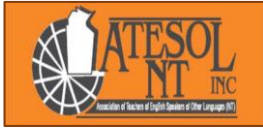


## **MEDIA RELEASE**



### **Indigenous students' attendance falls while remote schools suffer funding cuts and millions are wasted on failed programs**



Australian Council  
of TESOL  
Associations

In two scathing submissions to the Parliamentary *Inquiry into the Importance of Adult Literacy*, the **Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in the Northern Territory (ATESOL NT)** has described how – despite millions of dollars poured into English literacy programs –

- *the NT Government has slashed remote Indigenous school budgets by as much as 50% since 2012*
- *access to secondary education in remote communities has been increasingly restricted since 2015*
  - *only 14% of very remote students were attending school 4 days a week in 2020.*

The Association's Supplementary Submission describes how remote Indigenous children and their families have been progressively alienated from formal schooling. ATESOL NT blames this on the failure of the NT Government's policies and programs which consistently fail to acknowledge the fact that *“more than 8 out of 10 people in remote communities speak an Indigenous language”* and that *“young people do not use English outside school for social, emotional, practical or other purposes”* (p. 25). Staffing, teaching resources, professional development and support for remote schools have been blinded by *“a version of literacy that takes no account of learners' first languages and cultures”* (p. 47). Consequently, *“a discourse of failure permeates all levels of Indigenous educational provision in the NT”* (p. 41).

The causes of the NT Government's overwhelming failure to achieve Closing the Gap targets for Indigenous students include the following.

- **A vicious cycle of shrinking and insecure remote school budgets has made Closing the Gap attendance targets unreachable.**

The Supplementary Submission points out:

*Many remote schools have lost up to 50% of their budgets ... Students generally enrol in larger numbers in terms 1 and 4. To staff classes with fewer teachers, class sizes have to be large. Students find large classes intimidating, so they cease attending.* (p. 71)

Since 2012, the NT Government's “effective enrolment” policy has syphoned off Commonwealth money allocated for remote schools. The NT Government's own 2017 review confirmed these cuts,<sup>1</sup> as did Independent NT MP Yingiya Mark Guyula, who was highly critical of effective enrolment in 2018.

- **In panicked responses to dismal NAPLAN scores and failed Closing the Gap targets, millions have been wasted on imported remedial literacy programs and other short-lived initiatives.**

Every year remote Indigenous students who are **learning to speak English** sit mandated NAPLAN tests designed for fluent English speaking students. These students are advised to guess answers to multiple choice questions by *“colouring in the bubbles on the test pages”* (Supplementary Submission, pp. 40-42). In 2015, attempting to respond to abysmal NAPLAN results, the NT Government mandated that **remote schools use an American “Direct Instruction” program costing \$25-30 million**, which included flying instructors from America to remote NT communities several times a year (pp. 20-22). It was cancelled in 2018.

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<sup>1</sup> The review reported that “schools where funding is reduced due to the application of effective enrolment are in remote locations, are socioeconomically disadvantaged and have a high concentration of Indigenous students.”

[https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/464792/Report-from-the-Review-of-the-Global-School-Budgets-Funding-Model.pdf](https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/464792/Report-from-the-Review-of-the-Global-School-Budgets-Funding-Model.pdf) p.33.

In 2017, a **British remedial literacy program** that includes nonsense words to teach phonics and content designed for children in England was rolled out. This program is now the NT Government's sole official approach to teaching English to remote Indigenous students.

In 2015, under the auspices of the NT Indigenous Education Strategy, the Government initiated its own **Literacy and Numeracy Essentials (LANE)** and **Employment Pathways (EP)** program. Both were cancelled in 2020-21. The result is that:

*Indigenous communities are experiencing program fatigue. ... Staff and students are reluctant to engage with programs that may be cancelled a year later. ... Students are being taught to read English before they can speak it. ... [They] cannot transfer what is practised ... to speaking or reading Standard Australian English or other parts of the curriculum.* (Supplementary Submission, p. 21)

➤ **Pathways to secondary schooling for students in remote communities are now highly restricted.**

The 2015-2024 Indigenous Education Strategy (IES) restricted secondary schooling options for most remote Indigenous students to *either* NT and interstate boarding schools *or* the new local, community-based Employment Pathways (EP) program.

After 2015, EP became the only secondary option for most remote secondary students wanting to remain in community. In Term 3 2020, it was abruptly terminated, leaving 537 EP remote students stranded across 32 remote communities. (Supplementary Submission, pp 33- 35).<sup>2</sup> Since 2015, boarding school attendance has increased dramatically. No publicly available Government data exists on attendance, completion or dropout rates. Anecdotal evidence and a 2020 independent study found that many remote students do not adjust to boarding school life.<sup>3</sup> They return to their communities where options for secondary education are mostly non-existent. The ATESOL NT Supplementary Submission reports that:

*The sense of failure by students who drop out of boarding school, and the lack of employment opportunities for those returning, discourages other younger students in the community from continuing their education.* (p. 34)

A lack of viable learning and employment pathways is a well-attested cause of young people's alienation. They are at risk of collision with the justice system and/or, tragically, suicide. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among NT adolescents in remote communities, while youth incarceration rates continue to escalate.<sup>4</sup>

➤ **Qualified Aboriginal teachers, Assistant Teachers and teachers of English as an additional language are increasingly rare in remote NT schools.**

In 2012, Batchelor Institute, which provided the only undergraduate Aboriginal teacher education program, was incorporated within the mainstream degree at Charles Darwin University, causing remote community teachers to withdraw. Cuts to school budgets have limited the employment and training of Assistant Teachers in remote schools. Aboriginal teachers are essential in facilitating remote children's learning in and through their first language and English, because they are local and can teach the children in their own language and in ways the children understand. With the University's cancellation of the Graduate Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages in 2014, nothing now exists in the NT that appropriately supports teachers of Indigenous-language speaking students in remote schools. On-going professional development is confined to the inappropriate British remedial program (see above and Suppl. Submission, pp. 36-39, 43-44).

**For ATESOL NT Submission 105 and Supplement**, go to: [Submissions – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au/submissions)

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<sup>2</sup> See p.13 of the 2019-20 DoE Annual Report for EP stats [https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/943959/doe-annual-report-2019-2020.pdf](https://education.nt.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0012/943959/doe-annual-report-2019-2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> *Boarding Off Country: a study of education in one NT community.* <https://apo.org.au/node/308093>

<sup>4</sup> [Youth detention census - Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities](#)