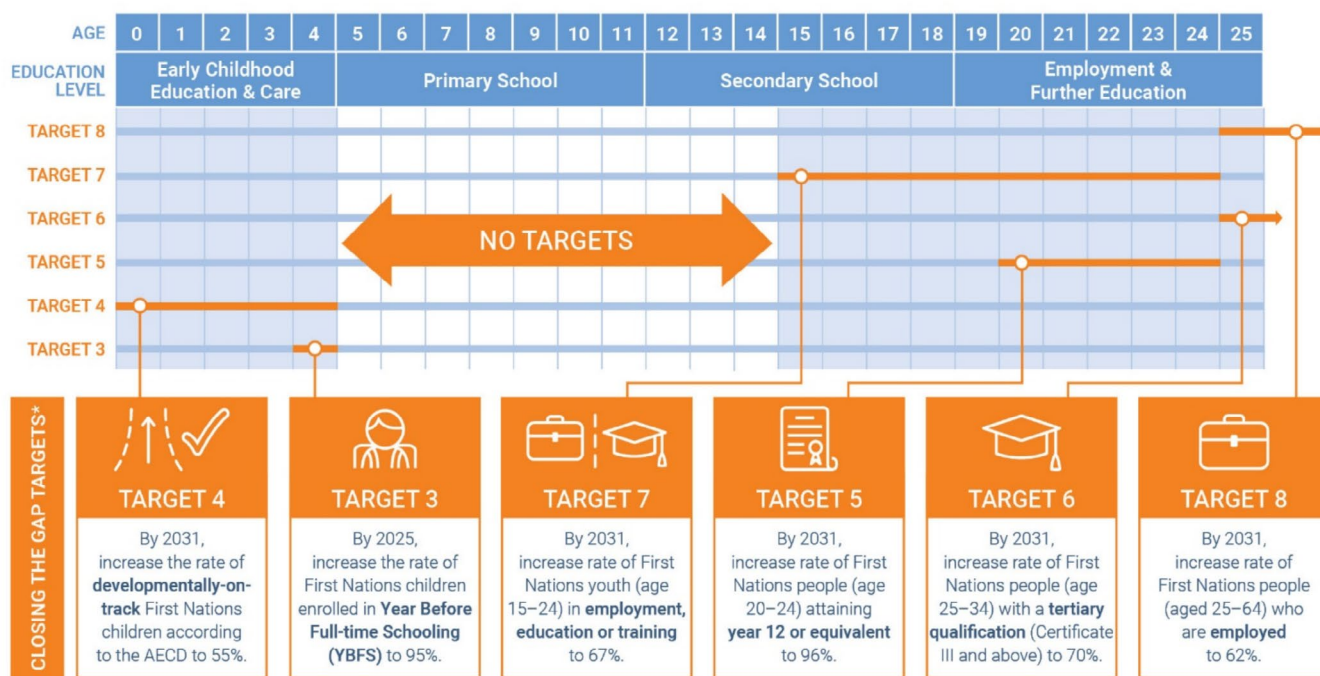


FIGURE 1 | *Closing the Gap* education-focused targets.

employment, setting a solid foundation for lifelong learning and career success. While the middle years of schooling are not explicitly addressed in the current targets, recognising this phase as critical for maintaining educational engagement provides a unique opportunity. This period is precarious for all students, evidenced in a heightened risk of educational disengagement (Goldstein et al. 2015). For First Nations students, this transition presents additional challenges seen not only in broad challenges of geography (e.g., lack of secondary schooling opportunities in remote locations) and culture (Dadi et al. 2024; Guenther et al. 2024; McCalman et al. 2020; Waite et al. 2024) and the enduring effects of colonisation (Dudgeon and Walker 2015), but in the failure of school systems and staff to be ready for First Nations students and embrace their strengths (Anderson et al. 2023; Lewthwaite et al. 2015) to ensure inclusion and opportunity to thrive. Addressing the challenges of this transition phase would further strengthen the framework, ensuring a more holistic approach to supporting educational journeys across all stages of learning.

### 3 | Bridging the Gap in Transitions

Navigating educational transitions is inherently challenging, and this is particularly pronounced during the pivotal move from primary to secondary school, a period marked by significant shifts in the school environment, curriculum complexity and social dynamics (Cauley and Jovanovich 2006). Acknowledging a body of research, the *Closing the Gap* educational targets clearly recognise the need for attention to the transition into (Dockett et al. 2006; Thorpe et al. 2013; Taylor 2010) and out of (Nakata and Nakata 2022; Nakata et al. 2019) the school system. The *Closing the Gap* initiative, while making strides in addressing educational inequities faced by First Nations students, has yet to prioritise the transition from primary to secondary school phase as a distinct target. This oversight suggests an area where policy could be more proactive in supporting students through this precarious time. The transition not only demands that students adapt to new routines and academic expectations but also places them at risk of disengagement if the educational system fails to provide adequate supports and resources tailored to their needs (Beatson et al. 2023; Benner 2011). This is especially true for First Nations students, who may face additional challenges due to cultural and geographical dislocation (Dillon et al. 2022; Guenther et al. 2024; McCalman et al. 2020), racism and discrimination (Fricker et al. 2023; Moodie et al. 2019), deficit assumptions (Lowe and Weuffen 2023; Sarra and Shay 2019) and intergenerational trauma (Menzies 2019; Miller and Berger 2020; O'Neill et al. 2018) during their middle schooling years. This highlights a significant opportunity for policy enhancements to foster a smoother transition and sustain engagement in secondary education.

Transitioning from primary to secondary school is challenging for most students. In the Australian education system, this transition coincides with a changing environment, expanding school size and specialist subject teachers with secondary school pedagogical practices requiring multiple transitions across a day (e.g., from one classroom to another). The complexity of this transition is amplified for students from remote

communities, some of whom must navigate the additional challenge of relocating their residences to access schooling. The persistent achievement gaps in literacy and numeracy, as highlighted by the *Closing the Gap* (2020) report, further indicate that the current educational framework requires a more robust support system to address these disparities effectively (Anderson et al. 2023; Hancock et al. 2013; Purdie and Buckley 2010). Moreover, the consistent average underachievement of the 90% attendance target of First Nations students across all school levels signals a need to reassess the relationship between school and student and strategies to boost engagement and attendance, particularly during the middle years of schooling. This phase presents a critical window for intervention, where targeted policies could significantly impact students' educational trajectories and overall success.

### 4 | Methods

School attendance data were downloaded from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) national report on schooling in Australia data portal, which is publicly accessible for analysis. Average school attendance rates as reported to ACARA by each school in Semester 1 are made available by collection year (2016–2019 and 2021–2022), formal school year level (years 1–10), geolocation (city, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote), jurisdictions (Australian states and territories) and First Nations status. The school attendance rate was calculated as the number of student days attended by full-time students as a percentage of the total number of possible student days attended over the collection year (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023).

School attendance data for 2020 was not published due to inconsistencies in recording and collecting school attendance as a result of varying school arrangements and disruptions across Australia due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first school semester of 2021, state-wide lockdowns across some Australian states disrupted student school attendance, and students were in remote learning environments. For this reason, 2021 data were not used for our analysis. Using the available data on national attendance, we plotted the average attendance rates across the school year levels over time to observe the attendance pattern for First Nations and non-Indigenous students.

### 5 | Researcher Positionality

This paper is a collaboration of four authors. The first author (AP) is of Indian origin, has lived and worked in Aboriginal communities and works closely with First Nations education service providers. The second author (KW), a proud Ngarabal person, specialises in implementation science with Aboriginal communities, focusing on building community capacity and youth engagement. The third author (TW), a proud Warumungu Luritga person, is a school teacher with extensive experience in early childhood, primary and secondary education. The fourth author (KT), a non-Aboriginal researcher who immigrated as a child from the United Kingdom, has partnered with Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander co-researchers in early education and has worked as a teacher in Rural Tasmania.

## 6 | Results

Using publicly available data from ACARA, shown in Figure 2, the disparity in average school attendance rates between First Nations and non-Indigenous students starts at the commencement of formal school (Year 1). From this point, average attendance rates for the two student groups remain stable throughout

primary school, followed by a decline immediately upon entry to secondary school for First Nations students (see Figure 2 average attendance from Year 6 to Year 7). For First Nations students, this decline is significant and observed as a precipitous drop—an *attendance cliff*—at the point of transition to secondary school. This *attendance cliff* aligns with the evidence that the effects of multiple challenges escalate among First Nations students towards the end of primary school and as the start of secondary school approaches (Potia et al. 2023; Stewart and Lewthwaite 2015). Further, our analyses of ACARA data show that the *attendance cliff* pattern is consistent across all

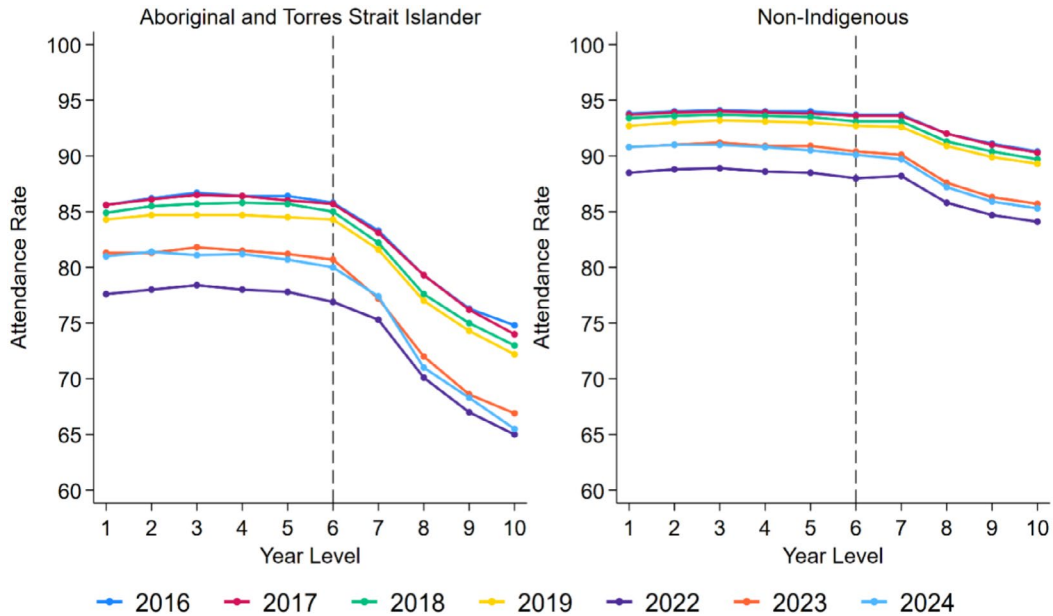


FIGURE 2 | The *attendance cliff*. Source: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

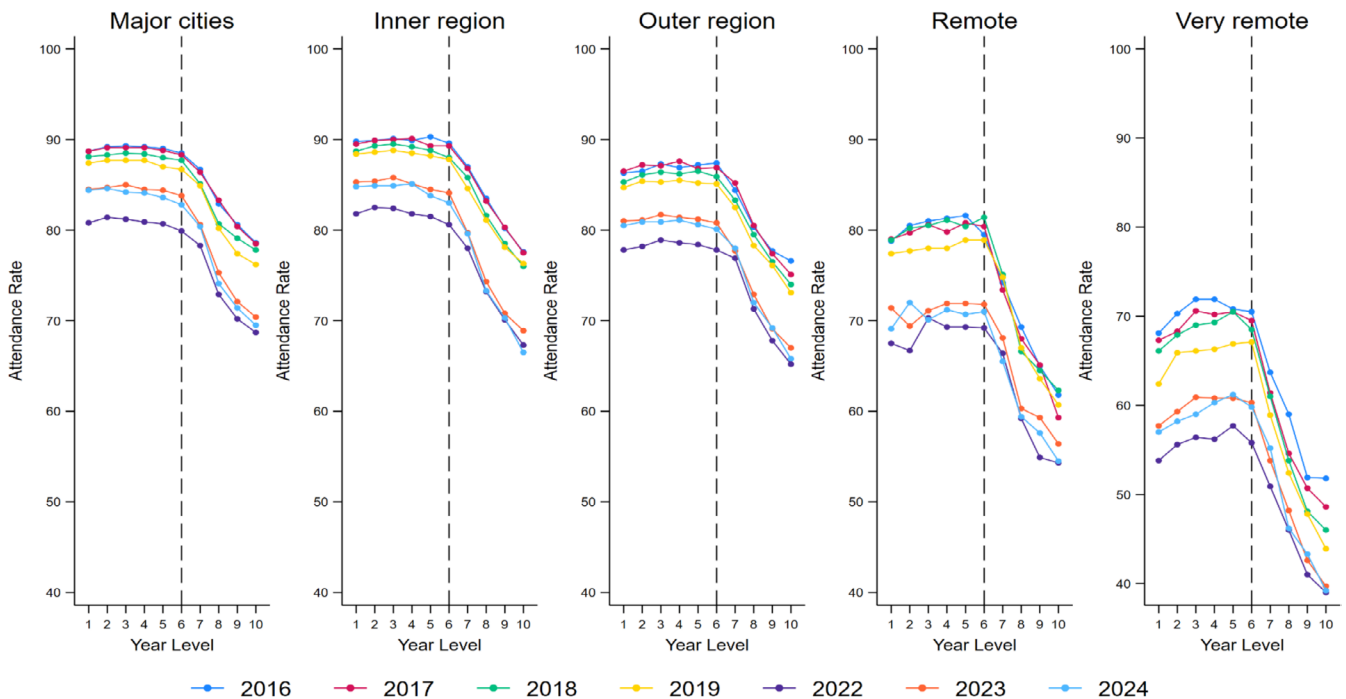


FIGURE 3 | The *attendance cliff* by geolocation—Attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by geolocation. Source: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

geographical locations (see Figure 3—average attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students). While the drop in average attendance from the start of secondary schooling until Year 10 completion is noticeable in major cities, inner regional and outer regional jurisdictions, this decline is more pronounced for students attending schools in remote and very remote jurisdictions. Therefore, school absences and potential educational disengagement are more pronounced concerns for First Nations students based in remote and very remote communities (see Figure 3).

The *Closing the Gap* reform makes a comparison in outcomes (e.g., health, education and other life outcomes) between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples. In presenting these results, we conceptualise ‘the gap’ as a call to question the structural and human (relationship) factors that explain this difference. That is, the *attendance cliff* as a notable symbol of inequity. The finding of an *attendance cliff* marks the identified need for systemic change that is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led and grounded in consultation to understand the mechanisms that perpetuate inequity.

## 7 | Discussion

In this study, we analysed attendance data to ask whether the middle years matter. Specifically, we examine the transition from primary to secondary education to ask whether there is a missing *Closing the Gap* target. We recognise the limitations to using school attendance as a proxy for school engagement—since attendance does not capture the cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of engagement. Nevertheless, there is evidence that regular attendance is a precursor to strong school engagement (Hancock et al. 2013; Miranda-Zapata et al. 2018). The attendance data visualisations we present identify a clear gap in national policy focus that needs to be further theorised, researched and addressed through policy and practice action. Beneath our observations of an *attendance cliff* in the transition from primary to secondary school is an opportunity to ask, ‘Why?’ Asking why requires genuine and meaningful co-design in partnership with communities and privileging the voices of students, parents and community members. This will involve deep listening (Dadirri), centring and recognising First Nations peoples as the knowers of the issues their communities face and allowing them to lead the way in co-designing solutions. Such an approach is essential to advance beyond a mere description of a problem to drive effective solutions—‘What?’

There is substantial international literature that focuses on the middle years and the transition from primary to secondary school for students. This work documents the disruptions of transition and its impact on educational outcomes (Evangelou et al. 2008) focusing on social–emotional supports as the pathway to facilitating smoother transitions and maintaining educational engagement. There is a strong, emerging literature specifically documenting and examining the experience of this transition for First Nations students. Linking to our findings of particularly concerning attendance rates in remote and very remote communities, these studies have focused on First Nations students and their families in remote and regional Australian

schools and communities (Dadi et al. 2024; Guenther et al. 2024; Langton and Ma Rhea 2009; Lowe and Weuffen 2023) and are reflected in regional variation in academic (NAPLAN) assessments (Anderson et al. 2024). In discussing the implications of the *attendance cliff*, we draw on both broader literature and that specific to First Nations students.

### 7.1 | Why? Importance of the Transition From Primary to Secondary School

For all students, the transition to secondary school coincides with structural changes in school systems and pedagogical practices and significant biological, social and cognitive changes. Such disruptions are set against the background of varying broader social and cultural environments and challenges in students’ life circumstances that may exacerbate or ameliorate the stress of change (Beatson et al. 2023; Hanewald 2013). For First Nations students, inter-generational trauma, cultural dislocation and deficit expectations exacerbate the potential stress associated with transition (McCalman et al. 2020; Miller and Berger 2020).

The transition to secondary school is a universal milestone, marked by shifts in educational environments that include changes in school locations, larger student cohorts and a broader range of subject specialisations. These changes bring about heightened academic and structural expectations and increased interactions with a diverse array of students and teachers. Positive transition experiences are formative as they lay the foundation for students’ academic engagement, enhancing their educational, social, emotional and behavioural outcomes in schools (Beatson et al. 2023; Hanewald 2013). Conversely, social–emotional challenges during this transition can negatively impact academic achievement and motivation (Goldstein et al. 2015). The shift from having a single class teacher to navigating relationships with multiple teachers requires significant adaptation, emphasising the importance of fostering strong student–teacher connections to support a positive school experience.

The research underscores the critical role that teacher–student relationships play in shaping students’ perceptions and experiences of school, highlighting the need for educational systems to adapt to the diverse needs of transitioning students (Anderson et al. 2023; Burgess et al. 2019; Hallinan 2008). As students encounter pedagogical shifts that necessitate moving between classrooms for different subjects, they must develop enhanced organisational skills and familiarise themselves with new campus layouts. This period of adjustment calls for an inclusive approach that recognises individual differences in students’ abilities to adapt to relational and structural changes. Importantly, schools also need to recognise that such relational and structural changes may impact some students more than others and require adaptations that are culturally responsive and inclusive (Lowe et al. 2021).

Drawing parallels from early education, where the emphasis is on preparing children for school, it becomes evident that schools must also prepare for the diverse array of students they welcome (Anderson et al. 2023; Petriwskyj et al. 2005). This perspective suggests a shift in focus towards policy reform that supports

schools in becoming more adaptable and responsive to the varied needs of their student populations. Such reforms could facilitate smoother transitions into secondary education, ensuring that all students are equipped to thrive in their new academic environments, thereby promoting equity and inclusivity in educational outcomes.

Relationships matter. Fostering positive relationships is pivotal during the transition to secondary school, a period that coincides with the significant biological and social shifts of adolescence. This stage is characterised by the growing influence of peer groups, which play a crucial role in shaping a student's sense of belonging and engagement with their educational journey (Gowing 2019; Waters et al. 2014). Research highlights that a strong sense of belonging, both within the school environment and among peers, is instrumental in easing this transition and maintaining engagement in school (Longaretti 2020). Existing research identifies that the extent to which secondary school students feel a sense of belonging is influenced by their previous experiences of belonging in primary school (Potia et al. 2023; Rahman 2013). These are, in turn, influenced by interactions with peers and teachers, and the level of learning support they receive in their school and home environments (Gowing 2019; Uslu and Gizir 2017).

Addressing the emotional challenges students may face, such as anxiety and self-doubt during this transition, is critical as these can adversely affect their self-esteem, attitudes, behaviours, academic performance and attendance (Evans et al. 2018). Concerns about fitting in, fears of bullying and racism and feeling overwhelmed by being the youngest in a new school setting are common and can impact students' educational experiences and outcomes (Cornell et al. 2013; Moodie et al. 2019). Those who face additional challenges, such as anxiety about being ill-prepared for the next stage of education or a sense of loss due to disrupted social groups and support networks, have been found to have decreased educational achievements and increased levels of absenteeism and dropout (Gubbels et al. 2019).

Given these challenges, there is a clear opportunity for policy changes aimed at creating a more supportive and inclusive transition process. Policies that encourage the development of robust support systems within schools, emphasise the importance of building strong, positive relationships between students, peers and teachers and offer targeted support for those facing additional challenges can significantly enhance the transition experience. This approach not only benefits all students but also addresses the unique needs of First Nations students, who may face compounded challenges due to specific sources of dislocation. By focusing on these areas, policy reform can play a pivotal role in ensuring a smooth, positive transition to secondary education for every student, laying the groundwork for continued educational engagement and success.

## 7.2 | Why? Theorising the Attendance Cliff

In exploring potential explanations for the significant drop in attendance of First Nations students, we draw upon a diversity of

studies that provide accounts of their experiences in the school system. Most of these accounts derive from administrative data, with an emerging literature drawing on the perspectives of students, parents and communities.

First Nations students enrich the educational landscape with their diverse cultural backgrounds and perspectives (Lowe et al. 2021). This enhancement is, however, positioned against distinctive challenging experiences of First Nations students during their transition to secondary school. These challenges include much higher rates of students moving from their communities to boarding schools in urban centres away from their kin and community connections (Dillon et al. 2022; Mander et al. 2015; McCalman et al. 2020). Such change can be profound. Dislocation from community is associated with challenges of adapting to structural and educational expectations within the mainstream Western schooling system, which may not always resonate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ways of learning (Bishop and Vass 2021; Burbank 2006; Guenther et al. 2024; Shay 2017).

Recognising the importance of the additional challenges faced, there is a significant scope for policy reform aimed at fostering educational environments that are inclusive and supportive of students' historical, cultural and social backgrounds and experiences. The Australian Boarding School Association (ABSA) (2023) has noted an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in boarding schools, highlighting the growing necessity for educational models that are culturally responsive and that integrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and perspectives within the schooling experience. However, this need extends beyond the context of boarding school.

To mitigate potential feelings of isolation and enhance the well-being of First Nations students, policy initiatives require that schools develop strong support networks that celebrate and incorporate cultural practices. This could include maintaining connections with students' home communities, embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledges and languages into the curriculum, the inclusion of culturally safe spaces within the school environment and offering culturally responsive counselling and mentorship programs (McCalman et al. 2020; Waite et al. 2024; Wilson et al. 2018). Such policy measures would not only cater to the unique needs of First Nations students but also enrich the educational journey for all students by promoting a learning environment that values inclusivity and diversity. Indeed, the 2017 report of the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs for the House of Representatives of the Parliament of Australia notes that boarding schools need to improve cultural safety:

It is clear that this 'revolving door' within Indigenous boarding must be addressed if educational attainment is to be improved. The committee hopes that improving the quality and cultural safety of boarding facilities ... will go some way toward addressing this problem. However, more must be done to assist students, families, boarding facilities and schools.

(House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 117)

To date, studies have suggested that Western educational approaches may be isolating for some First Nations students in secondary schools, and boarding schools particularly. There has been a call for more research to understand the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding school students (Dillon et al. 2022; Guenther and Fogarty 2020). Commenting on boarding schools, Indigenous academic Jessa Rogers argues that there is a lack of data regarding the benefits of boarding schools and calls for ongoing research.

how can the government be so sure about pushing our kids into boarding schools when there is so little data...how can we be pushing this model when we do not even know that it works?’

(Assistant Professor Jessa Rogers, ANU—House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. 99)

First Nations students’ cultural identity and belonging in educational spaces across the schooling system emerge as critical in educational engagement and outcomes (Shay and Wickes 2017). First Nations students report feeling excluded from the schooling system, particularly when school staff do not acknowledge their cultural identity (Lowe and Weuffen 2023). Shifting the concept of ‘school readiness’ from a focus on student readiness to the secondary school’s readiness to support First Nations students and ensure they thrive is fundamental. Success depends on schools building stronger relationships, actively working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members and leaders, and engaging with parents and caregivers (Fricker et al. 2023; Gower et al. 2021; White et al. 2019). There is a clear association between the collaboration of schools and local communities and its impact on the schooling experiences and educational outcomes of First Nations students as well as on improving teachers’ professional capacity (Lowe et al. 2019; Lowe 2017).

A recent study by Waite et al. (2024), focusing on the voices of First Nations students, identifies the tensions that these students face and the importance of safe spaces and a sense of belonging in school settings. In this study of First Nations youth leaders, participants identified acknowledgement of their cultural identity as a critical factor in belonging (Waite et al. 2024). In their interviews, the students identified a sense of difference and judgement. For example, one student spoke of being denied cultural identity because she is too ‘white’:

You’re not Aboriginal because you’re white [skinned].” there’s still that prejudice regarding skin colour which is pretty sad I must say...We come from a strong line of Indigenous women.

(Waite et al. 2024, p. 7)

Another, in contrast, identified that being Aboriginal was a source of being negatively perceived and judged:

People going to judge you for the facts that you are Aboriginal and stereotype you and say, “Oh your

mum must be a drunk,”... or they expect you to drop out of school, something like that,....

(Waite et al. 2024, p. 9)

First Nations students often face such racism and discrimination in schools, with attendant detriment to their educational experiences and outcomes (Fricker et al. 2023; Moodie et al. 2019). The quotes presented here voice the prejudice that First Nations students can encounter in school settings. A prejudice that isolates and separates rather than includes and celebrates. They underscore the potential for peers (including non-Indigenous peers), school staff and leadership to play a role in the inclusion of First Nations students. First Nations students are often judged based on their Indigenous and cultural identities (Moodie et al. 2019). Deficit assumptions, such as low teacher expectations and the lack of culturally responsive teaching practices and curriculum, can lead to these students disengaging from their education (Sarra 2008; Weuffen et al. 2023). This consequence is particularly pronounced in secondary schools, where students interact with multiple subject teachers. Negative experiences from just a single teacher can negatively impact a student’s engagement. Individual teachers and school systems are important in the school–student relationships and ensuring inclusion and equally high expectations of all students (Buxton 2017; Sarra et al. 2020).

Sense of school belonging, connectedness and valuing are clearly identified in the educational literature as predictors of academic success, positive school experiences and post-schooling outcomes (Parker et al. 2022). For First Nations students, a sense of belonging captures cultural identity, community connection, safe and supportive environments and family support (Waite et al. 2024). Recognising that First Nations students may carry experiences of historical trauma is crucial for schools aiming to enhance their well-being and educational experiences (Lowe et al. 2019; Moodie et al. 2019). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents harbour distrust towards the educational system due to their own negative experiences, which are often rooted in the adverse experiences of their parents and grandparents. These inter-generational experiences, passed down through family members, shape perceptions and can significantly influence how current students perceive their school experiences, their level of engagement in learning and their sense of connection to school.

Dislocation, whether geographical, cultural or historical, presents an imperative for attention to cultural safety, connection and celebration and presents clear areas of focus in policy and practice to address the *attendance cliff*. The extant literature presents a complexity of factors that compound to explain the *attendance cliff*. To capture this complexity in examining policy and practice responses (Figure 4) and setting an agenda for research (Figure 5), we, therefore, adopt an ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner 1977). Ecological systems models recognise that individual, family, school, community and broader policy factors combine to influence school engagement and educational outcomes.

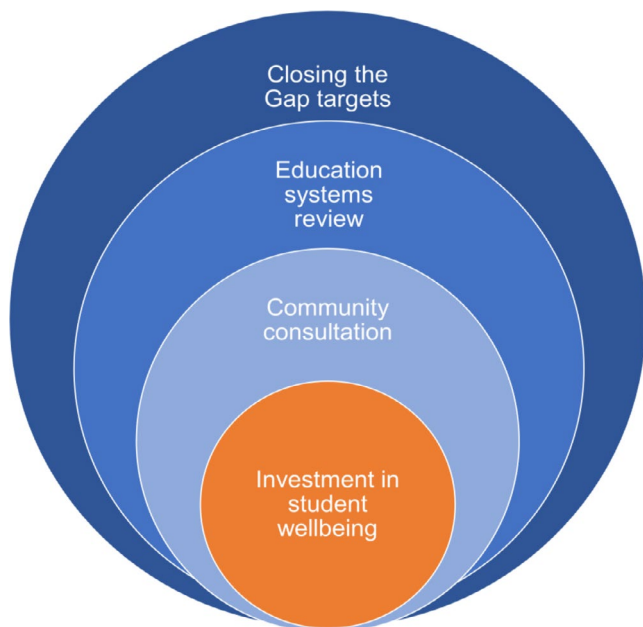


FIGURE 4 | An ecological model for policy and practice.

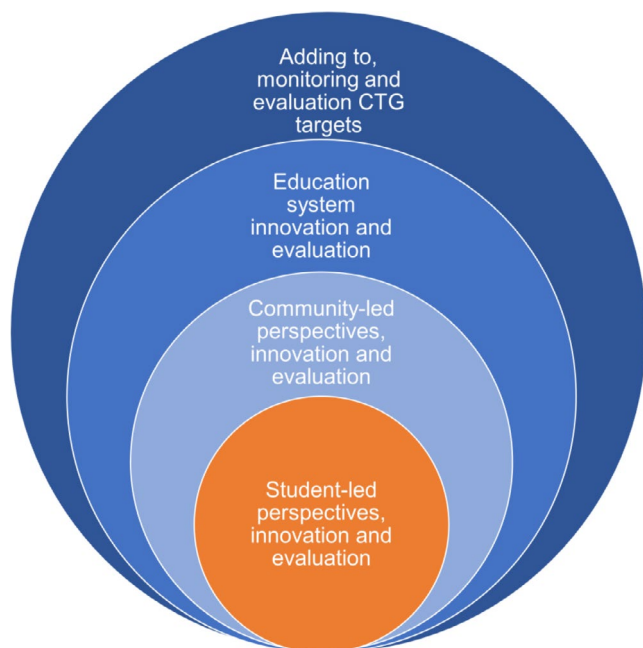


FIGURE 5 | An ecological model for research.

## 7.3 | What? Directions for Educational Policy and Practice

Figure 4 summarises the levels of policy and practice action required in addressing the *attendance cliff*, presented within an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1977). We consider each component of the ecological model in turn.

### 7.3.1 | Closing the Gap Targets

The Alice Springs Mparntwe Education Declaration lays down the Australian Government's education goals for young

Australians and their corresponding commitment to action (Education Council 2019). As part of the commitment to action, the Declaration calls for 'embedding pathways for learning throughout life and supporting effective transitions'. The declaration includes primary to secondary school transitions. The *Closing the Gap* reform aligns in the inclusion of transitions into and beyond school but misses the middle years transitions. While the Mparntwe declaration depicts the educational process, and educational transition as a process, *Closing the Gap* reform does not. A reconceptualisation of the educational journey for First Nations students, as a process, would require the addition of targets in the middle years. The *attendance cliff* draws attention to this omission and clearly portrays the need for more to be done in addressing the educational journey that First Nations students undertake. The introduction of any new targets would need to be driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (including students and families) and community consensus. Ongoing monitoring of progress and innovations would also be required to support positive educational pathways.

### 7.3.2 | Education Systems Review

The *attendance cliff* shows the average pathway for all First Nations students. However, not all students have the same circumstances and pathways. A recent report to the Queensland Department of Education used latent class analysis to identify different trajectories of attendance and other educational outcomes for all Queensland state school students (Potia et al. 2023). This analysis was conducted using student-level longitudinal administrative data from 2007 to 2019. Five attendance trajectories were identified for all Queensland state school students. Three were largely resilient, with the middle schooling years showing a minor decline while transitioning to secondary school for all students.

Two trajectories, however, were less resilient. In one, there was a rapid decline at the transition to secondary school despite primary school attendance being consistently high. On the other trajectory, students had low attendance profiles throughout their primary schooling, with a significant decline observed once they entered secondary school. First Nations students were over-represented in each of these less resilient pathways but with a much higher proportion within the latter trajectory. This over-representation in poor attendance from the beginning of schooling represents a systemic failure to address apparent inequities (e.g., ongoing systemic racism, westernised education system not aligning with cultural values and culturally unsafe school environments) within and beyond the schooling system, with flow-on effects that catalyse profound disengagement at the transition to secondary school.

As attendance is a marker of engagement and is monitored daily across the school journey, providing immediate support when there is an evident decline is an important marker of the need for additional supports. The major decline in attendance for a group of students in the middle years suggests the need to consider structural change that includes reviewing boarding school transition processes (Guenther and Fogarty 2020; McCalman et al. 2020) and considering remote and flexible learning options

beyond what is offered by mainstream schooling (Shay and Heck 2015), with Governments investing in good quality educational opportunities in remote and rural areas for First Nations students.

### 7.3.3 | Community Consultation and School Support

The general literature on school transitions, and that specific to First Nations students, identify relationships within schools and connectedness and belonging to school as central to ongoing educational engagement and academic success (Thackrah et al. 2021). To achieve this connection, whether students and schools are co-located in a community or distant (as in the case of boarding) requires connecting community and school (Gower et al. 2021; Lowe 2017). The effectiveness of connection is intricately tied to mutual respect, consultation, meaningful co-designing of solutions and ongoing communication. School staff and leadership's positive responses to each student's culture play a crucial role (Waite et al. 2024).

### 7.3.4 | Investment in Student Well-Being

Recognition that dislocation, whether physical or cultural, will affect students' mental health and well-being in schools, ongoing supports and proactive investment in individual student well-being is important. Understanding the long-term impacts that intergenerational trauma can have on students' health and well-being is an important consideration when support structures are established. Such trauma and its continuing legacy on young First Nations people today are often overlooked. Ongoing consultation and meaningful co-designing in partnership with students and their families are required to provide appropriately tailored supports. Providing opportunities for leadership and peer support is also likely important.

## 7.4 | What? Future Directions

Figure 5 summarises research opportunities at the different individual, community and system levels to address the attendance cliff, presented within an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1977).

### 7.4.1 | Understanding Stakeholder Perspectives (Students, Families, Teachers and Communities)

The *attendance cliff* presents an imperative for research and one that focuses on understanding the perspectives of students, their families and communities and the diversity of primary and secondary schools and teachers that support the educational journey of students. Innovations in supporting student well-being and improving school practices are most likely to be effective when schools, teachers, communities and students work together and participate in innovation and evaluation. It is also important to document what a successful transition to secondary school would look like for First Nations students.

### 7.4.2 | Experimenting With Systems Strategies

The *attendance cliff*, and particularly that for students living in remote locations, presents a call for review and co-designed experimentation (try, test and learn) with ways to bridge school and community relationships. Trials of different system innovations, initiated and/or supported by communities, present a program of work.

### 7.4.3 | Adding to, Monitoring and Evaluating the Closing the Gap Targets

The *attendance cliff* presents a stark representation of a problem to solve. That problem is inequity. The solution is well specified in *Closing the Gap* Prime Minister's report (Commonwealth of Australia 2020), where it is made clear that to effect positive change requires working with and being led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The imperative for inclusion of targets for the middle years with attendant monitoring and tracking of outcomes is required.

## 8 | Conclusion

Embracing change and ensuring a culturally responsive educational journey is an imperative for supporting the unique needs of First Nations students. First Nations students face significant transitions within the education system that are not only physical and pedagogical but also deeply social cultural and historical. These transitions highlight the importance of student, community and school relationships. In action this requires adapting educational policies to better align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, ensuring that students do not have to face dislocation from their communities and Country. Recognising the critical transition into secondary school, which has not been specifically addressed by the *Closing the Gap* targets, presents a significant opportunity for policy reform with accompanying actions and resource allocation.

To address this, we advocate for expanding the *Closing the Gap* targets to include a focus on the crucial middle years of education. This approach necessitates a strategic emphasis on policy reforms aimed at enhancing school attendance, engagement and academic achievement for First Nations students. By fostering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research and community-driven initiatives, there is a tremendous potential to innovate and implement strategies that are culturally attuned and effective in supporting students through these transitions. Such policy reforms will not only contribute to closing the educational gaps but also ensure that all First Nations students, regardless of their location, have access to a supportive and enriching educational experience that respects and incorporates their cultural heritage.

### Author Contributions

**Azhar Hussain Potia:** conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, visualization, funding

acquisition, writing – review and editing. **Kai W. Wheeler:** conceptualization, writing – review and editing. **Tracy Woodroffe:** conceptualization, writing – review and editing. **Karen Thorpe:** conceptualization, writing – original draft, supervision, funding acquisition, writing – review and editing.

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### Ethics Statement

An ethics exemption approval was given by the Research Ethics and Integrity unit at the University of Queensland (2024/HE000099).

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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