

Australian Education Union



Submission

To the

Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

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1. Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) appreciates the opportunity to table this submission to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities.

The AEU has a membership of 175,050 which rose by 12% in the last decade. Members work in public schools, preschools and TAFE colleges in all states and territories as well as Adult Multicultural Education and Disability service settings. The largest group of members are school teachers, including principals and administrators, together with support staff generally performing educational roles.

2. Overview

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian citizens have been denied genuine rights and opportunities, and this is at the heart of the disadvantages faced by many in regional and remote Australia. Successive governments have ignored the disproportionately high levels of poverty, substance abuse and violence which persist in many communities. Community-based initiatives struggle to succeed in the face of government neglect and lack of funding. The funding directed to Aboriginal-controlled community organisations working at the grass roots level to combat cultures of violence must be reviewed with the aim of increasing funding and targeting programmes more appropriately.

The AEU is alarmed about the disadvantage experienced by regional and remote school students in areas such as:

- The availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling;
- The quality of educational services, including technological support services, and
- Whether the education available to Indigenous children complies with their human rights.

These concerns were affirmed in the Productivity Commission's recent Report on Government Services, which raises issues around performance in reading, writing, maths and science for Indigenous children in remote and very remote communities. For all categories of remoteness across years 3, 5 and 7, the reading outcomes for Indigenous students were lower than those for all students. Outcomes declined as remoteness increased. The gap in learning outcomes between Indigenous students and all students increased as the degree of remoteness increased¹. This requires urgent and targeted action.

Data on Indigenous children's school participation indicates that their needs are not being met. In 2006, 21 per cent of 15 year old Indigenous people were not participating in school education. In comparison, only 5 percent of non-Indigenous 15 year olds were not participating in school education. Furthermore, Indigenous students were half as likely as non-Indigenous students to continue to year 12². The Australian Government must direct

¹ Report on Government Services 2009, School Education, p4.45

² Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report 2007, p36

resources to overcome the immediate causes and the long-term systemic causes of poverty, substance abuse and violence in Aboriginal communities. Recognising the transformational power of education, the Australian Government must ensure every Aboriginal child has meaningful access to pre-school, primary, secondary and post-school education. This must be a national priority, if communities are to break the cycle of poverty and violence that currently grips the lives of too many Australian children.

3. The effectiveness of Australian Government policies following the Northern Territory Emergency Response, specifically on the state of health, welfare, education and law and order in regional and remote Indigenous communities

The AEU is gravely concerned about the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), and in particular about the changes to land tenure, the suspension of the Commonwealth and Northern Territory Anti Discrimination Acts and the quarantining of welfare payments of all people living in the targeted communities regardless of their circumstances³.

The AEU Northern Territory Branch has reported no improvements for Central Australian schools or communities as a result of the Intervention, and a growing resentment in the Northern Territory about the amount of money spent on the Centrelink staff and Business Managers housing and travel and wages, with still no housing for local teachers.

A key element of the NTER has been the introduction of linking welfare payments to school attendance. The AEU questions the efficacy of this measure. The 2008 announcement of 6 trial sites from Term 1 2009 is of concern because there are insufficient teachers to staff the schools currently. Yalmay Yunupingu, Senior Teacher at Yirrkala School was quoted in the Australian on 18 January 2008 as saying: *“even if all the students turned up to school tomorrow there would be no chairs or tables to accommodate them”*.

Professor Larissa Behrendt has highlighted the increased influence of the concept of Mutual Obligation in Australia and its particular application to Indigenous policy in the AEU commissioned *“Welfare Payments and School Attendance”*. The use of the quarantining of welfare payments as a punitive mechanism to improve school attendance became government policy as part of the Northern Territory intervention, and it marks an unprecedented phase in welfare policy in Australia. The Rudd government has maintained the use of Mutual Obligation.

Prof. Behrendt has found that similar models in the United States and South America that instituted sanctions without expanding support services did not improve school attendance. Implementation of a system that divests Aboriginal people of any power to determine their own financial affairs is at odds with principles of self-determination.

Prof Behrendt established that geographic location was a better predictor of school attendance than welfare status and that illness rather than truancy was the major cause of absence – a finding which undercuts the idea that sanctions alone are likely to alter attendance patterns.

³ Education is the Key Report, 2007, p4

The general principles that underpinned the most successful strategies in increasing school attendance included home visits and community liaison, emphasis on personal contact with consistent follow up where absence occurred, personal planning and goal-setting. Research indicates that students are more likely to attend school when they perceive school as positive and supportive, the curriculum is delivered in a contextually and culturally relevant way and teachers have experience teaching in a cross-cultural and bilingual situation.

Making welfare payments conditional on attendance draws attention away from the chronic under-resourcing of the Indigenous programs which aim to address endemic problems such as poor health, housing and lower education levels.

4. The impact of State and Territory Government policies on the well being of regional and remote Indigenous communities

Access to education continues to be an issue for many discrete Aboriginal communities in remote and some regional area, and particularly for access to secondary education. The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research has investigated this issue and discovered:

- There were 21 discrete communities of 500 or more persons where there was no Year 12 secondary school within 25 kms. For 19 of these communities there was no Year 12 secondary school within 50 kms; and
- There were nine discrete communities of 500 or more persons where there was no Year 10 secondary school within 25 kms. For eight of these communities there was no Year 10 secondary school within 50kms⁴.

At State and Territory level the AEU's 2007 "*Education is the Key*" Report estimated that as many as 2,000 students of compulsory age in the Northern Territory alone are not enrolled in a school at all. For substantial numbers, secondary schooling is simply unavailable - that is, it is not provided in many areas of the Northern Territory, Northern Queensland and Western Australia. "*Education is the Key*" estimated that up to 5,000 students under the age of 18 in the Northern Territory had no access to secondary or vocational education services⁵. Community Education Centres in many remote communities provide only the most basic primary education, with limited tuition support for secondary students to study by correspondence. This is unacceptable and must be addressed immediately.

Of grave concern to the AEU is the continuing gap in the educational achievements between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers. This has led to the suggestion that past and current practices are not fully effective in bridging this gap. The AEU is of the view that the provision of education to Indigenous students by respective State and Territory education systems cannot be "more of the same". The AEU believes there is an urgent need to consider and develop different structures and models that take into account the needs of Indigenous students and their particular communities. The development of such initiatives would require the prior consultation with and the agreement of local communities.

⁴ Summarising: Fordham (2007), Preliminary analyses of access to education and discrete Indigenous communities in Australia, 2006, p.2

⁵ Education is the Key Report 2007, p19

The *Education is the Key Report* sets out some fundamental principles that should underpin future planning and provision of education to Indigenous students throughout Australia, based on self-determination and respect for Indigenous culture and rights.

The impact of State and Territory policies in the following areas have also proven detrimental to the provision of quality public education in remote and regional Indigenous communities.

Staffing Issues

Lack of access to specialist teachers and support staff in remote schools, particularly in regard to advisory visiting teachers and allied health professionals to support students with disabilities and health issues. There is no access to ‘relief teachers’ in most remote communities this means that teachers who are away due to illness or other reasons cannot be replaced. Parents in these communities deserve qualified relief teachers.

Accommodation

Housing is already a concern for teachers in remote Indigenous communities, particularly for Indigenous teachers from the respective community. There is already an acute shortage of accommodation in many remote Indigenous communities and a disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous income levels and life-styles. State and Commonwealth Governments need to address this problem.

Buildings and Maintenance

There are major problems with the state of both schools and teacher accommodation in rural and remote Indigenous communities. State and Commonwealth Governments should make Indigenous communities a priority in their infrastructure building programs.

Safety and Security Issues

In 2008 teachers in a number of Indigenous communities expressed serious concerns about safety and security relating primarily but not exclusively to break-ins to teacher accommodation. Ongoing problems relating to public safety highlight the urgent need for the state and federal governments to effectively address problems with health, community facilities and programs, law, order and justice that exist in remote communities.

Bilingual Education

The AEU notes with some concern the proposed restructure of the Northern Territory education system and in particular, the announcement that the first four hours of instruction must be in English.

This policy announcement goes against well established research that Indigenous languages have been shown to assist in student learning. In its own report “*Indigenous Languages and Culture in Northern Territory Schools 2004-2005*”ⁱ, the then NT Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), stated that the teaching of Indigenous languages and culture in NT schools is important for two reasons. Firstly, the Report states that there is irresistible evidence to show that when the home languages and cultures of students are reflected in their learning experiences and learning environments, students achieve better levels of learning (p.i). The second reason, the Report goes on to say, is that Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people of today are fundamental to the Northern Territory’s future social and economic vitality and wellbeing and that schools are the rightful place to gain an intercultural understanding of diverse communities (p.i).

The announcement of this policy places bilingual programs at risk and in particular the employment of Indigenous bi-lingual teachers in affected schools. There are only nine schools with officially approved bilingual programs and these are in the larger remote communities. Further, the AEU is concerned that the restructure will result in the loss of teacher positions.

The AEU firmly believes that efforts to improve attendance, retention and the literacy and numeracy rates must that Indigenous Australians have the right to speak and maintain their languages, knowledges and values and that they have access to an education that provides recognition and affirmation of the cultural knowledge, language and values that Indigenous peoples bring into the mainstream.

5. The health, welfare, education and security of children in regional and remote Indigenous communities

Otitis media is a chronic condition with long-term health and educational impacts. Aboriginal children are ten times more likely to develop this condition than their non-Indigenous counterparts⁶. A lack of awareness of the disease and its long-term effects among parents, teachers and health workers contributes to its persistence as does the lack of agreement about who is responsible for treating the disease and its effects.

The classroom teacher or Indigenous Educator spends considerable time with the children, and therefore can play a major role in the management of otitis media. The teacher or Indigenous Educator's role need not only be confined to the classroom. By working with educational consultants, liaison officers and health workers, the teacher or Indigenous Educator can be the agent of change in a community. Involving the school community is essential to this process. The teacher or the AEA can assist health workers in educating the community by raising awareness of otitis media and its impact.

Governments must provide increased resources to address this issue and reduce the incidence of the condition. This should include appropriate training and support to classroom teachers and Indigenous educators to assist in the development of effective strategies in the classroom.

There is an over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child welfare system across Australia,⁷ as reported by Julian Pocock in the *State of Denial* Report. Of great concern is the lack of access to services in regional and remote areas. Language barriers and ineffective reporting systems contribute to the lack of an effective response to sexual abuse and poor health outcomes of Aboriginal children.

The SNAICC⁸ Report, "*Through Young Black Eyes*" (2005, p6) found that poverty, poor socio-economic status, differences in child rearing practices and the intergenerational effects of previous separations are significant factors in the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system. The key reasons for this are low incomes, and financial stress, poor quality housing and the effects of social isolation (2005 p.6)

⁶ http://www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/otitis_media.htm

⁷ Pocock, 2003, p9

⁸ Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Childcare Centres

Further issues which contribute to abuse include the breakdown of traditional culture and society and the loss of identity, coupled with alcohol and substance abuse. This also has an adverse affect on school performances. The affects of child sexual abuse may include learning problems at school, loss of concentration and a drop in school attendance. The AEU is concerned that respective government departments are not fulfilling their mandate to protect children from such maltreatment.

The AEU is greatly concerned that high levels of neglect and the ongoing effects of dispossession, homelessness, poverty and unemployment are seen as the “norm” by communities and agencies with a direct role in child protection (Pocock pp9-13). This socio-economic disadvantage has adverse implications on the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The AEU believes that proper health care is essential to the learning process and for successful educational outcomes.

Education systems around the nation have been unable to deliver the same levels of success for Aboriginal students as they do for other students. The gap persists despite the efforts of educators in schools and on TAFE campuses. Any gains in Indigenous education have largely been attributed to pilot projects and trials which are accessed by a small proportion of Indigenous students. Indigenous education has come to be regarded as peripheral to core business and reliant on special programs and short term solutions⁹.

The 2006 National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations), while reporting better educational outcomes and progress against targets for schooling sectors across Australia, also identified gaps in attendance, literacy and numeracy skills. A major concern was that low achievement in the early years of schooling results in poor achievement and participation in secondary and further education. These conditions persist despite initiatives that have been introduced by the Australian, State and Territory Governments in the last 20 years to improve participation in, and outcomes from, education among Indigenous students.

6. The employment and enterprise opportunities in regional and remote Indigenous communities

Decades of research point to the clear links between educational attainment, qualifications and earnings. Research evidence in OECD countries shows that education is associated with an increased capacity to participate in the labour market, better performance in the labour market in terms of employability, and higher earnings (OECD, 2008, p142-143).

Evidence from Australia (MCEETYA 2001) shows that there is a strong relationship between education and employment prospects for Australian Indigenous peoples:

- Completing Year 10 or 11 increases an Indigenous person’s chance of employment by 40 percent.
- Completing Year 12 increases employment prospects by a further 13 percent.
- Having a post-secondary qualification increases employment prospects by between 13 percent and 23 percent.

⁹ Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008, p16

The *Australian Bureau of Statistics Report* also points out the relationship between education, employment and earnings. Poor numeracy and literacy skills, as well as school attainment levels, are a significant barrier to employment. This is especially true for Indigenous people in regional and remote areas which on average have a lower level of educational attainment with just under 40 per cent of Indigenous people aged 19 years and over having completed year 12 whilst in remote and very remote areas the figure is between 22 and 28 per cent. The figures are also similar for the attainment of non-school qualifications¹⁰.

Community Development Employment Project (CDEP)

The Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) has become the main provider of services in most remote areas, especially in homeland communities.

The funding for a program which provides wage subsidies and training for employers who take on Indigenous staff means there is no real incentive for organisations to provide full-time employment. However, the AEU recognises the potential of programs such as the CDEP and the benefits it may bring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities¹¹.

From 1 July 2009 all new CDEP participants in remote locations will not be eligible to receive CDEP wages. Instead they may be eligible to receive an Income Support Payment¹². Current participants in remote areas will be able to access CDEP wages until 30 June 2011 to support their transition to the new arrangements. The loss of CDEP will have a major impact on the education system. The AEU's *Education is the Key*, has identified several adverse impacts including the pressure placed on education institutions to meet the influx as people from remote areas, including the Homelands, are compelled to move into towns and cities¹³. Many Aboriginal people working in the remote and very remote areas are employed as teaching assistants and receive 'top up' wages under CDEP. The loss of CDEP will mean that schools will have their staffing level reduced unless the State and Commonwealth accept responsibility for payments no longer provided through CDEP payments¹⁴. The AEU supports initiatives which aim to identify real job opportunities so that people can move from CDEP to real jobs are vitally important.

The AEU recognises that CDEP employees are working within schools and TAFE who have developed positive partnerships with organisations that deliver CDEP. However, more effective responses to the employment of CDEP workers in schools, including the development and implementation of training plans, career pathways and transition to full employment, must be developed.

A central motivation for repositioning the programme within the mainstream Job Network structure is to maximise the access that CDEP participants have to mainstream jobs and to the Government's support services for this transition. The AEU is cautious of supporting the re-introduction of CDEP without real outcomes, job opportunities and the payment of appropriate entitlements, including superannuation, as without these conditions the Union movement would consider CDEP racially discriminatory.

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends*, 2008 (cat. no. 4102.0), p. 5.

¹¹ AEU Policy on CDEP Scheme for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders p.1

¹² <http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/services/cdep.htm>

¹³ Education is the Key Report, 2007, p.15

¹⁴ Education is the Key Report, 2007, p.15

Staffing Policies

The AEU is further concerned about the low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers working in the schooling sector. *The National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (2006)* shows that the percentage of Indigenous teaching staff as a proportion of all teaching staff in the Government schooling sector is 1.0% , in spite of the Indigenous schooling population being 5.4% of the total student population (p.72).

Many State/Territory Department of Education staffing and funding formulas provide insufficient compensation for the extra costs and time involved in providing education in rural and remote areas

In relation to the issue of teacher supply and retention in difficult-to-staff schools, whilst acknowledging the contribution and positive influence of beginning teachers, teacher experience, and continuity and stability of employment contribute significantly to improved student outcomes and school development initiatives. The AEU believes that staffing policies must promote the development and support of local Indigenous teachers and support staff. Apart from serving as positive role models for students which will assist in improving cultural understanding and the learning outcomes for students, such endeavours will serve to increase the capacity of community as a whole.

Whilst there is much to be learnt from successful programs the AEU supports the further development and negotiation of new staffing policies aimed at increasing the number of experienced teachers in identified difficult-to-staff schools, increasing leadership density and correspondingly reducing the number of beginning teacher appointments. Furthermore, new staffing policy should include initiatives that include the early appointment and in-servicing of new teachers including principals who will teach in schools with significant Indigenous enrolments. The appointment of new teachers including principals during the final term of the school year, prior to the new school year, will ensure continuity of programs for students. Improvements in the recruitment and retention incentives available to classroom teachers, executive teachers and principals serving in geographically isolated, difficult to- staff schools in Indigenous communities are also required.

7. Conclusion

The provision of quality public education is crucial to the well being of all communities, but particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) communities in regional and remote Australia, especially students. The public education system in all States and Territories must provide access to quality pre-school, primary, secondary and post-school education every Aboriginal community.

The Australian Education Union has a long standing commitment to improving the educational outcomes for all students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We believe that efforts by the Federal and State Governments to halve the gap in the educational achievements for Indigenous students are worthwhile and must be supported by the development of a comprehensive and a solid funding commitment.

8. Recommendations

1. The AEU supports the development of strategies to expand and enhance culturally aware excellence in teaching and learning for Indigenous communities in rural and remote areas. Further, the AEU recommends incorporation of Indigenous community knowledge into curriculum and teaching, and the involvement of Indigenous communities in education decision-making.
2. The AEU recommends the quarantining of welfare payments cease immediately.
3. The AEU recommends the Racial Discrimination Act and the Northern Territory's Anti Discrimination Act with reference to the NTER be re-enacted immediately.
4. The AEU recommends that in efforts to improve attendance, retention and the literacy and numeracy rates governments must ensure that Indigenous Australians have the right to speak and maintain their languages, knowledges and values and that they have access to an education that provides recognition and affirmation of the cultural knowledge, language and values that Indigenous peoples bring. Further, the AEU recommends the employment of bilingual teachers and education workers under appropriate employment conditions.
5. Teacher training institutions must incorporate compulsory modules on rural and remote teaching into teaching courses. These should include rural placements and recruitment strategies to prepare and encourage undergraduates for regional and remote teaching positions.
6. The AEU calls on governments to fulfil their responsibility to properly and adequately fund support services to remote and non-remote Aboriginal communities. This includes expanding the provision of training to Indigenous Health Workers, Police and Child Safety/Protection Officers.
7. The AEU recommends that governments provide appropriate training and resources to classrooms teachers and Indigenous educators to raise their awareness about otitis media and its impact and to reduce the incidence of this disease.
8. In the context of the review of the CDEP, the AEU recommends the development and implementation of training plans, career pathways and transition to full employment for Indigenous educators.
9. The AEU recommends that employment policies promote the development and support of local Indigenous teachers and support staff.
10. The AEU recommends that the Federal Government conduct a comprehensive regional economic assessment of CDEP to identify real job opportunities so that people can move from CDEP.