A quarter of a century ago an Australian rock band took its music to the outback.

What Midnight Oil frontman Peter Garrett learned on that 1986 Blackfella/Whitefella tour still drives him in his job today.

The federal schools minister has a "real burning desire" to help improve the lot of young indigenous people.

"When I first travelled into remote areas and met many Aboriginal people in communities ... I saw how important and crucial, in fact, education was to those communities," he told AAP.

His passion for indigenous education policy is evident in his Parliament House office: a pinboard crammed with drawings and messages from students at schools in remote communities.

Just a week ago he was in Wadeye, near Darwin, opening a new boarding facility the government funded to help ensure the kids there attend school.

When AAP interviewed Garrett this week, he was hosting a work experience student as part of the Learn Earn Legend! program for indigenous students in Years 11 and 12.

But for all the ministerial attention to indigenous education, the indicators show not much is improving.

NAPLAN results from 2011 show indigenous students' results continue to be substantially lower than non-indigenous students across all ages.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has targets to halve the gap for indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy achievement by 2018, and to halve the gap of Year 12 attainment rates by 2020.

However, the most recent COAG Reform Council progress report, released almost a year ago, warned it would be difficult to meet the first target with states and territories falling behind in early years.

The same report also found school attendance rates continued to fall in almost every jurisdiction.

Upon releasing the report, council chair Paul McClintock said the declining attendance was among some of the most confronting pieces of data he'd ever seen.
"There's not the slightest possibility of closing gaps ... if that number of children have opted out of the system," he said.

Another COAG committee, which reviewed government service provision, released a report this month showing $2.99 was spent on schooling per head of indigenous population for every $1 spent per non-indigenous person.

The almost $2 gap is partly explained by a higher proportion of indigenous people being of school age than the general population.

Garrett acknowledges there's more to do, but he was keen to highlight some schools and students were doing really well.

"We cannot in any way have another generation of Aboriginal students in Australia not perform to their capacity, not come through school with the means of working and learning and of providing," he said.

"We need to have a number of key things in place in every school setting.

"We know what they are but we need to make sure they're in place and that the effort is continued."

This include strong and committed leadership from schools and communities, personalised learning plans and setting high expectations for students.

Garrett points to the first national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education plan, agreed to by all governments, as giving a solid template on how to proceed.

Indigenous education expert Dr Bill Fogarty, from the ANU National Centre for Indigenous Studies, says community engagement and making education relevant are important factors.

International research shows test-driven agendas and programs unconnected to children's real lives are particularly unproductive for indigenous students.

"We need to refocus on programs and policy that really engage indigenous communities in the education process," he told AAP.

The question of community engagement can be a difficult one for governments to resolve.

Garrett has seen how excited and proud communities are when their young people do well and become leaders.

The minister said he makes it his "constant mantra" to reinforce the importance of education to parents.

And he says governments can give schools and principals tools to help them engage parents and local communities.

Fogarty said low attendance rates often indicated the education on offer was not seen as valuable or useful.
But punitive responses, like aligning parental welfare payments to kids' school attendance, were ultimately only short-term fixes.

"A better policy approach is to invest in and support place-based strategies that give education a point in the local context and link to opportunities in the wider world," he said.

"This also means supporting programs that value indigenous languages and that link to local people's economic and social development aspirations.

"That way you make education important for everyone involved and provide real pathways for the kids' futures."

Garrett agrees on the importance of recognising culture, saying it should be placed on an equal footing with literacy and numeracy in schools.

"One shouldn't be seen in isolation to the other; they play different roles but they are absolutely crucial," he said.

"A strong connection to culture is to make sure that people within the school setting are able to be acknowledged and taught in a way which reflects this experience they bring with them."

Ultimately, Garrett believes while it will be a struggle, work is in train to "get on top of decades of challenge".

"We now need to keep our foot on that accelerator pedal; we need to hold hands with others who are part of this journey and we need to hang on, hold on and keep going until we all get there," he said.