

# **NORTHERN TERRITORY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

## **PRE-HEARING SUBMISSION TO THE HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION**

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this pre-hearing submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is to provide background information on the context and operational activities undertaken by the Northern Territory Department of Education in relation to the provision of education services in Northern Territory government schools.

The Department of Education will be making a formal submission to the Commission before September 1999. An outline of the areas to be addressed in the Department's formal submission is attached.

### **2 DEFINITIONS**

#### **2.1 Rural and remote**

As the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is using the definition of *rural* being towns with populations of less than 99,999 and *remote* being towns of 5,000 or more, all of the Northern Territory is included within the Commission's definition of rural and remote.

Hence this pre-hearing submission will refer to all of the Northern Territory as rural and include specific reference to remote educational contexts which are located outside the Territory's major urban centres.

### **3. TERMS OF REFERENCE**

This pre-hearing submission addresses the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's terms of reference into the provision by the Northern Territory Department of Education of education for children in the Northern Territory with reference to

- the availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling
- the quality of educational services, including technological support services.
- information relating to whether the education available to children with disabilities, Indigenous children and children from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, complies with their human rights will be contained in the formal submission from the Department.

### **4. NORTHERN TERRITORY CONTEXT**

Any assessment of the provision of education services in the Northern Territory should be made with an appreciation of the Northern Territory education context and the complexities associated with the delivery of educational services. Providing high quality education to all Australians who live in the Northern Territory is a great challenge as the Territory has a small

population in a very large land area; its population is multilingual, multicultural and highly mobile.

Almost 182 000 people live and work in a land area of 1 348 000 square kilometres: our population density is approximately thirteen persons per 100 square kilometres. This population is scattered over an area thirty percent larger than the combined areas of New South Wales and Victoria. Many remote centres are accessible only by air or sea and others not accessible during the wet season from October to March. Nearly fifty-three percent of schools and just over twenty-three percent of students are located in remote areas. Many of these remote communities also have significant numbers of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged people in Australia.

Aboriginal peoples have lived in the Northern Territory for thousands of years. Today, more than fifty Indigenous languages and/or dialects are spoken by students in Territory schools. More recently, migrants have been coming to the Territory from all over the world, some to remain and others to depart after two, five or ten years – from the European and Chinese miners of the mid nineteenth century to the boat people of the 1980s – contributing to our cultural and linguistic diversity. There are over sixty migrant languages spoken, with fifteen of these in daily use by significant numbers of people. It is significant that one-third of young people between five and seventeen years have a language other than English as their first language.

A high degree of mobility, both intraterritory and interstate, is a characteristic of the Northern Territory population. Many Indigenous Territorians in remote areas move frequently between their communities, homeland centres and urban centres for a range of reasons, including traditional cultural commitments, or political, social or educational imperatives; and non-Indigenous residents are also very mobile, mainly because of employment circumstances, children's education or family ties. The Territory's educational challenge is further exacerbated because high mobility also characterises the teaching population: teachers in our schools come from all states of Australia and beyond, often stay only a short while, especially in the remote communities.

## **5. AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF SCHOOLING**

### **5.1 Preschool**

The Northern Territory Department of Education operates 97 preschool education programs with 49 of these in Aboriginal communities. In 1997 3,535 students were enrolled in preschool education programs.

### **5.2 Primary**

The Department operates 128 schools primary schools throughout the Territory. In 1997 there were 24,862 students enrolled.

### **5.3 Secondary**

There are 11 secondary schools and two senior colleges in larger urban areas. In 1997 the secondary school enrolment was 9,688.

Specific information on types of schools and additional student data will be provided by the Department as requested.

## 5.4 Homeland Learning Centres

Homeland Learning Centres are located in Homeland Centres or Outstations to provide an educational service for their community. There are 55 Homeland Centre Programs with a student enrolment of 1016. Homeland Learning Centres are supported by their hub school, which provides a visiting teacher, curriculum materials, professional development and advisory support to the Learning Centre.

## 5.5 Participation rates

Participation rates are identified by expressing the level of student enrolment as a proportion of the estimated total number of children of a specific age cohort. Student enrolment data is provided by the Department of Education, estimated age cohort data is provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

**Percentage Participation Rate by Age for NT Students, 1988 – 1997**

	<b>4 - 14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15 - 19</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>1988</b>	91.8	78.8	59.3	29.8	8.5	4.3	36.3	75.0
<b>1989</b>	92.8	78.4	58.4	30.5	9.7	3.7	34.9	75.2
<b>1990</b>	93.0	81.1	59.9	33.1	11.2	3.7	35.9	76.0
<b>1991</b>	94.2	80.7	70.1	38.8	12.8	5.1	40.2	78.5
<b>1992</b>	94.2	79.5	65.3	41.6	12.4	4.7	40.3	78.6
<b>1993</b>	94.6	82.7	64.9	42.6	14.0	4.3	41.4	79.2
<b>1994</b>	95.0	82.0	66.0	41.9	12.5	3.2	40.3	79.4
<b>1995</b>	95.7	81.5	69.0	41.8	14.0	3.7	40.8	80.0
<b>1996</b>	96.0	83.7	66.2	45.4	13.7	3.6	41.8	80.8
<b>1997</b>	95.6	82.7	72.8	43.5	13.2	3.6	43.6	81.0

Source:

1. *Annual Student Census, Statistics and Demography, NTDE*
2. *Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories ABS Catalogue No. 3201.0*

From the above table it is apparent that

- there has been a constant increase in the rate of student participation over the past ten years
- the participation rate generally decreases in the over 14 age group which is the period of post compulsory schooling
- for the 1988-1997 period, there is an increase in the participation rate of number of 15-19 year age group students continuing their education. Participation rate of this group has increased from 36.3% in 1988 to 43.6% in 1997.

It is also apparent that some 1,560 students in the compulsory schooling 4 to 14 age group and some 7,813 students in the post-compulsory 15 to 19 age group are not participating in formal education.

## 5.6 Indigenous student participation rates

The above figures show that a significant number of students are not participating in education. The majority of these students are Indigenous students in remote communities. The

participation rate of Indigenous students in the four year old age group is 15-20% lower than that of non-Indigenous students. 57.7% of 4 year old Indigenous students attend Pre-School compared with 91.0 % of non-Indigenous students.

The Indigenous participation rate for the compulsory schooling years (4 to 14) is 87.1% for males and 99.6% for females. These figures decline to 39.7% for females and 28.2% for males in the 15 to 19 year old age group.

It should be noted that participation rates do not accurately reflect attendance rates as participation relates to enrolment.

## **6. PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT TEACHERS STUDENTS AND PARENTS**

The following programs are implemented by the Department of Education in support of the provision of education.

Many of these programs are related to Recommendation 72 of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and the recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee *Report on the Provision of School Education Services for Remote Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory*, to promote the schooling culture, improved enrolment, attendance and retention, leading to improved student outcomes.

These initiatives and programs also reflect the Aboriginal education policy goals of the Northern Territory Department of Education, a copy of which is attached.

Initiatives and programs include:

- *Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness*, a DETYA initiative, which operates in all schools. The provision of funds direct to ASSPA groups, has assisted parents to become involved in a decision making process concerning additional activities for Aboriginal students. Through this parental involvement, understanding of what schools are and how they operate has been enhanced. Aboriginal parents have also been able to extend their knowledge and understanding of the importance of schooling and the need for regular school attendance
- *Aboriginal Assistant Teachers*, who are employed in all community schools. These staff play a major role in assisting the school communicate with its local community. These Aboriginal staff also make classrooms more welcoming places to be, as Aboriginal students can more readily relate to members of their own local community.
- *ESL Staff*, who provide support services to the teachers of Aboriginal students. As most Aboriginal students speak English as a second or a foreign language, the professional development service provided by ESL advisors assists teachers to have improved knowledge and understandings of their students' needs, so teachers may plan more appropriate programs for their students.
- *health programs*, including the Aboriginal Hearing Program, which provides information to school staff and Aboriginal community members, regarding ways in which students' health may be improved to enable their more effective participation in schooling.

- *communication technologies*, particularly those operated from the NT Open Education Centre. Through the use of computer technologies, Aboriginal students in communities have greater access to formal secondary education.
- *support for Aboriginal language programs*, where requested by the local community. These programs are part of the Department's commitment to support Indigenous language and cultural maintenance.
- *Student Welfare Teams* have been established in Northern Territory Government High Schools and may be composed of many of the following staff;
- *Senior staff* of a school with responsibilities for managing student welfare. They establish *Peer Support groups* and arrange for appropriate strategies to deal with students at risk.
- *School counselors* who provide a range of services which include personal and career counselling. Most, if not all, counselors have some training but are selected generally for their ability to establish appropriate relationships with all students, particularly those at risk.
- *Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs)* and *Home Liaison Officers* are provided to all government high schools and larger primary schools. These staff establish and maintain vital links between the home and the school. They assist by visiting homes, and are able to involve other agencies to respond to families' needs. They assist in matters of medical and welfare problems. They also assist with problems related to school, lunches, clothing, books etc.
- *School Nurses* are provided to all high schools. Nurses are involved with students who may have attendance problems, some of which have associated medical/health implications. They provide a back-up counselling service. Their services are available to feeder primary schools.
- *School based Community Police*. Each high school has been provided with a school based community police officer.
- *Special Education teachers and assistants* provide programs for students with significant learning/language disorders. All Northern Territory Government high schools are allocated additional specialist staff to provide for the differentiated curriculum requirements of a large number of students with disabilities of various descriptions. For many such students meaningful attendance at school would be unattainable and without this service no doubt non attendance would soon become a factor for such students.
- *Integration assistants*. Often, when a student's attendance is jeopardised by severe behavioural/emotional disorder, part time integration assistants are considered for the student to continue to access the school.
- *Aboriginal and Islander Tertiary Aspirations Program (AITAP)*, which provides encouragement and support to secondary age Indigenous students to assist their completion of formal secondary studies to Year 12 and onto tertiary studies.
- *Parents as Teachers*, a program which works alongside parents of pre-school age children, providing advice on educationally supportive activities which parents may undertake to enhance their children's learning before the children attend school.

- *Behaviour Management Service*, officers are based in the *STAR* (Students at Risk ) Centre in Darwin and in the Regional Offices in Alice Springs and Katherine. Their major areas of support include professional development of individual or whole school staff, direct intervention with difficult students in the school setting, parent/guardian support and training programs and centre based programs.
- *Guidance Officer Service*. Appropriately trained teacher psychologists are based in Student Services in Darwin, and in most regional offices throughout the NT. They are available to conduct a range of intellectual and personal assessments for a variety of special needs clients, many of whom will have school attendance/discipline problems. Counselling of students, teachers or parents/guardians can be provided by these staff.
- *Transition Education Support Services* are aimed at assisting special needs students prepare and make the transition from school to work or further training. Students accessing these programs are continuing at school beyond what has previously been the experience.

## **7 QUALITY OF EDUCATION SERVICES**

### **7.1 Indigenous Education**

38% of Northern Territory students are Aboriginal students. The Northern Territory Department of Education is tackling a number of issues in relation to their education, including,

- low participation rates compared to non-Aboriginal students
- poor attendance rates of enrolled students
- a very high proportion of students who are ESL learners.
- A high proportion of Aboriginal students live in very remote locations and are often very mobile.
- A very high proportion of Aboriginal students come from families with very low socio-economic status, poor health status and poor housing.

These issues are not unique to the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Government is a signatory to the National Aboriginal Education Policy and has adopted the 21 goals of the Policy as the policy framework for Aboriginal education in the Territory.

In 1998, the government undertook a review of education in the Northern Territory. The Government adopted a number of recommendations of this review on Aboriginal education. These include:

- An independent Review of Aboriginal Education. This is being conducted by the former senator, Mr Bob Collins and is to report in late July or early August.
- Formation within the Department of an Aboriginal Education Branch to give clearer focus and direction to the Department's work in this area.
- A decision to withdraw funds from a Northern Territory funded bilingual program in favour of supporting outcomes in literacy and numeracy. This decision has generated much community reaction. Attached is a document outlining the Government's position and the current situation on this issue.

## **7.2 Education provision for students with disabilities**

The Department's Student Services Branch provides a range of services including advice, assessment, teaching and counselling for students, teachers and parents throughout the Northern Territory.

This support is provided under the *Special Education Policy – Provision for Students with Disabilities in Northern Territory Schools 1994*, which defines students with special needs and those who have been identified as having an intellectual, sensory, physical, social/emotional, language/communication disability, a specific learning disability or multiple disabilities.

Teams of professionals work together across the Territory to provide services in the areas of Guidance, Speech Pathology, School Nursing, Early Intervention, Special Education, Vision, Hearing, Behaviour Management, Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy.

Staff in larger schools who provide direct and consultative support to school staff include Special Education Teachers and Assistants, School Counsellors, Home Liaison Officers, School Nurses and Part-Time Instructors.

Due to the distances between small, remote schools and the larger urban centres where Student Services staff are located, it cannot be claimed that students with special needs are supported in the same way as special needs students in urban centres. In order to address the complexities of distance and remoteness, the team approach is normally utilised so that personnel from different disciplines travel together to a remote community to provide support to students, their parents and teachers.

In recognition that current approaches are not adequate in appropriately meeting the needs of students in remote areas of the Northern Territory, the Department of Education has commenced two research projects. These are

- ascertaining the nature and extent of disability amongst infants and school-age children in Aboriginal communities throughout the Territory and
- informing Aboriginal parents on the Department's Special Education Policy, their rights and responsibilities relation to the policy and the services available to remote parents, including how to access these services. Consultation on appropriate procedures and practices in the policy's implementation and providing staff development has also been undertaken.

As the above issues are not confined to the Northern Territory, the Department of Education has raised the provision of special education services in remote Aboriginal communities at the Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers (CESCEO). CESCEO has formed a working group which is at a national level pursuing a collaborative approach to the special education provision in remote communities.

## **7.3 Secondary education provision for Indigenous students from remote communities**

Several options exist through which Indigenous students may access secondary education. These include

- attend boarding schools. In the Northern Territory, Yirara,
- St Phillip's, Kormilda and St John's secondary colleges all offer residential facilities
- move to an urban area. Some parents have used this option as it enables their children to access formal secondary education through a conventional high school
- secondary studies through the Open Education Centre. This option is increasingly being utilised by Indigenous students who wish to remain in their home communities. Through the Open Education Centre, students have access to the Northern Territory Board of Studies approved curriculum. Students in most locations also have access through electronic technologies such as the Electronic Classroom, which enables them to talk and exchange written work via computer with their teachers on a daily basis
- secondary bridging courses. On completion of primary schooling, students attending Community Education Centres (CECs) who are not academically ready for formal secondary studies through the Open Education Centre, may enrol in one of three Northern Territory Board of Studies approved secondary education bridging courses. These courses have been developed in recognition that most Indigenous students in remote areas, as well as being learners of English as a second or foreign language, often do not have the English literacy and numeracy skills to successfully undertake a formal secondary education program.
- Another option currently being trialed in conjunction with the Catholic Education Office is the secondary 'area school' trial at Bathurst Island. Should this trial prove to be successful, it will provide a model for the extension of formal secondary education to other remote communities.

**Attachment: Bilingual education program:**

The Northern Territory is unique in this country for its strong repertoire of original Australian languages, and it is a heritage the Government values.

The NT Government has no intention of phasing out bilingual education. What is at stake is \$3.7 million of NT Government expenditure which allocates additional funds to only 17 of the 87+ remote Government schools for a specific pedagogical approach to bilingual education. After 20+ years of operation there is no evidence that children in these schools are performing any better than children in similar schools without the extra resources.

In November last year, the Government announced its plan to redirect funds from the bilingual program to better support outcomes in English literacy and numeracy. This decision has generated much confusion and misunderstanding.

The facts are:

The Government believes literacy and numeracy outcomes for indigenous Territorians should be on a par with those of non-indigenous Territorians and they are not.

The bilingual education programs were originally introduced on the premise that they would improve literacy. Schools funded under this program get significant levels of additional resources compared to other remote schools in the Northern Territory.

There is no evidence that, on average, students in those schools with additional resources are performing better than students in comparable schools.

However the Government has made it clear that:

- Bilingual funds for employment of indigenous staff will not be affected.
- There will be a detailed consultation with every school and community affected by the decision within a six-month period.
- There will be no change to the program in 1999 – or to the position of anyone employed with bilingual program funds in 1999.

There is concern that this decision about the bilingual program means that the NT Government does not support the place of indigenous language and culture in Northern Territory schools.

The NT Government's position is clear: culture and indigenous languages have a central place in everyday schooling for Aboriginal students. Every remote area school in the NT is a school with programs in English and in vernacular languages, i.e., bilingual education is core to Aboriginal education in the NT:

- The Indigenous Assistant Teacher Program makes the Department of Education the largest employer of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. These assistants are in classrooms to support the place of language and culture in schools. There are 250 of these teachers in NT schools. The program costs \$7.5 million.
- Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers and Aboriginal Resource Officers strengthen the focus on culture in urban schools.
- \$384 000 is currently dedicated to the specific support of community languages in schools. This is a Commonwealth funded program.

Culture and indigenous languages have a central place in everyday schooling for Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory.

Likewise English literacy and numeracy are a core responsibility of all Northern Territory schools. Recognising the fact that for many Aboriginal students, English is often their second, third or even fourth language, the Government has a major commitment to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and to tailored English literacy and numeracy programs. The Government spends close to \$6 million on these programs. These programs are jointly funded by the Commonwealth and the NT.

Compared to 'immigrant children in capital cities' through a Commonwealth funded program (ESL-ILSS) Aboriginal children now receive equivalent support for their first year of schooling to that offered to immigrant children. The NT has implemented this program effectively.

The Secretary of the Northern Territory Department of Education, has commissioned Bob Collins to review Aboriginal Education. This Review will hear people's views on programs which support indigenous languages and culture, and which develop English literacy.

The Government is interested in receiving recommendations for evidence-based interventions which will deliver improved outcomes.

The Government will consider implementation of its decisions on the bilingual program when the consultations with schools affected by the decision are complete, when the recommendations of the Review of Aboriginal Education are available, and in any case, not before the Year 2000.