Dodson leads education drive

By Emma Macdonald

Australian of the Year Mick Dodson will use 2009 to push for an indigenous education revolution, calling for an end to the division between “symbolic” and “practical” reconciliation.

Professor Dodson said in his first public address since being named Australian of the Year, that education was key to improving outcomes for indigenous people.

“On 26 January 2010, every child will be geared up for the start of the school year. They will have a school to go to with chairs and tables and blackboards; with teachers ready, confident, determined, equipped to impart knowledge and confidence. They'll be ready to learn, willing to learn, able to learn,” Professor Dodson said.

“It never made any sense but nonetheless provided an easy way of dividing people who are essentially working towards the same end result.” Former prime minister John Howard advocated practical reconciliation during his time in power, while Professor Dodson and other prominent indigenous activists argued reconciliation had to include symbolic gestures such as an apology for past injustice, finally delivered by Labor a year ago last week.

He said there would be little disagreement education was the foundation for real reconciliation.

“Education is something we've let slide miserably in recent decades. We've failed a lot of children in that time - a disproportionate number of indigenous children.”

Professor Dodson lashed out at the political debate on “practical” and “symbolic” reconciliation.

“I want to do my best to put an end to this misguided notion that reconciliation comes in two discrete and opposing forms – practical meaning worthwhile and effective, and symbolic, meaning near enough to useless,” the Yawuru man said.

“I think we can all agree that a good education is a right that all Australian children have. I think we can all agree that education also bestows dignity. And I think all of us agree that this right and this dignity are a bit more, a great deal more, than merely symbolic. They have profound practical effects.”

He acknowledged the “hollow symbolism” of past policies which never translated into on-the-ground help and described as shameful money slated for education that never reached some communities.