

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In late 1998 the Northern Territory Department of Education commissioned an independent review into Indigenous education in the Territory, to be undertaken by a team led by former Senator Bob Collins. The review produced a detailed report submitted in late 1999 and entitled *Learning Lessons*. The terms of reference for the review sought information and guidance in respect of:

- the views and educational aspirations of Indigenous parents and community members in relation to their children's schooling, with particular reference to English literacy and numeracy;
- the key issues affecting educational outcomes for Indigenous children;
- supportable actions for educational outcome improvements.

Amongst other key findings, the review established that there was "unequivocal evidence of deteriorating outcomes from an already unacceptably low base, linked to a range of issues, led primarily by poor attendance which has become an educational crisis".

At page 29 of *Learning Lessons* there is framework chart for "understanding the pathways to poor outcomes". The chart identifies "direct", "proximate", and "distal" causes for poor outcomes in 5 identified categories. The "direct" causes are: (1) poor attendance, poor attention; (2) teacher turnover; (3) language learning difficulties; (4) attrition; (5) fragmented approaches.

The "proximate" causes for the "fragmented approaches" problem were found to be: "lack of policy coordination; lack of outcomes data; and poor management systems".

The applicable "distal" cause was "Indigenous education historically peripheral to core business of NTDE".

In the years that have followed the publication of *Learning Lessons*, the deteriorating outcomes it reported have deteriorated further, and the "fragmented approaches" partly responsible for such deteriorating outcomes have not been effectively corrected or harmonised.

In December 2008 the Federal Parliament has enacted legislation paving the way for the implementation of a national curriculum to be taught in schools throughout the country. The Northern Territory Government shares the Federal Government's commitment to ensuring that numeracy and English literacy constitute the core of each child's schooling and is now seeking to address the stasis that has since long before 1998 undermined efforts to bring Indigenous students up to national benchmarks in those areas.

The current Northern Territory Government is of the view that "fragmented approaches" must no longer hinder progress towards equipping our Indigenous students to compete equally in a level educational playing field and thereby have access to opportunities that can lead to employment, travel, and engagement in the national economy and in all aspects of Australian social and cultural life. Our determination to expanding the horizons of our Indigenous children is balanced by

strong support for the protection and maintenance of Aboriginal language and culture – a cornerstone of the heritage and identity of all Territorians, not just those of Aboriginal descent.

Part of the rationale for the proposed policy and departmental practice changes to be introduced is that for too many years, including the years since *Learning Lessons*, there has been a preparedness to operate by reference to a longstanding but increasingly unacceptable status quo. A status quo in which many bush schools struggle by from year after year as sleepy and often inadequately resourced educational outposts, disseminating very basic curriculum material to students who leave school barely able to read and write or do simple arithmetic. There is a need to do away with that status quo and replace it with a dynamic agenda for change and excellence.

“Transforming Indigenous Education” will be developed and implemented as a coherent and integrated strategy or set of strategies designed to replace the “fragmented approaches” of the past. The fundamental threshold objective will be to dramatically improve the woeful attendance levels that condemn a majority of our bush schools to failure. Unless that objective is achieved the other proposed strategies will have no traction. It is proposed that the rationale for the intervention provisions in the Northern Territory *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act* (and the administrative enforcement regime established to implement those provisions) will be used as model to develop a formal intervention policy aimed at ensuring compliance with section 22 of the *Education Act* and the effective application of section 31 of the *Education Act*. Coercive intervention of this kind will of course be a last resort, and improved resources will be allocated and better-targeted procedures developed with a view to improving the success rate of non-coercive strategies for addressing truancy.

Supplementary to the campaign to improve attendance will be a suite of 8 inter-related measures or strategies:

- *Sturdy Foundations*  
In recognition of the reality that families are the first teachers of the young children who start their primary school education in remote Territory schools, the Department will develop a coordinated strategy in conjunction with other relevant government and non-government agencies and service providers to assist parents and other family members responsible for the care of infant children. This assistance will be aimed at both the creation and maintenance of safe and healthy home environments conducive to early learning and socialisation, and at supporting parents and others in their efforts to put in place the building blocks of language and general knowledge that are vital to a small child’s success in its early years of formal education.
- *Growing Our Own*  
This strategy will focus on upgrading the skills of currently employed Indigenous staff (both Aboriginal Teacher Assistants and those who have fully qualified as teachers), and the training and recruitment of the Aboriginal teachers and teacher assistants of the future.

- *Orientation/Induction For Non-Indigenous Staff/Staff Retention*  
 The phenomenon of newly minted interstate-trained teachers arriving in remote Northern Territory community schools keen to make a difference but having little clue about local social and cultural preconditions for effective communication is one that is already being addressed to some extent by means of generic cross-cultural training, but the most important information to be imparted to new teachers at bush schools is information relating specifically to the community and the region in which it is located. Appropriately structured cross-cultural training at the local level will be formalised and resourced throughout the Territory, and incentives will be developed to encourage non-Indigenous teaching staff to stay at a particular remote school for placements of at least 5 years.
- *ESL/Professional Learning*  
 A substantial majority of our remote school students speak English as a second language, and we intend to introduce staff rotation and continuing training arrangements that will over time result in the comprehensive upgrading of the ESL teaching skills of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching staff out bush.
- *Core Curriculum Content And Exposure To Standard Australian English*  
 Numeracy and literacy in English have been identified nationally as the core skill set that any school leaver needs to have acquired in order to make successfully make his or her way in life. Achieving competence in those areas is especially crucial for Indigenous children in remote Territory schools most of whom speak English as a second language and few of whom are regularly engaged in numeracy-enhancing activities in their everyday life outside the classroom. Our strategy involves the compulsory teaching of English and maths for four hours in the morning of each school day, Monday to Friday. Where the English language fluency of students in years 1 to 3 is insufficient for these classes to be conducted in English, and there is an appropriate regional Aboriginal language common to all the children being taught, that regional Aboriginal language will be used as a vehicle for teaching English and maths, the extent of the use of the regional Aboriginal language to depend on the English language skill level of the local students in each case. However, the emphasis of morning teaching in all remote area Territory schools will be on maximising (within the language competency limits of students) exposure to Standard Australian English (SAE).
- *Staying On Country: Boarding Hostels*  
 Aboriginal students in remote Territory schools derive their social and cultural identities from their families and peers in a community and regional context. Removal of an Aboriginal child from its community and region – while sometimes unavoidable for health and welfare reasons – weakens not just family bonds but also the child’s sense of identity and orientation. The importance of such social and cultural bearings was recognized in *Learning Lessons* and reflected in numerous comments and recommendations (e.g. No.106 concerning language teaching: “It is recommended that Indigenous viewpoints, perceptions and expectations about social, cultural and historical matters are reflected in the curricula, teaching and administration of all NT

schools”). However, in many remote Aboriginal communities in the Territory dysfunctional and destructive behaviours have become entrenched to a degree that both traditional culture and authority and attempts to foster and inculcate “mainstream” education are being critically undermined (see page 153 of *Learning Lessons*).

Our proposed solution to this problem as it impacts on school age children in some affected communities is to establish a number of regional weekly boarding hostels. Children will reside with their families in their community on the weekends then stay at the hostels Monday to Friday during each school term. They will be cared for and supported by appropriately trained and qualified staff (of whom as many as possible will be Indigenous) and their school attendance will be monitored and facilitated.

- *Community Education Boards*

The final section of the *Learning Lessons* report is headed “Conclusion: Community partnerships”, and the following comment is made: “Many of the issues and subsequent recommendations identified in the preceding sections of this report point to the need to create more effective partnerships between Indigenous people and the education system, and ultimately the need to pursue greater Indigenous control of that system”. The mechanism provided for in the current *Education Act* to facilitate community consultation and control is the school council. A school council can be established for any particular Government school (but only a “school management council” constituted by a single person appointed by the Minister can be established in respect of a group of schools in a region). Once it is established it may undertake the functions set out in section 71C(1) of the Act. Those functions are broad-ranging and significant but fall short of full management.

It is proposed to trial a similar model of community control in relation to groups of Government schools within up to three selected trial regions. The trials will be analogous to the coordinated care trials undertaken over the last 10 years in the Katherine West, Tiwi, and Katherine East regions. As with the coordinated care trials, it is proposed that in each region a community-controlled trial entity will be established, and that that entity will enter into a comprehensive and detailed legal agreement setting out the terms and conditions on which certain management responsibilities will devolve to the regional education boards, and stipulating the committed funding to be allocated by the Department to implement the arrangement.

Government schools in a trial region managed, or part-managed by an education board will be required to teach the standard Northern Territory schools curriculum but will be given significant discretion in relation to the extent of regional Aboriginal language to be used in the context of ESL teaching, and the extent to which Aboriginal regional languages and culture are to be taught as stand-alone classes in the afternoons. The education boards may also be given management responsibility for training and recruitment of staff below the principal or head teacher level, and a mandatory consultation entitlement in relation to the appointment of principals and head teachers.

## 2. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ATTENDANCE

Petrol sniffing by school age young people is a self-evident abomination. The practice robs individuals of the capacity to participate in and enjoy the activities and challenges of a normal childhood and ultimately leads to brain damage and other serious health problems. There is a clear correlation with anti-social behaviour escalating to the commission of criminal offences.

Truancy is not as dramatic and emotive a problem, and does not of itself directly lead to brain damage in the physical sense. However, there are definite parallels between the negative impacts of petrol sniffing and truancy. The starving of a young brain of opportunities to absorb and capture critical life-enhancing information during the years when it is most receptive and capable of processing and retaining such information is a comparable harm to physical brain damage.

The statutory machinery available to address truancy in the Northern Territory is outlined in section 31 of the *Education Act*. It empowers an “authorised person” to “escort” a child of school age found in public place during school hours without a valid excuse to the school where the child is enrolled, and “into the custody of the head teacher”.

An “authorised person” means a uniformed member of the Police Force or some other person authorised in writing by the Secretary of the Department. The Act seems to contemplate that the “escorting” of the child to school will be a consensual arrangement – there is no express conferral of power to use reasonable force to compel school attendance.

It goes without saying that it is preferable if satisfactory school attendance results can be achieved with a “carrot” rather than a “stick” approach, and this applies equally to attendance children and the discharge of supervisory responsibilities by parents. However, despite the engagement and deployment of a considerable number of truancy officers throughout the Territory and a concerted effort to address the poor school attendance problem that was given such emphasis in *Learning Lessons*, attendance figures have remained extremely poor at most remote schools. It is evident that the range of strategies which have been adopted in the past rely on a consensual outcome and that they not in many cases been successful. It is therefore going to be necessary to give section 31 “teeth”.

The situation is similar to the one that faced Government several years ago in respect of petrol sniffing. Police and other responsible adults were being stymied in their attempts to prevent the petrol sniffing which was taking place before their eyes in public because there was no legal mechanism authorising intervention. In the second reading speech for the *Volatile Substance Abuse Prevention Act* (“VSAP”) introduced in late 2004, and in preceding consultations with affected communities, it was stressed that it was neither the purpose nor the prescribed consequence of facilitating intervention that the young people concerned would be charged with an offence. The legislation did not “criminalise” petrol sniffing.

Instead, what it did was to guarantee protection and certainty for Police officers and other authorised persons to carry out effective harm-prevention interventions. These

interventions could be limited to a disruption of petrol sniffing activity actually underway, or it could extend to taking individuals into protective custody and arranging for them to be directed to appropriate rehabilitation. Similarly, in the case of school age children who remain recalcitrant after the available consensual truancy strategies have been attempted, there should be a power to enforce attendance through a process which does not involve criminalisation or punishment.

The VSAP regime for apprehension of petrol sniffers is set out sections 16 to 22 of that Act. Section 17 sets out the meaning and scope of such apprehension in the following terms:

**17** *Meaning and effect of apprehension of person*

- (1) *For this Division, the apprehension of a person is the detention of the person in order to take the person to a place of safety or to a responsible adult.*
- (2) *An apprehended person is not under arrest and, unless section 22(3) applies, must not be taken into police custody.*
- (3) *An apprehended person:*
  - (a) *must not be charged with an offence;*
  - (b) *must not be questioned by a police office in relation to an offence;*
  - (c) *must not be photographed or have his or her fingerprints taken.*

It is proposed that the section 31 of the *Education Act* be amended or supplemented by the insertion of an apprehension regime similar to the one in the VSAP, with the term "place of safety" being replaced by "school or place of enrolment".

It is also proposed that the *Education Act* be amended to address the current unavailability of any direct truancy action in respect of a child who is not enrolled at a school. Section 22 of the Act only makes school attendance compulsory for children who are already enrolled at a school, and the focus of the Act in respect of non-enrolled children is the penalisation of parents who do not enrol their children (section 21). The powers of truancy officers should extend to proactively arranging an interim enrolment for a child who is not enrolled at a school, the interim arrangement to be either confirmed or varied after consultation with the child's parents or guardians.

It is intended that once they are equipped with such increased powers and enforcement options, truancy officers will work in close cooperation with Police officers to compel attendance at school by hard core truants. This policy is not designed to be implemented in relation to Aboriginal children only, or remote community children only. It should be applied without discrimination or preference to all non-attending school age children throughout the Territory.

### 3. STURDY FOUNDATIONS

When the family fails in its vital natural role as the crucible for the upbringing of children, the Minister for Family and Childrens Services has to intervene to secure and protect children who are at risk. That is a remedy of last resort, and it is in the interests of Government and society as a whole that all available support be given to families to assist them to effectively function so that children may thrive.

The existence of harmonious and well-adjusted families is a fundamentally necessary precondition for the successful provision of education services through our Government's remote community schools (and of course at all other schools as well). The stability and continued viability of many Indigenous families is under threat because of addictions, poor lifestyle choices, and a non-traditional but entrenched culture of casual violence. Addressing social harm and dysfunction in the family, is therefore necessarily core business for Education Department staff, whether at the policy formulation level or the coalface school or truancy officer level. Obviously Departmental strategies designed to address these problems will need to be developed and cooperatively implemented in conjunction with other relevant agencies, in particular the Police and FACS.

One way in which remote schools can play a role in restoring troubled communities to stability and constructive engagement is by actively promoting the school as a key element of within the combined public resources available to the community. As well as preparing and presenting displays and performances generated from the activities of school age students and their teachers for the benefit and information of the rest of the community, offering the school as a resource may involve the conducting of continuing education programs at the school outside of regular school hours and actively encouraging parents to participate in school activities involving their children (including, where appropriate, actual classes).

However, even where the family unit is stable and the parents or guardians of school age children in the household are keenly aware of their obligations and responsibilities as regards ensuring that their children get the best possible chance of succeeding in their education, and even when there is a healthy amount of community engagement with the local school, remote Indigenous children may find themselves at a disadvantage compared to many urban children (especially those with well-educated parents) when they start going to school. This is because the family life of their household has not involved any literacy or pre-literacy activity that can lay the foundation for structured literacy learning in the classroom.

Attention was drawn to this concern in page 96 of *Learning Lessons* under the heading "Early childhood services":

*Many contributors to the review emphasised the importance of an early acquisition of literacy, pointing out that children who fall behind are unlikely to catch up and in fact are more likely to find the gap widening in secondary school. Some put it to the review that illiteracy at grade four level is unlikely to ever be remedied, pointing to the need for early intervention.*

*A common diagnosis of why Indigenous children perform less well in Western schools is that they 'lack a schooling culture'. In the preamble of the PAC Report for instance, the committee stated, 'The Committee believes that Aboriginal parents who have the legal responsibility in the NT to ensure that their children attend school regularly, need continued assistance in developing a schooling culture and an acceptance of their role in the education process' (PAC 1996: xix), and further, that 'Aboriginal communities in remote areas need support to develop a schooling culture' (ibid: xx).*

*The review understood the notion of 'schooling culture' to refer both to the wider sociocultural domain that Western schools are part of, and also the intimate domestic practices within families that prepare children for the disciplines of school-based learning. The research literature certainly supports the view that young children who come from literate households, where reading and writing material of all types are readily available, where children have been read to from an early age and where the primary carers are visible users of literacy skills are most likely themselves to become successful readers and writers (QSCC 1998: 58-65).*

*However, little is precisely known about the 'specific literacy features of the environment upon which the school expects to draw' (Heath 1996: 12), and even less about 'the variety of ways children from non-mainstream homes learn about reading, writing and using oral language to display knowledge in their preschool environment' (ibid: 13). Not surprisingly then, schools and teachers are not trained or given specific techniques in recognising and possibly reorienting the starting points of children in their classrooms, especially where these radically deviate from mainstream norms.*

*Given that for many Indigenous students, the school is the predominant and in some cases the only site of literacy and numeracy practice, it is critical that every effort is made to introduce the precursors to literacy and numeracy in all available environments. Literacy and numeracy precursors include, importantly, access to paper and writing equipment to 'scribble' and formative letter making, and structured play to introduce both literacy and numeracy concepts, e.g. measurement, shape and location, and handling and interpretation of quantitative data (Berk 1994; Stone 1995).*

Under *Transforming Indigenous Education* increased resources (including human resources) will be allocated to early childhood assistance to parents and communities out bush. There will be a particular emphasis on establishing preschools in communities where there aren't any at present, and on re-orienting the priorities of preschools that are already operating towards the laying of literacy and numeracy learning foundations.



#### 4. GROWING OUR OWN

##### *Non-Indigenous Teachers*

Putting aside administration staff and other employees not involved in actual teaching, our remote community schools are staffed by employees in two main categories: teachers and Aboriginal teacher assistants. Most of the teachers are non-Indigenous and come from somewhere else in the Territory or from interstate. Few of the non-Indigenous teachers stay at a remote bush community school for more than a few years and many stay for a much shorter time. Frequent replacement/rotation of non-Indigenous teachers is not only cost-ineffective, it is also a factor militating against the achievement of high quality teaching results. There are at least two reasons why that is the case.

Firstly, as in any school with high staff turnover anywhere in Australia (but in particular in a schools servicing an already disadvantaged community) there is insufficient time for teachers to develop mutual relationships of confidence and trust with students and other teaching staff.

Secondly, given the reality that in most of our remote community schools teaching staff are necessarily teaching English as a second language, short term tenure in a community school does not allow the newcomer teacher to acquire even a modicum of familiarity with the relevant regional Aboriginal language spoken by his/her students and by the Aboriginal teaching staff. Even when non-Indigenous teaching staff ho stay at a remote community school for more than a few years do not manage to become completely fluent in the local language, they do acquire a sufficient grasp of that language to collaborate effectively with their Aboriginal teacher assistants in the shared task of teaching students numeracy and English literacy.

*Transforming Indigenous Education* will prioritise the recognition and selection for advancement of remote school teachers who are performing well at a remote community school and whose continuing tenure at the school the Department believes would be of great benefit to the school and to Territory education. Such teachers (which will include high performing teachers who have already served at a particular school for a long period) may be offered enhanced contract packages and other incentives to persuade them to commit to staying at the school for at least a further 5 years.

##### *Indigenous Teachers*

As noted in *Learning Lessons* (page 89) by reference to data obtained in that review, "trained local teachers are much more stable than non-local teachers". teaching, also ent's parents and entire local family. The local Aboriginal teacher will not require Government financial assistance with relocation expenses every few years and will be in a position to give cross-cultural training rather than having to receive it.

The local Aboriginal teacher will usually know not just the student but also the student's parents and his/her entire extended family. This familiarity, combined with

the Aboriginal teacher's fluency in the relevant regional Aboriginal language will in most instances facilitate fluent and effective communication.

On the debit side of the ledger, it needs to be acknowledged that some Aboriginal teachers often require (usually due to circumstances well beyond their control) significant supplementary leave on a regular basis. To quote again from *Learning Lessons* (page 90):

*Indigenous teachers should not be set up as the panacea for Indigenous education. Their own ability to attend regularly, like that of their students, can be an issue, for the same complex array of sociocultural reasons – including the high levels of morbidity and mortality in their communities. And their own English oracy, literacy and numeracy skills may not be well-developed. This can be addressed with professional development and greater assistance, which increasingly should be an important part of the role of non-local teachers as an increased number of local recruits assume teacher positions. The level of determination Indigenous teacher trainees have already shown should not be underestimated.*

This passage continues to note that those Aboriginal teachers who had achieved their teaching qualifications prior to or as at the time of the review had generally taken a comparatively long time in the course of their life to do so.

The difficulty we are facing in 2008, almost 10 years down the track, is that the cohort of Aboriginal teachers currently working at schools in the Territory is rapidly ageing and there are relatively few young entry level teachers. It is of great concern (including to the older Aboriginal teachers themselves) that there are so few Aboriginal teacher graduates in their twenties coming on stream to replace the older teachers.

Part of the reason for this is a failure over many years to target and encourage promising young Aboriginal men and women to choose a career in teaching. However, it appears that a more significant causal factor has been the poor numeracy and English literacy skills of those Aboriginal students who have managed to complete, or almost complete their high school education over recent decades. It is probable that in order to sufficiently and effectively train new Indigenous recruits as teachers, it will be necessary for them to first undergo some bridging training in maths and English.

In the meantime, the Department needs to value and strategically develop those Aboriginal teachers it is already employing at remote community schools. For the time being teachers need to be regarded as analogous to the situation we have reached with "peak oil": they are currently indispensable but we need to find replacements for to take their place in the medium term future.

Part of the challenge the Department faces as regards encouraging existing Aboriginal teachers to not just remain in the profession but to also upgrade their professional skills is to offer them meaningful incentives. Too often it has been the case that when an Aboriginal teacher takes up a position in a remote Territory school, she /he has not been offered the same package of benefits that would be offered to a new non-

Indigenous teacher arriving from interstate. This is especially likely to be the case if the Indigenous teacher is already living in a non-Departmental house in the community. Such disparate treatment should not be allowed to continue, and Aboriginal teachers must be made to feel that they are valued in a financial as well as professional sense.

### *Indigenous Assistant Teachers*

*Learning Lessons* was emphatic in its endorsement of the role of Indigenous assistant teachers. Insufficient steps have been taken since its publication to address the need for structured training and career paths outlined in the following two paragraphs at page 91 of the report:

*Many contributors pointed to the anomalous staffing formulae whereby non-Indigenous teachers in communities are eligible for an assistant teacher, but an Indigenous teacher is not. The justification for this is that Indigenous teachers do not need assistance with translating – even though few are trained in the complex task of educational interpreting. This policy position implies that translation is the main benefit an AT confers, which ignores their role in assisting teachers to deal with multi-age and multi-ability classrooms by effectively creating smaller teaching groups. One contributor to the review also observed that their non-allocation to Indigenous teachers ‘means that the apprenticeship for the next generation of teacher trainees is being undermined’. (Submission to review)*

*The review considers that the para-professional role of the assistant teacher needs to be explicitly recognised and trained for accordingly. In particular, assistant teachers need explicit skills in mediating between teachers/schools and community members, students and parents. They are also required in greater numbers in upper primary and junior secondary, where the challenges confronting older children are currently poorly met. It should also be noted that the bilingual programs created the most explicit and meaningful role for the AT’s, and that with such support, many went on to become fully trained teachers. This remains the promise of a well-structured scheme to support assistant teachers that need not remain concentrated in bilingual schools.*

In recent consultations with Indigenous assistant teachers in remote community schools, AT’s have expressed serious concerns about being undervalued and under-utilised by non-Indigenous teaching staff. An AT in a Western Arnhem Land school even complained about having to spend most of his time “sharpening pencils”. Even if this complaint incorporated an element of exaggeration, it is symptomatic of the mind set and morale of the contemporary cohort of AT’s. Their age profile broadly resembles that of the qualified Aboriginal teachers, and there is once again a real anxiety on the part of both teaching staff and community leaders that there is no next generation of adequately educated and career-focussed AT’s coming up to take the place of the existing cohort. As with qualified local Indigenous teachers, AT’s tend to stay long term in the schools they serve, and in most cases they will live out their whole lives in the relevant community, seeing countless waves of non-Indigenous teaching staff come and go over the years.

Under *Transforming Indigenous Education* a two year comprehensive audit of our Indigenous assistant teacher resources will be undertaken. This process will involve exhaustive and individualised interviews with and vocational guidance for not just currently employed AT's but also: (i) past AT's with more than 5 years experience who have not yet reached retirement age and who the Department is satisfied performed effectively in the role when they were employed; (ii) young adults living in remote communities who the Department considers to possess the right combination of qualities (including fluency in the applicable regional Aboriginal language and in Standard Australian English; numeracy and English literacy of at least year 12 standard; demonstrated capacity as regards both understanding and explaining the core curriculum subject matter; good character and behavioural attributes) for working as an assistant teacher and then progressing towards qualifying as a fully fledged teacher.

Existing AT's who the Department considers would be capable of completing formal teacher training and qualifying as teachers will be encouraged to do so, and offered special traineeships with enhanced salary packages and designed so as to minimise the disruption caused to the trainee's family life as a result of undertaking training away from his or her community. The philosophy behind upgrading the skills of AT's is currently being applied in the Territory to other important frontline public service vocations (e.g. the upgrading of Aboriginal Community Police Officers as fully commissioned members of the Northern Territory Police Force) and involves a commitment to training and employing local Indigenous people to become the preferred recruits for available positions in their own communities.

As individuals from the current cohort of AT's progress up the vocational ladder to become fully qualified teachers, replacement AT's will need to be trained and resourced to take their places. It is contemplated that in most cases this transition process will take a few years and will include stints where both the teacher trainee AT and the new AT-in-training will work side-by-side at the School, with the existing AT passing on his or her knowledge and skills. That scenario obviously requires the payment of two salaries where currently only one is paid, and careful financial planning will be required both at Departmental and a school budget lever to ensure that funds are available to cover this priority process.

In the meantime, the audit will also investigate how AT's are utilised in each remote school. It is anticipated that while this process will identify instances of under-utilisation which can be addressed by more effective communication and cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, there will also be instances where particular AT's simply do not have the required skills to undertake a more substantial and challenging role. Where the audit reveals such a deficit in the skills of an AT, the Department will take steps to offer remedial training and formalise any negotiated training arrangement by way of varying existing employment contracts or replacing them with completely revised agreements.

## 5. ESL TRAINING FOR TEACHING STAFF

In planning for the provision of quality education to a population where English is a second or third language for most students, it goes without saying that all things being equal the recruitment of teachers with English As A Second Language (ESL) teaching qualifications is to preferred over the recruitment of teachers without such skills. However, as was noted in *Learning Lessons* (page 86), ESL teacher training interstate varies significantly in duration and content. In many cases ESL methodologies taught in universities are designed to meet the needs of migrant students in metropolitan areas and not Indigenous students in bush communities. The reality is that “as teachers will confront the bulk of their Indigenous ESL challenges on the ground, ESL expertise is needed at the local level”. The report went on to state that “what is still missing is the system-level planning and strategic analysis aimed at ensuring that every teacher recruited and every teacher already in place has some component of professional development in ESL within a short time of commencing work”.

In line with the approach recommended in *Learning Lessons*, the Department has already been working towards the provision of intensive short-course training in ESL to each new teacher to a remote community school, either at the time of induction or shortly afterwards. This training will have to extend to Aboriginal teachers (i.e. just because an Aboriginal teacher may have conversational fluency in both languages being used in the classroom doesn't necessarily mean that the teacher is automatically capable of effectively conveying educational content back and forth from one language to another). In the short to medium term, equivalent courses will also be made compulsory for Aboriginal teacher assistants.

To start off with, ESL courses currently offered at Territory tertiary institutions will continue to comprise the bulk of the services in this area purchased by the Department. However, throughout 2009 there will be a thorough review of the strengths and weaknesses of such services with a view to providing the Department and the Minister with recommendations as to the commissioning of supplementary or replacement services.

The upgrading of the ESL qualifications and skills of all teaching staff at remote community schools which is to be a key element in *Transforming Indigenous Education* is part of a broader commitment to strategically structured ongoing professional renewal, as recommended in *Learning Lessons* (page 85):

*...There is a strong culture of professional development and inservicing within NTDE which seems to confuse the aims of personal development with what people need in order to do their jobs effectively. Training is not simply to increase a person's list of qualifications- however, where people are under-qualified for their task, for example in lacking ESL skills, a noted deficit for Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff alike, then every effort needs to be made to increase the pool of available skills.*

## 6. ORIENTATION/INDUCTION FOR NON-INDIGENOUS STAFF

Although the focus of ESL teaching is of course English, over time the ESL teaching courses developed in the Territory should also attempt to provide non-Indigenous teachers with the building blocks for the incremental acquisition of basic competence in relevant regional Aboriginal languages. But it will continue to be the case that non-Indigenous teachers will have little prospect of learning the regional Aboriginal language spoken in a particular community until they actually move to the community to live and start working at the school.

It will continue to be the case that some non-Indigenous teachers will be strongly motivated to do the hard work required to enable them to acquire conversational fluency in the language spoken by their students (work the bulk of which is necessarily undertaken outside of school hours). Other non-Indigenous teachers, while having full respect and regard for local culture and language, may not have the time or inclination to learn more than a few words of a local Aboriginal language. They may regard their role as purveyors of "mainstream" education benefits and feel that spending significant amounts of time on the acquisition of Indigenous language skills may prevent them from allocating sufficient time to conventional teacher work outside the classroom (e.g. programming/preparation for classes and the marking of submitted written work).

The extent of absorption and understanding of the language spoken in a community may have implications for the capacity of an individual non-Aboriginal teacher to navigate an effective and appropriate course, but it is evident that remote community teachers (as with Police officers and some other frontline public servants) may earn the respect of the community where they live and work and develop a harmonious and effective working relationship even if they make no attempt to learn the local language, provided they are able to grasp some basic cultural ground rules at the commencement of their period of service there.

Generic cross-cultural training in Indigenous culture for new non-Indigenous teacher recruits is not undesirable, but is no replacement for community-specific training and guidance relevant to the community where the teacher is going to be working. Under *Transforming Indigenous Education* a coherent and consistent set of subjects and issues to be covered in a community-specific cross-cultural training module will be developed and appropriately detailed service contracts will be developed for use in the engagement of local or regional service providers to teach relevant matters to newly arrived non-Indigenous staff. A review will also be conducted of the services of this kind that are already being purchased by the Department. The intended outcome is that each remote community school will have a customised orientation/cross-cultural orientation course in place that meets the criteria set out in the relevant service contract.

A corollary of the proposition that non-Indigenous recruits who receive appropriately comprehensive community-specific cultural training are able to more effectively interact with their students and make better teachers is that teachers who work steadily in a community for more than 5 years and who make special efforts to acquire an understanding of local language and culture become an extremely valuable asset to the Department. Special incentives aimed at such teachers will be offered.

## 7. CORE CURRICULUM CONTENT AND EXPOSURE TO STANDARD AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

The reason why supplementary training in the teaching of ESL is required is the continuing primacy throughout the Indigenous communities outside the main Territory population centres of regional Aboriginal languages (either surviving traditional languages or Kriol). This phenomenon is both a cultural asset and an educational challenge.

The educational challenge is rendered more demanding and urgent by the deterioration in English language competence (both oracy and literacy) that has taken place over decades. That deterioration was referred to in various submissions to the *Learning Lessons* review (pages 117-119) and there can be no doubt that the deterioration has been substantial and that it is continuing.

The time frame of the deterioration broadly coincides with measures adopted in Northern Territory schools aimed at supporting and encouraging regional Aboriginal languages which involved the use of Aboriginal languages in the classroom. This was done in different ways in different schools, the great majority of which had previously conducted classes only in English. While it is not possible to categorically conclude that the introduction of Aboriginal languages into the classroom has been a substantial cause of deteriorating standards of competency in English, there is evidence to suggest that an inadequate and ineffective exposure in remote schools to Standard Australian English (SAE) – regardless of the extent of Aboriginal language teaching in the school – has been a major factor in the deterioration. A number of contributing co-factors can be identified, including changing attitudes amongst students and in communities generally towards class discipline (in particular the carrying out of teacher directions as a cultural imperative), and the increasing social dysfunction that has afflicted many communities, aggravated by alcohol and other substance abuse, gambling, and family violence. There is also evidence suggesting that the quality of Aboriginal language oracy has deteriorated over an equivalent time period, despite the introduction of Aboriginal language teaching into schools.

The history of the bilingual education in the Northern Territory is set out in *Learning Lessons* (pages 121-125). It is clear that throughout the course of that history the merits of the purist “staircase” or “step” model - involving an eventual “transfer” from literacy in an Aboriginal language to literacy in English – have been highly contentious. The report’s conclusion about that model and about the future of bilingual education generally was as follows (page 25):

*The transfer model has sufficient question marks surrounding it for the review to recommend that it undergo complete reappraisal to determine the most appropriate approach. As part of this reappraisal, a comprehensive analysis is required of what is either in place or available to increase the amount of standard English oracy and explicit exposure to the literate language features, while supporting vernacular language development. This assessment is critical to all attempts to address the quality and effectiveness of English language teaching for all Indigenous students, and is not a matter of bilingual or not bilingual. The ‘bilingual or not’ debate conceals and distorts the generic concerns that are in need of urgent analysis.*

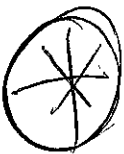
*The review believes that the whole question of 'bilingual education' in respect of the most effective pedagogy for teaching Indigenous students has become a major red herring. The term itself no longer reflects what is happening in classrooms, and is so divergently interpreted and misunderstood that it should no longer be used. A more accurate and appropriate description would be 'two-way learning', a term which removes the current tendency to see learning in the vernacular and in English as somehow in competition. The evidence is that competency in one tends to be reflected in competency in the other, and in any case, vernacular instruction is taking place regardless.*

*The teaching framework adopted to support 'two-way learning' needs to be flexible enough to incorporate in a soundly based educational program the individual situations and requirements of different communities. A 'one-size fits all' approach is doomed to fail and there has been enough failure already. At the same time the program must be strongly outcomes based with appropriate assessment provided which includes critical reference to SAE oracy, literacy and numeracy. It is essential that intellectual effort go toward developing valid ESL/EFL MAP tests that provide comparable longitudinal data.*

*The NTDE should support 'two-way learning' programs in schools where the local community wants such a program, providing assessment demonstrates the essential elements for its educationally effective delivery are in place or will be put in place. This assessment and any ongoing assessment must be dispassionate, rigorous and unequivocally focused on agreed outcomes. The failure to implement the inclusion of Standard Australian English oracy, literacy and numeracy outcomes noted by the review must not be allowed to occur again.*

Adding a further dimension of complexity to the education challenge facing the Northern Territory Government is the fact approaching adoption of a national curriculum. This is scheduled to occur in 2010 and while the precise format of the curriculum is still being developed the current Federal Minister has stated on many occasions the primary emphasis that will be given to numeracy and English literacy.

Taking into account the critical importance of : (1) effectively implementing the national curriculum when it is finalised; and (2) addressing the current inadequate and ineffective exposure to SAE in schools with Indigenous students that was highlighted so starkly in *Learning Lessons*, it has been decided that for the first four hours of each school day, the students in each Northern Territory school must be taught core subjects from the national curriculum, with a primary focus on maths and English. During the first three years of primary school (and for up to two further years subject to the grant of special Ministerial dispensation), it will be a matter for the school in consultation with the Department to determine the extent to which an appropriate regional Aboriginal language will be used as a vehicle to teach the prescribed curriculum, provided that from the very beginning of a child's primary school education he or she is exposed regularly, meaningfully, and for significant periods of time to SAE. Such exposure to SAE in the classroom from the commencement of a child's schooling reflects Government's agreement with the following observation in





the submission made to the *Learning Lessons* review by the Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory (*Learning Lessons*, page 129):

*Language development is founded in oracy. It is critical that young children are exposed to good models of standard Australian English from their early childhood years, the time when they undergo their most rapid language development. This is particularly critical for children who do not normally hear English spoken at home or in the community and whose language learning is made more difficult by hearing loss as a result of the high incidence of otitis media. Many Indigenous youngsters do not have regular contact with standard Australian English in those critical early years.*

Contrary to the views expressed by some commentators, the Government policy position set out in *Transforming Indigenous Education* does not oppose the teaching of regional Aboriginal languages as legitimate classroom subjects in their own right, and acknowledges the desirability of doing so in communities where strengthening of cultural identity and traditional values may result. It will be a matter for individual schools, in consultation with the Department to determine whether or not to teach oracy and literacy in an appropriate regional Aboriginal language as a subject in its own right.

Critics of this proposed policy initiative will argue that it is premature and that the status quo, at least in terms of preserving the option of teaching primary school children by means of the “staircase” or “step” model, should be retained for some years while longitudinal studies are conducted. Government has reached the view that the crisis in Indigenous education in the Territory is so extreme – a crisis that extends to schools which have maintained a more purist version of bilingual teaching – that to delay taking action now would be negligent. What this means is that while a regional Aboriginal language may be used in early primary school as a vehicle for teaching English and other core curriculum subjects during the first four teaching hours in the school day, it can no longer be taught as a subject in its own right during that block of time.

In order to make good on the Government’s commitment to continued support of Aboriginal language and culture in Territory schools, the *Transforming Indigenous Education* will allocate additional resources to remote community schools wishing to enhance or further develop their Aboriginal language and culture courses by means of a format which schedules such teaching in the afternoons (or if desired by the community at other times outside normal school hours).

## 8. STAYING ON COUNTRY: BOARDING HOSTELS

Aboriginal Territorians in their fifties or older from Arnhem Land (or other areas where Aboriginal people were able to maintain their language and culture and their traditional ties to country) who attended school in their youth generally speak good English and are also fluent in at least one regional Aboriginal language. It is evident from what they tell of their school days that obedience and attention to teachers was for the most part regarded as an unquestionable cultural norm and that learning basic numeracy and English literacy was considered necessary and useful even for remote area Aboriginal people. A number of schools attended by individuals in this category were operated in remote communities by church missions, and responsibility for some of them passed in later years to the Northern Territory Government.

A significant number of prominent senior men throughout Arnhem Land attended school at Gove in the 1970's and boarded at a facility called Dhupma College. Dhupma College's first premises were army buildings left in the area after having been erected there during the Second World War. Boarders at Dhupma came from communities as close as Yirrkala and from as far as Maningrida. But even for Western Arnhem Landers, attending school in East Arnhem Land was less of a cultural wrench than attending school in Darwin (let alone going to a boarding school interstate).

The great majority of Dhupma College alumni speak highly of their time there and of what it did for them in terms of enabling them to acquire an education. It is proposed that a boarding college similar to Dhupma be re-established in East Arnhem land, for the benefit in particular of interested school age children and their families living in the vicinity in East Arnhem Land but also as a place to which enterprising students from throughout greater Arnhem Land could go to board and to obtain a quality education. The facility would incorporate and combine both a boarding accommodation function and a regular school function. Consultations regarding this model will also take place in Central Australia, and if there sufficient interest and support amongst communities there, it is proposed that a similar facility will be established in an appropriate Central Australian location.

Boarding hostels or appropriate group house accommodation will also be investigated as an option to be implemented in Katherine and Tennant Creek, providing an opportunity for children from remote communities in the outlying region to come to the town to board and to attend the local town school.

Finally, in relation to those communities where social disorder is sufficiently severe that parents and guardians are not achieving success in getting their children to school each day, the option of establishing group houses or other accommodation facilities will be urgently investigated, by the Department in conjunction with other relevantly concerned agencies (including FACS).. Such group houses would be supervised boarding facilities located either in the community or else at a location some kilometres away (far enough away for the children and management staff to avoid "humbug" but close enough for the children to be able to return to their families in the event of a family or medical crisis). The children would sleep at the facility on weeknights, returning to their parents or guardians on weekends. The children would attend the local community school

## 9. COMMUNITY EDUCATION BOARDS

In the final section of *Learning Lessons*, headed “Conclusion: Community Partnerships” the following passage from a submission to the review is quoted with evident endorsement (page 163):

*The quickest and surest way to achieve change in this system is for the people most affected to take action to change it themselves, employing the full range of legal and political remedies available nationally and internationally to people whose rights are being denied. This is unlikely to occur unless the immediate and primary focus of those seeking reform is placed not on the schools, or on the children attending or not attending them, but on the parents and community leaders and organisation who have primary responsibility for the welfare and education of their children and young people. In other words, Indigenous people and their organisations must become more empowered in relation to the education system before real change will occur in this system.*

The first sentence in this passage is couched in the terminology of conflict and confrontation, but the final sentence speaks of empowerment. Modest community empowerment in relation to the management and local policy settings of a remote community school is available through the mechanism of a school council established under section 71 of the *Education Act*. Subsection 71(1) is in the following terms:

- (1) *Subject to subsection (2), the Minister may, at the request of an interested body –*
- (a) *involved in the management of a Government school; or*
  - (b) *from the community served by a Government school,*

However, under subsection 71(6), the Minister may establish a “school management council” in respect of the same Government School, consisting of the head teacher of the relevant school “or such other person as the Minister may appoint in place of the head teacher”. A school council may not carry out a functions when that function is being undertaken by a school management council.

The scope of the functions that may be undertaken by a school council is broad. The functions are set out in section 71C as follows:

- (1) *A school council may, in respect of the Government school for which it is established -*
- (a) *examine the manner in which the educational policies of the Territory are to be implemented at that Government school, and, to this end, to advise the head teacher accordingly;*
  - (b) *inquire into and identify the particular educational needs of the community served by that Government school and advise the Secretary of those needs;*

- (c) *consider and advise the head teacher and Secretary on initiatives in community education and, in particular, on means for improving links between that Government school, parent organizations, other associations and the community in general;*
- (d) *assess, from time to time, the needs of that Government school in relation to buildings and facilities, equipment, and needs of students and teachers and other staff and make recommendations to the Secretary with respect to the provision of those needs;*
- (e) *within the scope allowed by the functions and powers conferred or imposed upon it, determine the purposes for which moneys allocated by the Department of Education to that Government school are to be expended and to expend those funds accordingly;*
- (f) *determine and regulate the conduct of activities for the benefit of the local community served by that Government school at any time when that Government school's buildings or grounds are not required for usual purposes;*
- (g) *exercise general control of the buildings and grounds of that Government school, including, with the consent of the Secretary, controlling the conduct of work being carried out to or in relation to those buildings or grounds, upon such terms and conditions as are approved in writing by the Secretary;*
- (h) *control the manner in which prescribed services are being rendered for that Government school;*
- (j) *advise the Secretary in relation to the job description for the position of head teacher;*
- (k) *advise the head teacher in relation to the job descriptions for teaching and ancillary staff;*
- (m) *employ, with the consent of the Secretary, such persons, as the school council thinks fit, upon such terms and conditions as is approved in writing by the Secretary;*
- (n) *carry out such activities as are approved by the Secretary for the purpose of raising funds to be expended on or in relation to that Government school and to expend such funds accordingly;*
- (p) *perform such other functions as the Minister, by instrument in writing confers upon the school council.*

There is a useful precedent in the Northern Territory in relation to the devolution to a regional Indigenous community-controlled entity of responsibility for management of major area of government service delivery, namely remote area health services.

In three regional trial locations “coordinated care trials” have been undertaken. The trials have tested a scheme whereby the notional Commonwealth MBS/PBS allocations and the Territory Government funding that would normally have been allocated for service delivery via the Northern Territory Health Department is pooled, the pooled funds are transferred to an Aboriginal community controlled regional health board, and the health board manages the funds, purchasing services either from the Northern Territory Health Department (or private health service contractors) or providing the services itself (essentially taking over the management of Government health clinics).

In two instances the trials were clearly successful and led to the permanent transfer of responsibility for health services in the region from the Northern Territory Health Department to the relevant health board. In the third instance the experiment was ultimately unsuccessful, and direct responsibility for health services reverted back to the Northern Territory Government.

It is proposed that Community education boards be established in up to three remote regional areas and that education trials analogous to the coordinated care trials conducted in the Territory over the last 10 years be undertaken.

Because the *Education Act* in its current form does not allow for the creation of a school council for a group of schools, some other statutory or contractual mechanism will have to be developed to establish the relevant education board entities and devolve to them the education responsibilities and associated funding which would be the subject of the trial. However, the functions of the education boards would cover at least the matters set out in subsection 71C of the *Education Act*.