

Dodson focuses on education's missing 20,000

Leo Shanahan, Canberra

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Mick Dodson at the National Press Club in Canberra yesterday. Children who miss school "should be an offence to our pride", he says. *Photo: Glen McCurtayne*

AUSTRALIAN of the Year Mick Dodson has committed to focusing on education in his role, saying he will aim to ensure that the estimated 20,000 children who do not attend school regularly have the desire and the opportunity to go.

"The failure should be an offence to our pride, our benign self-image and our profession of faith in the fair go — and maybe it is," Professor Dodson told the National Press Club.

"Maybe that's why we fob off the failure by blaming the kids or the parents or the teachers, or looking for one-size-fits-all solutions, silver bullets that just don't exist. Maybe these habits are symbols of our denial.

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"I want to spend my year doing what I can to see that children who are not getting a good education in Australia today, get one in the future.

"Many of these children, of course, are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders."

An emotional Professor Dodson said education was the most important tool in his success.

He said rhetoric and funding announcements must be matched by improvements, likening the current delivery of services to embezzled bushfire charity.

"Think of it this way: if we were to learn that most of the donations of money and clothing and food to the survivors of the bushfires had not actually reached them, we would be outraged — justly outraged," he said.

"If we really believe in the value of education and that every child has a right to it, we should be just as outraged when our taxpayer dollars do not reach the children who need them."

Attacking the Howard government's approach to reconciliation — especially refusing to engage in "symbolic" gestures like the apology — Professor Dodson said there was no conflict between practical and symbolic reconciliation, describing it as a "false dichotomy" with its roots in the "culture wars".

"Governor Phillip didn't think planting the British flag in Sydney Cove on January 26 was a gesture without meaning, even when there was so much work to be done," he said.

"He knew how practical that symbolism was."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/dodson-focuses-on-educations-missing-20000-20090217-8aag.html>