

# **Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory**

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

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

**INQUIRY ON THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDENTS**

**NOVEMBER 2015**

## Introduction

The Aboriginal Peak Organisations (APO NT) have operated as an alliance for five years and have a wealth of knowledge and expertise, which spreads across our five organisations: the Northern Land Council, Central Land Council, the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the Northern Territory. For more information on this alliance please view [Attachment A](#).

APO NT member organisations do not provide education services in the Northern Territory. However as Aboriginal community-controlled service delivery organisations, we have valuable insights into the delivery of services in the Northern Territory. Decisions made from afar by people without the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes has led to a litany of poor policies and practices in the education of Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory. APO NT recognises that the policies that are currently in place in the Northern Territory are not working. APO NT encourages policy makers to explore and investigate successful international models of education for Indigenous peoples, such as in Canada and New Zealand, to offer real opportunities to Aboriginal school children in the Northern Territory.

APO NT welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the House of Representatives Committee on Indigenous Affairs on educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

## Summary of APO NT's Recommendations

To ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the same educational opportunities as other Australian students, APO NT recommends:

- Recommendation 1:** That the Government recognises the rights of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibilities for the upbringing, training, education and well being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child, when making policies for Aboriginal people.
- 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:** 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 4:** 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 5:** APO NT supports the implementation of the Gonski Funding Model in the Territory to ensure that those that have the lowest educational outcomes, receive the highest levels of funding. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations must be involved in implementation and resourcing decisions.
- Recommendation 6** That Aboriginal communities must have access to quality early childhood education programs, such as preschools and the Abecedarian program, as a foundation for their children’s ongoing educational achievement and future wellbeing.
- Recommendation 7** That Aboriginal children are provided access quality education in their home location, from pre-school to secondary levels.
- Recommendation 8:** That Aboriginal communities and leaders be involved in any future decisions on changes to secondary education, including the development of regional boarding schools.
- Recommendation 9:** That a comprehensive evaluation of the trial of residential approaches to secondary education is undertaken before resources are allocated to expanding boarding schools and removing students from their communities.
- 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:** APO NT recommends work/career pathways to be developed in the home communities of students, so that when they return, they have a clear employment pathway to follow.

### **Community Control**

Aboriginal people should have greater control and involvement in policy development, program management and the service delivery of education. 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 found 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.



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>1</sup> Article 14, also 15, 17, 21 and the opening statement 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.” Articles 3, 4 and 5 provide 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>2</sup> To realise this, an independent Aboriginal controlled peak body for Aboriginal education must be established. An Indigenous advisory body was in place in the Northern Territory but was abolished by the current Government. This body was appointed by the Minister for Education and Training to provide advice and make recommendations to the NT and Australian Governments, however, it was not independent or Aboriginal controlled and advisory body members were appointed as individuals and were not representatives of NT Aboriginal communities.

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>3</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 services.<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence that the NT has developed national-leading examples of innovative comprehensive primary health care for Aboriginal people, particularly 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 and the communities.

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, Education Policy, June 2013. <http://nationalcongress.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/CongressEducationPolicyWeb.pdf> Accessed 20 November 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report, June 2011 to August 2012. Northern Territory Government, p.57.

<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT) Website. 2015. ‘About Us’ <http://www.amsant.org.au/index.php/about-us> Accessed 20 November 2015.



The Wilson Report on Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory also noted that there is no 'independent Indigenous body with a mandate and responsibility to speak on behalf of Indigenous people on educational matters'.<sup>5</sup> He went further to say that 'while, a strengthened Indigenous Education Unit will provide a voice within the department, there is no spokesperson for Indigenous people independent from the Department'. Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory need an independent community controlled peak education body to advance the interests of Aboriginal people across the Territory.

<b>Recommendation 1:</b>	<b>That the Government recognises the rights of Indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibilities for the upbringing, training, education and well being of their children, consistent with the rights of the child, when making policies for Aboriginal people.</b>
<b>Recommendation 2:</b>	<b>There is need for an Aboriginal community controlled peak education body in the Northern Territory to lead culturally appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal peoples.</b>

## Culture and Language

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

The persistent suppression of the cultural practices of minority populations is disruptive to their communities, and a cause of susceptibility to trauma, collective helplessness and endemic maladaptive coping practices.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, evidence internationally and within Australia shows that Indigenous cultures and languages are protective factors against health and wellbeing risks and are associated with higher self-esteem and psychological wellbeing.<sup>7</sup> APO NT believes that culture cannot be ignored or treated as a barrier to learning, but as a positive and enabling factor.

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>8</sup>

## Bilingual Education

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, B. 2013. 'A Share in the Future: Review of Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory'. NT Government.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, D. 2011. 'Closing the gap in cultural understanding: social determinants of health in Indigenous policy in Australia', Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT, Darwin.

<sup>7</sup> Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT. 2012. "Submission to the Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee Inquiry: Australia's Domestic Response to the World Health Organization's (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health Report 'Closing the Gap within a Generation'.

<sup>8</sup> Mudrooroo, (1995) *Us Mob, History, Culture, Struggle: An Introduction to Indigenous Australia*, Angus & Robertson, 123.



Language is an important component of cultural connection, and strengthens intergenerational relationships and community building.<sup>9</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>10</sup> The United Nations Economic and Social Council emphasised the importance of Indigenous teachers developing their own language programs and their own educational material.<sup>11</sup> Bilingual education is a proven, evidence-based approach to education. The Government should continue to encourage and support the development of Aboriginal language programs by Aboriginal staff and community members, not only in the Northern Territory, but across Australia.

Some NT 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>12</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 communities are engaged in the implementation of education programs. 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:** 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 4:** 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.

### Funding and resources of schools in remote communities

APO NT supports the need for adequate resourcing of Aboriginal education. This is an issue of particular significance in the NT because of the high number of Aboriginal students living in remote

<sup>9</sup> Nalder, J 'Learning in Both Worlds' *Inside Story*, 27 October 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education and Training. n.d. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Statement, Queensland Government, pp.1-3.

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council. 2008. *Report of the International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Languages*. 7th session. New York.

<sup>12</sup> Please view <http://www.westarnhemcollege.nt.edu.au/gunbalanya/about-gunbalanya> for more details.



communities in the Northern Territory. Evidence suggests that there has been systemic, racially discriminatory under-resourcing of Aboriginal education in the NT in terms of physical infrastructure, funding and staffing.<sup>13</sup> The under-resourcing of Aboriginal education has been compounded by the rejection of the Gonski funding model by the Northern Territory Government, which was not implemented in the Territory.

The Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services reported on the lack of adequately resourced funding in Aboriginal schools citing research undertaken by CAEPR in Wadeye.<sup>14</sup> Disturbingly, this research found that Wadeye children received less than half the average per capita funding compared to children in the Territory overall.

The research suggests that 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.

A further example of under-resourcing Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory is the policy whereby some small schools in remote communities are not recognised by the Northern Territory Government as schools but are classified as ‘Homeland Learning Centres’ and as a result do not receive the infrastructure and funding of other NT schools.<sup>15</sup> Other resourcing issues disproportionately impact on remote communities and schools, such as transport and access to culturally appropriate distance education. For many Aboriginal students, English is not their first language, therefore English as a Second Language (ESL) strategies are the best approaches to achieve improvement in student educational and language outcomes and should be adequately provided for by the Department of Education.<sup>16</sup>

It is essential that State and Territory Governments be held accountable by the Commonwealth Government with regard to the adequate and equitable funding and resourcing of Aboriginal schools and education.

**Recommendation 5: APO NT supports the implementation of the Gonski Funding Model in the Territory to ensure that those that have the lowest educational outcomes, receive the highest levels of funding. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and organisations must be involved in implementation and resourcing decisions, including monitoring government expenditure.**

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report. 2012. p.154.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, J., and Owen Stanley. 2005. *The Opportunity Costs of the Status Quo in the Thamarurr Region*. Working Paper / Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, no. 28/2005. Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research; and Arnold Bloch Leibler, Rapport, June 2012. <https://www.abl.com.au/ablattach/ablrapport0612.pdf> Accessed 20 November 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Institute for Cultural Survival. 2009. *Unequal Schools*, [www.culturalsurvival.org.au/.../Case%20Study\\_Unequal%20Schools.pdf](http://www.culturalsurvival.org.au/.../Case%20Study_Unequal%20Schools.pdf) Accessed 19 November 2015.

<sup>16</sup> This also means that teachers should be employed who have had the training in ESL, or be afforded the further training to do so. Silburn, SR, Nutton, GD., McKenzie, JW and Landrigan, M. 2011. Early years English language acquisition and instructional approaches for Aboriginal and instructional approaches for Aboriginal students with home languages other than English: A systematic review of the Australian and international literature, Menzies School of Health, p.9. [http://www.education.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/20198/MenziesReport.pdf](http://www.education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/20198/MenziesReport.pdf) Accessed 19 November 2015.





## Access to, participation in, and outcomes of pre-schooling

It is widely known that the early years are critical to development because it forms the foundation for a child's future well-being and learning.<sup>17</sup> The Northern Territory Coordinator General for Remote Services 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>18</sup>

Many remote Aboriginal children who go to school are 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 Randomised control trial 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>19</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>20</sup> It is important to note, however, that the participants involved in this research were not remote or very remote [terms used in the NTIED] Aboriginal students.

Children who complete preschool also have higher rates of high school completion.<sup>21</sup> It is critical that preschool is taught by qualified early childhood educators appropriately supported by Aboriginal community staff.<sup>22</sup>

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>23</sup> 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. Inadequate and overcrowded housing has been identified as significant barrier to a child's education. AHURI reported that 'the lack of space that children experience when living in crowded areas has been found to have a direct

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF, Early Childhood Development: The key to a full and productive life, p.1, <http://www.unicef.org/dprk/ecd.pdf> Accessed 19 November 2015 and Harrison, L.J., Goldfeld., Metcalfe, E and Moore, T. 'Early learning programs that promote children's developmental and educational outcomes', Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, August 2012. <http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2012/ctgc-rs15.pdf> Accessed 20 November 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report. 2012.

<sup>19</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, pp. 844-7.

<sup>20</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, pp. 2-14.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolds A, Temple J. Robertson D, Mann E. 2001. 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. *JAMA*. 285(18), pp.2339-2346.

<sup>22</sup> A worthy research topic, would be to get the figured on where preschool in NT communities is not occurring. APO NT thinks that a lot of remote schools might be unable to provide preschool because of resources, but it would be of interest to investigate this gap in necessary education, if it exists.

<sup>23</sup> Office of the Northern Territory Coordinator-General for Remote Services Report. 2012.



impact on their wellbeing and development, including sense of autonomy, social behaviour, health and developmental outcomes and school performance'.<sup>24</sup> Young people also frequently have to care for family members and where this occurs, family support services should assist young people to stay at school. With these factors in mind, APO NT believes that there must be a diversity of options for students to engage with the education system, to ensure that each student has the best opportunities to be educated.

**Recommendation 6: That Aboriginal communities must have access to quality early childhood education programs, such as preschools and the Abecedarian program, as a foundation for their children's ongoing educational achievement and future wellbeing.**

### The provision of boarding schools

APO NT believes that students should have the right to quality education in their home location, from pre-school to secondary levels. Access to tertiary education should be available with pathways for students when they have completed their secondary education.

Parents should be able to choose between sending their child to a good school in their home community, or to a boarding school. The needs of each child should be determined by the parents and supported by the NT education system. 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 increasing school attendance in school in their home community or at a boarding school.

During consultations following the Wilson Review in 2014, APO NT sought the views of Yolngu leaders. The Yolngu leaders voiced their concerns about the Northern Territory Government's decision to close secondary schools in the larger communities to move students into regional centres, Darwin or interstate to complete their secondary studies. The leaders were concerned that students would be isolated from their families and the social and cultural fabric of their community and that this policy approach would ultimately compromise identity, songlines, language, and kinship, participation in ceremonies and cultural obligations and responsibilities.

This highlights the need for Aboriginal communities and leaders to be involved in any future decisions on changes to secondary education, including the development of regional boarding schools.

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

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<sup>24</sup> Dockery, A.m., Kendall, G., Li, J., Mahendran, A., Ong, R and Strazdins, L. 'Housing and children's development and wellbeing: a scoping study', Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) Final Report No. 149, July 2010, 13.  
[http://www.ahuri.edu.au/downloads/publications/EvRevReports/AHURI\\_Final\\_Report\\_No149\\_Housing\\_and\\_children\\_s\\_development\\_and\\_wellbeing\\_a\\_scoping\\_study.pdf](http://www.ahuri.edu.au/downloads/publications/EvRevReports/AHURI_Final_Report_No149_Housing_and_children_s_development_and_wellbeing_a_scoping_study.pdf) Accessed 20 November 2015.



- ensuring that the families and students are fully informed of educational options and opportunities to make the transition;
- that parents/ guardians are able to choose a school for their child, based on the what the child and family needs (whether their choice is 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; and
- The boarding school has regular contact with the families to provide updates on the students' progress and their welfare.

APO NT would also like to highlight the necessity of ensuring work pathways and careers for students who return to their home communities. Usually, when students return home after boarding school there is no identified work options. Without having a career pathway in their home community, students who attend boarding school will continue to have limited potential employment opportunities.

<b>Recommendation 7</b>	<b>That Aboriginal children are provided access quality education in their home location, from pre-school to secondary levels.</b>
<b>Recommendation 8:</b>	<b>That Aboriginal communities and leaders be involved in any future decisions on changes to secondary education, including the development of regional boarding schools.</b>
<b>Recommendation 9:</b>	<b>APO NT recommends a comprehensive evaluation of the trial of residential approaches to secondary education before resources are allocated to expanding boarding schools and removing students from their communities.</b>
<b>Recommendation 10:</b>	<b>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.</b>
<b>Recommendation 11:</b>	<b>APO NT recommends work/career pathways to be developed in the home communities of students, so that when they return, they have a clear employment pathway to follow.</b>

## 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.<sup>25</sup> APO NT

<sup>25</sup> Helme, S and Lamb, S, 'Closing the school completion gap for Indigenous students', Resource Sheet no.6 for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, January 2011.  
<http://www.aihw.gov.au/uploadedFiles/ClosingTheGap/Content/Publications/2011/ctgc-rs06.pdf> Accessed 20 November 2015.



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.

The NT urgently needs a commitment from Government at all levels to work 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 and will seriously affect the advancement of our people for future generations.



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