

# Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory

An alliance of the CLC, NLC, CAALAS, NAAJA and AMSANT

## APO NT SUBMISSION ON THE REVIEW OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

FEBRUARY 2014

### Introduction

APO NT is an alliance between the Northern Land Council (NLC), Central Land Council (CLC), Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT), North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) and Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service (CAALAS).

The alliance was created to provide a more effective response to key issues of joint interest and concern affecting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, including through advocating practical policy solutions to government. APO NT is committed to increasing Aboriginal involvement and implementation, and to expanding opportunities for Aboriginal community control. APO NT also seeks to strengthen networks between peak Aboriginal organisations and smaller regional Aboriginal organisations in the Northern Territory.

The effectiveness of schooling for Aboriginal students has concerned successive governments at least since the 1970s, when the Interim Schools Committee stated that the 'Aboriginal children undoubtedly constitute one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Australia'.<sup>1</sup> In fact, participation in education from preschool to primary and secondary in the Northern Territory is significantly poorer than anywhere else in the country.<sup>2</sup> Since then, governments have been engaged in a wide variety of reform measures but policies have been characterised by decades of slow improvement and a more recent plateau effect of outcomes.<sup>3</sup> In a submission to the Collins Review in 1999, Dr Bob Boughton, stated:

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<sup>1</sup> Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission. (1973). *Schools in Australia: Report of the interim committee for the Australian Schools Commission*. Canberra: Australian Government publishing Service, p.106; and Beresford, Q., Partington G. and Gower, G. (eds) (2012). *Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education*. Perth: UWA Publishing, p. 403; and Schwab, R.G. (1996) 'Having it both ways': The continuing complexities of community-controlled Indigenous education'. CAEPR Discussion Paper. No.111/199, p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report, June 2011 to August 2012. Northern Territory Government, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2005). *Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage: Key indicators 2005*. Melbourne: Productivity Commission, 19.

“the evidence is overwhelming that the situation in Aboriginal education in the NT today has resulted from a history of denial to Aboriginal peoples of their basic human rights, including their specific rights as Indigenous peoples. This history is not simply ‘in the past’. It continues up to the present, and if dramatic changes are not made, will continue into the foreseeable future.”<sup>4</sup>

APO NT member organisations do not provide education services in the Northern Territory; however, as community-controlled service delivery organisations we believe that we have valuable insights into the delivery of services in the NT. The Report on the Indigenous Education Review, lead by Bruce Wilson, provides draft recommendations assessing the effectiveness of programs and initiatives directed at school attendance, teaching and learning approaches, the Indigenous education workforce partnership and approaches for greater community involvement in education.<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal Peak Organisations (APO NT) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Northern Territory Government’s Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory.

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<sup>4</sup> Boughton, B. ‘Strategies to Overcome Institutional Racism in Education. A Submission to the Collins Review of Aboriginal Education in the NT. 20 April 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Education Review, (2014) Northern Territory Department of Education, <http://www.education.nt.gov.au/parents-community/students-learning/indigenous-education-review-1>

## Recommendations

- Recommendation 1:** Policy makers recognise the importance of education as one of the social determinants of health in bridging the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student's educational attainment.
- Recommendation 2:** There is need for an Aboriginal community controlled peak education body in the Northern Territory to lead culturally appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples.
- Recommendation 3:** The Review should explicitly recognise the importance of Aboriginal culture in the Northern Territory education system.
- Recommendation 4:** Bilingual education should be retained. APO NT does not agree that the lack of trained first-language teachers should mean that a proven, evidence-based approach to education for Aboriginal people should be abandoned.
- Recommendation 5:** Aboriginal peoples and organisations should be given greater input and control into schooling for their children, as the evidence supports this as an important component in achieving effective outcomes in Indigenous education.
- Recommendation 6:** Children in pre-school should be taught in both the literacy foundations in English and in their first language.
- Recommendation 7:** APO NT is reluctant to commit to the Draft Review recommendation that maintains Families as First Teachers (FaFT) until the program has been independently evaluated and the results published.
- Recommendation 8:** APO NT believes that the choice to go to boarding school should remain with families and students.
- Recommendation 9:** APO NT recommends a comprehensive evaluation of the trial of residential approaches to secondary education before resources are allocated to removing students from their communities to boarding schools.
- Recommendation 10:** APO NT recommends that Aboriginal Education Workers be employed to work closely with parents and students who have chosen to attend boarding school, to enable a smooth transition.
- Recommendation 11:** School attendance should be addressed through positive rather than negative messaging around parental and community responsibility.

- Recommendation 12:** APO NT recommends that the new truancy officer program is evaluated and that the results be published.
- Recommendation 13:** APO NT recommends implementing positive initiatives to involve both families and the wider community in the delivery of education for their children.
- Recommendation 14:** APO NT strongly disagrees with the Draft Review proposal to focus school attendance efforts on students attending school three days a week. The Draft Review does not set out what alternative pathways will be made available and these young people will be at risk of further marginalisation.
- Recommendation 15:** APO NT supports School Wide Positive Behaviour Support to be implemented consistently across Northern Territory schools and resourced appropriately.
- Recommendation 16:** APO NT recommends an evaluation of the Now Hear program and the results to be published before the Government supports the implementation in all schools across the NT.
- Recommendation 17:** The Northern Territory Government should actively seek to identify and support community based goals, rather than adopting a top down approach to education policy and delivery.
- Recommendation 18:** To ensure community involvement in local schools' decisions and practices, nominated community based leaders and elders should sit on both the school board and school council.
- Recommendation 19:** APO NT recommends a governance and management subject be offered as an elective for students to learn what an Aboriginal corporation is, how it functions, how to participate in meetings and how to make decisions, and to learn about governance and management more broadly.
- Recommendation 20:** The local community should be engaged in areas of the school curriculum to ensure that Aboriginal people in the community are closely connected with the schools, are valued for their knowledge and expertise and can help students and teachers make the connection between traditional and western education in a culturally safe environment.
- Recommendation 21:** APO NT recommends the RITE program be reviewed for comment by Aboriginal organisations, communities and teaching professionals to facilitate the revision of the course content to reflect the lower levels of literacy in candidates,

and to foster more support through the duration of the course.

**Recommendation 22** The future of education in the NT must include measurable performance indicators to develop and foster more Aboriginal educators.

**Recommendation 23:** APO NT strongly recommends that to enhance the engagement of local Aboriginal staff members, the NT Government should seek to offer equal benefits to both locally- and externally engaged staff, such as remuneration and housing.

**Recommendation 24:** APO NT supports the recommendation that funding be “allocated based on clear goals reflected in a strategic plan, and maintained for extended periods” to ensure all departments, regions and schools can undertake long-term planning and evaluate and then modify initiatives.

## Social Determinants of education

Bill Fogarty, research associate for the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University has observed that Aboriginal education is characterised by a 'diversity of lifestyle and geographic location, differing histories of engagement with non-Indigenous Australia and a wide spectrum of aspirations for development and the daily routine of school in remote communities takes place against depressingly high rates of unemployment, early mortality, poor health, violence, crime, substance abuse and youth self harm and suicide'.<sup>6</sup>

The overwhelming body of evidence on the social determinants of health shows that Aboriginal health and well-being is profoundly affected by a range of interacting economic, social and cultural factors which include: poverty, economic inequality and social status; overcrowded housing; employment and job security; social exclusion, including isolation, discrimination and racism; education and care in early life; food security and access to a balanced and adequate diet; addictions to adequate health services and control over life circumstances.<sup>7</sup> At a conference in 2005 Chris Sarra remarked "our children need to understand that these things exist in our community because they are a legacy of other historical and sociological processes, and that they are not a legacy of being Aboriginal".<sup>8</sup>

**Recommendation 1:** Policy makers recognise the importance of education as one of the social determinants of health in bridging the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student's educational attainment.

## Community Control

Aboriginal people should have greater control and involvement in education delivery. With this ownership comes pride and empowerment which fosters respect, trust and purposeful reciprocal working relationships. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse report, *What works to overcome Indigenous disadvantage* summarised key evidence from Australian and international research in relation to schooling and education and suggested that:

- projects characterised by a high degree of Indigenous involvement and control produced significant benefits for participants; and
- engaging parents in children's learning was of critical importance.

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<sup>6</sup> Fogarty, B. 'Indigenous education report misses the big picture'. The Conversation. <http://theconversation.edu.au/indigenous-education-report-misses-the-big-picture-8024> Retrieved 21 February 2013.

<sup>7</sup> APO NT Guiding Principles, AMSANT Annual Report 2011-2012.

<sup>8</sup> What Works. The Work Program, 2014, <http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=displaySitePage1&subcmd=select&id=516>.

The right to self-determination and the rights enshrined in Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are better served by allowing Aboriginal communities to have a high level of involvement and control in the delivery of education.<sup>9</sup> Article 14 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” In the same Declaration, Articles 3, 4 and 5 declare that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination and the right to participate in decision making in matters that affect them, through representatives chosen by themselves.

Consistent with these rights, and the evidence presented in the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Report, the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples considers “that education for our Peoples must be meaningful, empowering and culturally-sustaining. This will only occur when we are centrally involved in developing pedagogy, choosing curriculum and teaching our children.”<sup>10</sup> To realise this, an independently owned and controlled peak body for Aboriginal education must be established. Currently, an Indigenous representative advisory body is appointed by the Minister for Education and Training to provide advice and make recommendations to the NT and Australian Government. This body is not Aboriginal owned or controlled.

The former NT Coordinator General for Remote Services (NTCGRS) expressed that in the Northern Territory health sector there is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the efficacy and benefits of well-managed, community-based and controlled organisations that can provide appropriate and responsive services. It was also noted that Aboriginal community controlled health services have played a significant role in providing primary health care services, having sound local knowledge, cultural competence and experience in delivering a diverse range of complementary health programs.<sup>11</sup>

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT) is the peak body for Aboriginal community-controlled health services (ACCHSs) in the Northern Territory and has played a pivotal role in advocating for and supporting the development of community-controlled health.<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence that the NT has developed national-leading examples of innovative health care practices for Aboriginal people in the remote context.

The Northern Territory education sector needs to learn from the experience of the health sector. There needs to be a genuine partnership between the school and community where the community has control or autonomy over the process of development that occurs in the school or class room. Depending on the community, this would not necessarily mean that

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<sup>9</sup>Schwab, R.G. (1996) ‘Having it both ways’: The continuing complexities of community-controlled Indigenous education’. CAEPR Discussion Paper. No.111/1996, p.1.

<sup>10</sup> National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, Education Policy, June 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report, June 2011 to August 2012. Northern Territory Government, p.57.

<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT) Website <http://www.amsant.org.au/index.php/about-us>

the community carries out all responsibilities concerning school-classroom development, but instead the partnership could create an umbrella of control where all employees (paid and voluntary) work according to the notion that power is delegated to them for a period of time from Aboriginal decision makers.<sup>13</sup>

**Recommendation 2: There is need for an Aboriginal community controlled peak education body in the Northern Territory to lead culturally appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples.**

## Culture and Language

It is worrying that Aboriginal cultures, history and language is not embedded in the education system in the Northern Territory given that 30% of the total population are Aboriginal, 58% of the Northern Territory Aboriginal population live in very remote areas and many Aboriginal children speak two or three other languages.

The importance of Aboriginal culture in Northern Territory education is not explicitly mentioned in the draft Review. Dr David Cooper, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliances NT, states that “in the context of societies with dominant and minority cultures, such as Australia, the widespread and persistent suppression of minority cultural practices causes severe disruption, making our communities susceptible to trauma, collective helplessness and endemic maladaptive coping practices.”<sup>14</sup> APO NT believes that culture cannot be ignored or treated as a barrier to learning.

Mudrooroo claims that “if Aboriginal culture is excluded from the curriculum, then schools will always be alien institutions in which students cannot identify with the choices offered to them and we are back in the process of assimilation where Indigenous people must learn the alien methods of control in order to resist them.”<sup>15</sup>

## Bilingual Education

Language is an important component of cultural connection, and strengthens intergenerational relationships and community building.<sup>16</sup> Language is integral to maintaining culture and to the nurturing of social and emotional wellbeing that enables students to advance through the education system.<sup>17</sup> The United Nations Economic and Social Council emphasised the importance of Indigenous teachers developing their own

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<sup>13</sup> Heslop, J. ‘Making the Schools Relevant : School and Community in Partnership’. In Parlington, G. (ed). (2000). *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*. Melbourne: Cengage Learning, p.275.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, David. ‘Closing the gap in cultural understanding: social determinants of health in Indigenous policy in Australia’, Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT, Darwin.

<sup>15</sup> Mudrooroo, (1995) *Us Mob, History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia*, Angus & Robertson, 123.

<sup>16</sup> Nalder, J ‘Learning in Both Worlds’ *Inside Story*, 27 October 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Statement, (n.d) Department of Education and Training, Queensland Government, 1-3.



language programs and their own educational material.<sup>18</sup> The Northern Territory Government and individual schools should continue to encourage and support the development of Aboriginal language programs by Aboriginal staff and community members.

Some schools in the past have provided effective models of two or both ways education using multi-literacy and a culturally inclusive approach. Yalmay Yunupingu, at her husband's memorial service, spoke about Yolngu Both Ways Education and the Papunya model developed by staff, students and community members using the Aboriginal Education Policy Guidelines. The school in Gunbalanya should also be noted for its flexibility in meeting the needs of the community, including by changing school year dates and holiday periods to fit in with cultural obligations and events, and through its establishment of a co-principalship.<sup>19</sup>

As outlined above, APO NT believes that there is a need for an independent community controlled peak body for Aboriginal education in the NT. This peak body could be responsible for ensuring that bilingual education programs are available to Aboriginal communities, and that the community are vocal in the implementation. The peak body could also assist in providing support and professional development for special education support assistant/ special education support officers (SESA/ SESO) in the areas of Indigenous Knowledges and providing support and professional development for teaching staff in the areas of Indigenous Knowledges.

**Recommendation 3:**            **The Review should explicitly recognise the importance of Aboriginal culture in the Northern Territory education system.**

**Recommendation 4:**            **Bilingual education should be retained. APO NT does not agree that the lack of trained first-language teachers should mean that a proven, evidence-based approach to education for Aboriginal people should be abandoned.**

**Recommendation 5:**            **Aboriginal peoples and organisations should be given greater input and control into schooling for their children, as the evidence supports this as an important component in achieving effective outcomes in Indigenous education.**

## **Two systems of education: Town and Bush Schools**

APO NT recognises that there are significant challenges facing children in bush schools; however, the government must not lower its expectations for the delivery of quality

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO). (2008). *Report of the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages*. 7th session. New York.

<sup>19</sup> Please view <http://www.westarnhemcollege.nt.edu.au/gunbalanya/about-gunbalanya> for more details.

education in remote settings. Students in bush schools should not receive an inferior education. Children should have the same rights to education wherever they live.

### Early Childhood

Education and health are closely linked. Completion of secondary school is a strong predictor of good adult health and reduced mortality. Increasing school retention is likely to have a greater effect on health outcomes than any other public health or clinical intervention.<sup>20</sup> Mechanisms include increased earning power, increased capacity to deal with social stressors and adversity and enhanced health literacy and skills to make good health choices.<sup>21</sup>

The NTCGRS noted that “children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have poor educational attainment, experience unemployment and substance misuse, are more likely to come into contact with the justice system and suffer chronic disease and premature death. Poor maternal health, low birth weight, growing up in a household with multiple disadvantages together with poor access to services are all factors that affect a child’s development.”<sup>22</sup>

Many remote Aboriginal children come to school set up to fail. This is evidenced by NAPLAN and AEDI results. Early childhood programs can be a key enabler of improved educational outcomes. The Abecedarian program has a particularly strong record of improving educational outcomes. One RCT demonstrated that the IQs of experimental program children ranged between 7.9 and 20.1 points higher than those of the control children between six and 54 months of age.<sup>23</sup> This impact remained ten years after intervention ended: children who received the preschool intervention significantly outscored controls on standardised measures of academic achievement and were less likely to be retained in grade or placed in special education.<sup>24</sup>

Children who complete preschool also have higher rates of high school completion.<sup>25</sup> It is critical that preschool is taught by qualified early childhood educators appropriately supported by Aboriginal community staff.

Children who drop out of school early have high rates of mental health and alcohol and other drug problems. Teenage pregnancy is also a key reason for school dropout.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Freudenberg N and Ruglis J. Reframing school drop out as a public health issue. *Prev Chronic Dis*. Oct 2007; 4(4): A107.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, n 2.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, S. L., Ramey, C. T. & Ramey, S. 1990. The prevention of intellectual impairment in children of impoverished families: findings of a randomized trial of educational day care. *Am J Public Health*, 80, 844-7.

<sup>24</sup> Ramey, C., Campbell L, Burchinal F, Skinner, M., Gardner R, D. & Ramey, S. 2000. Persistent Effects of Early Childhood Education on high-risk children and their mothers. *Applied Development Science*, 4, 2-14.

<sup>25</sup> Reynolds A, Temple J. Robertson D, Mann E, MSSW Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest. : A 15-Year Follow-up of Low-Income Children in Public Schools (2001). *JAMA*. 285(18):2339-2346.

Providing effective youth friendly primary health care services, including primary mental health services, would assist children to complete school when facing challenges with their own health. Young people also frequently have to care for family members and again, family support services should assist young people to stay at school.

APO NT agrees with the recommendations in the draft review to strengthen parent engagement and to seek adequate funding for operation of child and family centres. APO NT, however, suggests that children in pre-school are also taught in first language as well as the foundations of English literacy.

APO NT is encouraged by the initial results of the Families as First Teachers (FaFT), but is reluctant to commit to the recommendation to expand the Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program until it has been independently evaluated.

### **Secondary education**

APO NT believes that children should have the right to quality education in their home location. Parents should be able to choose between sending their child to a good school in their home community, or to a boarding school. Educators must also realise that students may not be considered 'children' by the community. Some of these students are young women who may be mothers already and young initiated men who see school as a place for children. Having the flexibility to accommodate these young adults will be essential to getting community support. Role models and mentors, as in the sporting realm, could also contribute.

The APO NT Network Coordinator recently travelled to Nhulunbuy and spoke to Yolngu leaders. During consultations, Yolngu leaders voiced their concerns about the closure of secondary education in the larger communities and moving children into regional centres, Darwin or interstate to complete their studies. They are concerned that students would be isolated from their families and the social and cultural fabric of their community. This policy approach would compromise identity, songs, language, and kinship, participation in ceremonies and cultural obligations and responsibilities.

There is also a growing fear that children who are sent to boarding schools against their will and their parents' will, will disengage from the system altogether.

APO NT are also wary of the unknown in moving students from the bush to boarding schools. It leaves many questions unanswered, such as:

- What would the new education system look like?
- How will residential schools be structured?
- Are boarding schools capable of housing an increased number of students from bush schools?
- Will there be mechanisms in place for students to return to the communities and to assist members of the community to visit the students at boarding school?

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, n 17.

- Will cultural activities be implemented on weekends, such as camping, fishing and attending local Aboriginal festivals?
- Will the boarding schools and residential hostels have an Aboriginal Employment Strategy to attract Aboriginal people to this workforce to ensure cross cultural communications and learning is embedded in the schooling and residential environment?

The Draft Review proposes a trial to “enable the effectiveness of residential approaches to secondary education”.<sup>27</sup> APO NT recommends a comprehensive evaluation of this trial before resources are allocated.

APO NT would like to highlight the Tiwi College model for boarding:

*“Tiwi College is a remote Aboriginal Secondary Boarding School and a day school for a small number of primary children. The students are picked up from communities across Melville and Bathurst Island each Monday and brought to the College to participate in 24-hour holistic learning. They return each Friday, many crossing Apsley Strait by ferry to Bathurst Island, after a 40 minute trip in a 4WD Troop Carrier.*

*Many of the students belong to a growing cohort who have experienced disadvantage in terms health, education, services and future prospects in comparison to their peers in mainstream Australia. The College provides an opportunity for those students who are happy to leave their immediate community and be at boarding school while still on the traditional lands of the Tiwi Islands.*

*The College provides a supportive and nurturing environment for schooling that develops the student’s sense of self-worth, enthusiasm for learning and optimism for the future. Developing close partnerships with training providers and Island industries offer students opportunities for pathways into careers and secure futures.”<sup>28</sup>*

APO NT suggests that where parents decide to send their children to boarding schools, Aboriginal education workers must be employed to work closely with the students and their families to prepare them for their transition. This includes:

- that schools are chosen based on the student and family’s needs, whether it be to attend a school in a regional, town or interstate area;
- Families and students are able to visit the school before making a decision on whether the school provides for the students needs;
- Families have access to the school to visit their children through the school term;
- Students can return home on certain occasions and on holidays.

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<sup>27</sup> B Wilson, Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory Draft Report, The Education Business, 78.

<sup>28</sup> The Tiwi College Project, <http://tiwicollegeproject.com/the-cause/>

- Recommendation 6:** Children in pre-school should be taught in both the literacy foundations in English and in their first language.
- Recommendation 7:** APO NT is reluctant to commit to the Draft Review recommendation that maintains Families as First Teachers (FaFT) until the program has been independently evaluated and the results published.
- Recommendation 8:** APO NT believes that the choice to go to boarding school should remain with families and students.
- Recommendation 9:** APO NT recommends a comprehensive evaluation of the trial of residential approaches to secondary education before resources are allocated to removing students from their communities to boarding schools.
- Recommendation 10:** APO NT recommends that Aboriginal Education Workers be employed to work closely with parents and students who have chosen to attend boarding school, to enable a smooth transition.

## Attendance

It is concerning that, despite the allocation of significant government resources to programs and initiatives to improve school attendance, average attendance rates of Aboriginal student attendance has deteriorated in remote and very remote regions over the past decade.<sup>29</sup> Unsurprisingly, data presented in the Draft Review indicates that poor attendance has a significant impact on student achievement.<sup>30</sup>

The Draft Review accepts that some of the reasons for poor student attendance are outside the control of education staff. Issues relating to severe social and economic disadvantage for many students in remote communities, for example, impacts on the ability of students to engage with education. Teachers need to be aware of these such issues, if they want the students to actively engage in the classroom “the best qualified teachers and the most accessible and well resourced schools will be of little value if the child comes to school in the morning tired, sick, hungry and cold and in the afternoon returns to a home and community in crisis”.<sup>31</sup> It is vital that education policy in the Northern Territory encompasses a whole-of-government approach to improving social, health and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people, with a strong focus on community owned and controlled solutions.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid n 17, 83-85.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid n 17, 85.

<sup>31</sup> Lippmann, L. (1969). ‘Commentary to “health education”’. In Dunn, S.S & Tatz, C. (Ed). *Aborigines and Education*. Melbourne: Sun Books. pp. 315-318.

The Draft Review suggests that there is a need to “modify cultural practices” through negotiation to reduce the impact of, for example, funerals and ceremonies on school attendance. This could be a point of conflict if it is not handled delicately by the Department. The guidance of local school councils, acting as a medium between the school, the families and the Government, should be sought in each remote school. Having said that, it needs to be acknowledged that significant cultural events, such as a funeral of an elder in the community, will need to be considered on a case by case basis.

In seeking to improve school attendance, APO NT believes that there needs to be positive rather than negative messaging around parental and community responsibility and school attendance.<sup>32</sup> Parents and communities should be empowered to work with the Department and the schools to lift attendance. The School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) is a Commonwealth Government initiative to encourage and support parents and carers to make sure their children are enrolled and attending school regularly and the measure is closely aligned with the Northern Territory’s “Every Child Every Day” attendance strategy. There have been limited evaluations of this measure.

There should be a focus on implementing positive initiatives to involve families and communities in the delivery of education. This includes consistent approaches in all remote schools to implement simple initiatives such as opening libraries and computer rooms after hours or on weekends to allow students and families to actively engage in the students learning and to also increase the learning skills of parents.

APO NT is also extremely concerned about the proposal to focus school attendance efforts on students attending school three days a week. The Draft Review does not set out what alternative pathways will be made available for students not attending school three days a week, and who will seemingly be abandoned under this new approach. We are extremely concerned that young Aboriginal people in remote communities who are completely disengaged from schooling will be at increased risk of further societal marginalisation, and more likely to find themselves on adverse trajectories, such as increased involvement in the criminal justice system.

**Recommendation 11:** School attendance should be addressed through positive rather than negative messaging around parental and community.

**Recommendation 12:** APO NT recommends that the new truancy officer program is evaluated and that the results are published.

**Recommendation 13:** APO NT recommends implementing positive initiatives to involve both families and the wider community in the delivery of education for their children.

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<sup>32</sup> Response to Stronger Futures, Aboriginal Peak Organisations of the Northern Territory Submission, p. 14

**Recommendation 14:** APO NT strongly disagrees with the Draft Review proposal to focus school attendance efforts on students attending school three days a week. The Draft Review does not set out what alternative pathways will be made available and these young people will be at risk of further marginalisation.

## Wellbeing and Behaviour Management

School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS) is a framework that helps schools to plan and implement practices across the whole school, to improve educational and behaviour outcomes for all students.<sup>33</sup> The aim of the program is to improve educational outcomes for students through: prevention of behaviour problems and management of existing issues positively and consistently; developing skills and knowledge in schools for better teaching and learning and creating and maintaining a better school environment for students, teachers and the whole community.<sup>34</sup> The SWPBS is currently in place in NT schools. The issue that is raised in the Draft Review is the lack of resourcing and the inconsistent application of the program. APO NT supports the SWPBS to be implemented consistently across schools and resourced appropriately.

With regards to the “Now Hear” program, APO NT suggests a full evaluation be published before the Government supports implementation in all schools across the NT.<sup>35</sup>

**Recommendation 15:** APO NT supports School Wide Positive Behaviour Support to be implemented consistently across Northern Territory schools and resourced appropriately.

**Recommendation 16:** APO NT recommends an evaluation of the Now Hear program and the results to be published before the Government supports the implementation in all schools across the NT.

## Community Engagement

APONT considers that engagement with local communities is critical at every stage and level of education delivery. The Department should actively seek to identify and support community based goals, rather than adopting a top down approach to education delivery and policy.

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<sup>33</sup> School Wide Positive Behaviour Support (2013) Northern Territory Government, <http://www.education.nt.gov.au/teachers-educators/students-learning/safe-schools-nt/swpbs>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> The only information found on Now Hear is listed on the Australian Indigenous Health *InfoNet* and it has not been evaluated. ‘Now Hear Trial Project, Australian Indigenous Health *InfoNet* <http://www.healthinonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/programs-projects?pid=302>.

To ensure community involvement in local schools' decisions and practices, nominated community leaders and elders should be encouraged and supported on school councils and receive adequate training and support to effectively fulfil this role. This will assist in facilitating open communication between Aboriginal people in the community, school staff and the Department.

Governance and management subjects could be introduced into the school curriculum. In many remote and very remote areas in the NT, a major career pathway for school leavers is working in a local Aboriginal organisation(s). Many remote Aboriginal people will also be asked or to serve on a local board. APO NT believes it would be beneficial for students to learn what an Aboriginal corporation is, how it functions, how to participate in meetings, how to make decisions and to learn about management.

The local community should also be engaged in areas of the school curriculum, where people have particular expertise, such as art, storytelling, sports, cooking and history. This would ensure that Aboriginal people in the community are closely connected with the school and are valued for their knowledge and expertise. Students would have the opportunity to hear and see local leaders impart their knowledges and it would allow students and teachers to make connections between traditional and western education in a culturally safe environment. NAAJA has been running innovative legal education programs in Lajamanu which seek to transit information about the Western legal system in tandem with Warlpiri Elders conveying information about the Warlpiri legal system.

- Recommendation 17:**            **The Northern Territory Government should actively seek to identify and support community based goals, rather than adopting a top down approach to education policy and delivery.**
- Recommendation 18:**            **To ensure community involvement in local schools' decisions and practices, nominated community based leaders and elders should sit on both the school board and school council.**
- Recommendation 19:**            **APO NT recommends a governance and management subject to be offered as an elective, for students to learn what an Aboriginal corporation is, how it functions, how to participate in meetings, make decisions and learn about governance and management more broadly.**
- Recommendation 20:**            **The local community should be engaged in areas of the school curriculum, to ensure that Aboriginal people in the community are closely connected with the schools, are valued for their knowledge and expertise and allows students and teachers to make the connection between**



**traditional and western education in a culturally safe environment.**

## **Workforce Plan**

APO NT supports the development of an Aboriginal workforce/ employment plan to increase the Aboriginal education workforce, and also supports measures aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of non-Aboriginal staff.

### **Increasing the Aboriginal workforce in education**

Aboriginal staff are critical to the success of teachers in schools in remote Aboriginal communities.<sup>36</sup>

National Congress recommended that ‘governments and universities need to foster education and training of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, with deep knowledge of our culture, in all curriculum areas.’<sup>37</sup> It is concerning that the number of Aboriginal employees in the education workforce in the Northern Territory has decreased over the past year, and remains proportionately low. The Draft Review notes that the Department has invested heavily in the *More Indigenous Teachers Program*, but that the program has been unsuccessful. The lack of success has been attributed to the low level of literacy of many of the candidates, and the high level of cost and support required to sustain the program. It recommends re-establishing the *Remote Indigenous Teacher Education (RITE) Program* to assist Assistant Teachers to advance to teaching positions, notwithstanding that the trial of the program in a small number of settings was regarded as unsuccessful.

It is imperative that Aboriginal people in remote communities are supported to undertake career opportunities in the education sector. The future of education in the NT must include measurable performance indicators to develop and foster more Aboriginal educators.

APO NT recognises that there are a number of complex issues affecting the recruitment and retainment of Aboriginal staff in remote schools. However, APO NT considers that some of these issues could be addressed by also offering local Aboriginal staff the entitlements offered to education staff from outside the community. APO NT is concerned that staff employed from outside communities are often offered generous conditions of employment, with benefits including a remote area allowance, free or heavily subsidised housing, airfare allowances, and additional annual leave. By contrast, staff engaged locally within those communities are generally offered employment on standard terms. This creates inequalities within communities, and tends to exacerbate (or at least, fails to address) the challenges many Aboriginal people face to engaging in the workforce, such as unaffordable, overcrowded or unstable housing. Accordingly, APO NT strongly recommends that to

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, n 10.

enhance the engagement of local Aboriginal staff members, the NT Government should seek to offer equal benefits to both locally- and externally engaged staff.<sup>38</sup>

**Recommendation 21:** APO NT recommends the RITE program be reviewed for comment by Aboriginal organisations, communities and teaching professionals to revise the course content to reflect the lower levels of literacy in candidates, and to foster more support through the duration of the course.

**Recommendation 22:** The future of education in the NT must include measurable performance indicators to develop and foster more Aboriginal educators.

### Improving the cultural competence of non-Aboriginal education staff

APO NT believes that there should be training in cross-cultural communication and engagement skills, cultural competency and Aboriginal languages, cultures and histories for non-Aboriginal teachers. Given the concerns raised in the Draft Report regarding the quality of initial cultural training provided to remote service teachers by the Department, APO NT supports the suggestion in the Draft Report that local communities should be involved in the development and delivery of inductions for staff, and that cross cultural training should be provided to staff by local community members.

## Finance

In the report, it states that there are “widespread weaknesses” in bush schools, “largely to do with management rather than funding”.<sup>39</sup> There is some evidence to suggest that there has been systemic, racially discriminatory under-resourcing of Aboriginal education in the NT. Research in the community of Wadeye found that Wadeye children received less than half average per capita funding for children attending school in the Territory. In a case to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in 2007, this was found to be racially discriminatory.<sup>40</sup> Recent claims have suggested such under-resourcing - achieved by funding Aboriginal remote schools based on an expected participation rate of about 35% compared with 97% for non-Aboriginal children - is endemic.<sup>41</sup> In The Little Children are Sacred Report, a principal of a remote area school stated: “we’re resourced to cope, not to succeed”.<sup>42</sup> Where it exists, institutional racism must be acknowledged so that it can be meaningfully addressed.

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<sup>38</sup> APO NT Workforce Development Strategy, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid n 27.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid n 2, 154.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid n 10, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Chief Minister's Department, Rex Wild QC & Patricia Anderson 2007, Report of the Northern Territory board of inquiry in to the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse 2007, "Little children are sacred", Northern Territory Government, Darwin, 147.

As noted in the Draft Review, education needs to be properly resourced to be delivered effectively to remote students. APO NT supports the recommendation that funding be “allocated based on clear goals reflected in a strategic plan, and maintained for extended periods’ to ensure all departments, regions and schools can undertake long-term planning and evaluate and then modify initiatives.”<sup>43</sup> APO NT also stresses the need to reduce the complexity around funding arrangements to make it straight-forward for schools and particular services to report back to the particular funding body.

**Recommendation 23:** APO NT strongly recommends that to enhance the engagement of local Aboriginal staff members, the NT Government should seek to offer equal benefits to both locally- and externally engaged staff, such as remuneration and housing.

**Recommendation 24:** APO NT supports the recommendation that funding be “allocated based on clear goals reflected in a strategic plan, and maintained for extended periods’ to ensure all departments, regions and schools can undertake long-term planning and evaluate and then modify initiatives.

## Conclusion

Decisions made from afar by people without the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes has led to a litany of poor policies and practices in Aboriginal education over many decades.

APO NT emphasises the importance of education as a social determinant of health. Aboriginal control is key in the delivery of services to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, including education.

APO NT believes that the creation of an Aboriginal-controlled peak body for education is crucial to developing more effective education policy and practice for Aboriginal people in the NT.

Children should be able to attend schools in their own communities. If parents or their children should choose to attend boarding schools, then that is their prerogative and they should be assisted to do so. APO NT opposes the proposal of removing children from their communities if it is against the wishes of the students and their families.

APO NT suggests that Aboriginal languages should not be seen as a barrier to education but as an opportunity to engagement and educational attainment. Language is intrinsically connected to identity, culture and wellbeing. Bilingual education is an evidence-based approach that has been shown over many decades to be effective for Aboriginal people. If more trained first-language teachers are needed, developing this workforce must be the

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<sup>43</sup> Refer to p.117 of the Draft Education Review.

priority and renewed efforts and stronger determination are needed to make this happen. Every child should have the right to be taught in their own language and English, particularly in the NT where 75% of the Aboriginal population speak an Aboriginal language as their first, second, or third language.

The NT urgently needs a commitment from Government at all levels to working together and in partnership with Aboriginal people, families and elders. A culturally inclusive environment will give Aboriginal people a voice and a clear role in shaping the education of Aboriginal young people. APO NT is strongly of the view that unless and until we do this, improvements in school attendance, and achievement will remain elusive and the system will continue to fail Aboriginal children.

APO NT is grateful for the opportunity to make this submission, and commend you on your efforts to suggest a way forward for Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory.