Symbolism only matters when it stands for something concrete. This is the firm belief of Professor Mick Dodson, the 2009 Australian of the Year. Whilst many may discount symbolism as unrelated to the action needed to improve health and wellbeing, for Professor Dodson, it is one of the essential tools in getting the job done. This is because our actions are invested with meaning, and to change our world we all need to act in meaningful ways.

Professor Dodson has spent a good proportion of his life taking action. The Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in announcing Professor Dodson Australian of the Year for 2009, thanked him for a lifelong commitment to improving the lives of Aboriginal people and promoting understanding between all Australians.

The Award was recognition of Professor Dodson’s efforts in pursuing justice and reconciliation through education, awareness and dialogue at the community and international levels.

As a lawyer and an activist, Professor Dodson has dedicated the last two decades to working with the United Nations to improve the plight of indigenous people worldwide and has also found the time to co-Chair Reconciliation Australia, chair the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, work with governments, mentor young Aboriginal leaders and pursue a successful career in Academia.

This year has been no different for Professor Dodson. It has seen him tirelessly throw himself into what he sees as the central thematic issue for his term as Australian of the Year- the education of Australia's children.

It is a challenge he has relished. When asked what he saw as the significant highlights for the year, Dodson, beaming smile, is quick to answer. Every school visit has been what he has enjoyed the most he says.

“I like visiting all the schools, but particularly the primary schools,” says Dodson. “The kids are so fearless – they don’t have any self consciousness and they ask you great questions, very hard hitting questions. I’ve really enjoyed that – it's wonderful going to school.”

“I get a great deal of satisfaction from trying to impart knowledge and experience, particularly when students react, asking a lot of questions and showing real interest,” he says.

Professor Dodson’s year has seen him visit schools in every Australian state and territory, meeting and speaking to thousands of young Australians, sharing his own life experiences and stories.

Asked if, reflecting on these visits, he felt he had inspired and motivated these children, he says he honestly doesn’t know.

“I have tried to pass on encouragement and motivation through school visits and if something good comes of that that would have made it all worthwhile,” he says.

“I love being Australian and an Aboriginal Australian,” he explains. “But there are some things that happen in my country which trouble me as an Australian, let alone Australian of the Year.”

“I think if you have troubles you should speak up about them. Whether that is leadership or not, I don’t know. But I like to bring attention to things that I think are perhaps wrong or which are being done incorrectly or poorly. I like to bring my voice to those things.”
Professor Dodson has been bringing his voice to bear on another issue he is passionate about—articulating one powerful message— that is, to not give up and to always keep striving.

“You know...I have fallen over and fallen down a few times in my life,” he says. “I have spoken of how I have sometimes failed and I have spoken to the kids about failure.”

“I have also told them about the importance of picking themselves up and having another crack. I have also talked to kids about sadness, and how you shouldn’t let sadness consume you. I firmly believe you have to get going, to keep going.”

It is this belief in making sure that no matter what the odds may be, you must meet them head on, that epitomises Professor Dodson, who describes himself as a “persistent bugger.” His unwavering dedication to the objective of universal education was made abundantly clear when he spoke in June this year about what he thought his role as Australian of the Year entailed.

“As a very humbled recipient of the award, I think the greatest honour in all of this is that someone thought enough of me to nominate me,” he said at the time.

“More importantly, that nomination and this award mean that I have a huge responsibility to use this time to make things better for this country and it has given me great strength and resolve to pursue a better life and a better education for our kids – all our kids.”

And this is what being Australian of the Year has meant to Professor Dodson. He says the most meaningful thing for him at the end of his tenure would be to have made a real difference in schooling and education.

“Being Australian of the Year opens a few doors for you. It can help you do things, and I have been pretty single minded in that I have been looking at schooling—kindergarten to year 12. That’s where my focus has been.”

“There are a lot of people in the education system who know that it needs to be improved and if my voice helps that would be great, because we certainly need to lift our game. We’re not the worst in the world and we are not the best in the world. But we don’t want to risk the possibility of being called mediocre. I think we can do a lot better.”

The reason Professor Dodson made his goal as Australian of the Year to visit as many schools as possible was because he wants children to value education and the far-flung places it can lead to.

“Education is so pivotal to everything else, not just your family and your community but to the nation. That’s what education is about, that’s what its potential is, its possibilities.”

Professor Dodson emerges optimistic from the year. “Not only has visiting schools been the highlight of the year but it highlights that there are some amazing young people who will be there to lead when time calls upon them to do so,” says Dodson.

“We shouldn’t be too worried about the future of our country. These kids as adults are going to do a good job.”

Maybe one of those future leaders will remember the day a committed and passionate man came to their school and inspired them to get going - and keep going.

James Giggacher
Communications and External Liaison Office, ANU
Keynote Addresses

- National Press Club Address, Canberra
- Two Fires Festival, Braidwood, NSW
- Woodford Dreaming Festival, QLD
- Annual ANU Reconciliation Lecture, Canberra
- Communities in Control Conference, Melbourne
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth National Conference, Melbourne

- Closing the Gap in Education: Improving Outcomes in Southern World Multicultural Societies, Monash, South Africa, Johannesburg
- African Asian Society and the Institute for Democracy: Truth and Reconciliation Parallel Challenges – Australia and South Africa, Johannesburg

Lectures and other speaking engagements

- ANZ Speaker Series, Melbourne
- Talking Constitution Lecture, National Archives of Australia, Canberra
- Literacy Conference, Alice Springs, NT
- AusAID Pacific Leadership Program, Sydney
- Native Title Conference 2009, Melbourne
- Reconciliation Forum, Adelaide
- Podmore Foundation Fundraising Dinner, Canberra
- Law Institute of Victoria President’s Luncheon, Melbourne
- AIATSIS Symposium on Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory, Canberra
- Xavier Social Justice Network Seminar Series: *Daring to be different – A journey towards a more just world*, Melbourne
- Series of Lectures at University of Alaska Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska, USA
- Social Justice Sunday, St John’s East Malvern, Melbourne
- Australian Curriculum Studies Association Conference “Curriculum: a national conversation”, Canberra
- La Trobe University Bendigo Campus – Sir John Quick Lecture, Bendigo
- Forum on Universal Children’s Day, Commission for Children and Young People, Perth
- Mercy Justice Conference – Institute of Sisters Mercy Australia, Queanbeyan, NSW
- University House Ladies Drawing Room Luncheon, Canberra
- Great Australians Breakfast, Government House, Perth, WA
- Chamber of Minerals and Energy Board Dinner, Perth, WA
- Public address to the Australian Mission to the United Nations, New York

Left Graeme Drew (Local Hero), Mick Dodson, Jonty Bush (Young Australian of the Year) and Pat La Manna (Senior Australian of the Year), Tour of Honour, South Australia—Photo courtesy of the National Australia Day Council
Right Mick Dodson delivering the keynote address at the Curriculum Studies Conference, Canberra
School Visits

- Wanniassa School, ACT
- Radford College, ACT
- Melrose High School, ACT
- Majura Primary School, ACT
- Millner Primary School, NT
- Sanderson Middle School, NT
- Clontarf Academy, NT
- Ngukurr School, NT
- Katherine High School, NT
- Darwin Middle School, NT
- Palmerston Middle School, NT
- Kormilda College, NT
- St John’s College, NT
- Wagaman Primary School, NT
- Warriappendi School, SA
- Immanuel College, SA
- Le Fevre High School, SA
- Ross Smith Secondary School, SA
- Pasadena High School, SA
- Golden Grove High School, SA
- Melbourne High School, VIC
- Xavier College, VIC
- Whitton Public School, Whitton, NSW
- Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre, NSW
- Schools in the Torres Strait, QLD
- Dominic College, TAS
- Masakhane Primary School Roodeport, Gauteng, South Africa
- Nome-Beltz Senior and Junior High Schools, Nome, Alaska

Left  Mick Dodson with staff and students, Radford College, Canberra  Middle  Mick Dodson with staff and students, Wagaman Primary School, NT  Right  Mick Dodson with NT Chief Minister Paul Henderson and students from Katherine High School, NT
Launches and Award Ceremonies

- Reconciliation Action Plan Launch, Wanniassa School, ACT
- Book launch *DUE INHERITANCE: Reviving the cultural and economic wellbeing of First Australians* by Ted Egan, Coop Bookshop, Canberra
- Dusseldorp Skills Launch, ACT
- Book launch – *Decolonising God* by Mark Brett, Melbourne
- Launch of Woodside Reconciliation Action Plan, Canberra
- ANU Reconciliation Action Plan Launch, ANU, Canberra
- Launch of Essendon Football Club Reconciliation Action Plan, Melbourne
- Launch of NSW Judicial Commission *Circle Sentencing DVD*, Sydney
- Indigenous Awards Night, Griffith, NSW
- South Western Sydney Region Aboriginal Awards Ceremony, Liverpool, NSW