

IEUA-QNT SUBMISSION

[1 July 2021]

Submission: Northern Territory Department of Education – Education Engagement Strategy Discussion Paper

The Independent Education Union – Queensland and Northern Territory Branch (IEUA-QNT) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback regarding the Northern Territory Department of Education's *Education Engagement Strategy Discussion Paper*.

About IEUA-QNT

IEUA-QNT represents ~17,000 teachers, support staff and ancillary staff in non-government education institutions in Queensland and the Northern Territory and consistently engages in industrial and education debate at both state and national levels through its Education and Industrial Committees and through its national counterpart, the Independent Education Union of Australia, which receives input from teachers in all States and Territories.

This submission has been developed through consultation with our Yubbah Action Group, which is a group of First Nations members and union officers who provide support and advice to our union on matters relating to First Nations issues and the broader societal process of reconciliation. Input was also sought through our union's Yarning Circle, which is a regular, informal gathering of First Nations members.

Introductory Comments

Given the high proportion of First Nations students in Northern Territory schools[1], input of First Nations people and communities is a crucial element in the development of any strategy to increase engagement. In this context, it is imperative to acknowledge that respectful and constructive relationships between First Nations people and Australians from other cultural backgrounds require acknowledgement that many of the challenges faced by current generations have their genesis in unfair and unjust policies and practices of colonisation.

Reversing the psychological, social and economic impact of these policies and practices is a long-term undertaking and it is imperative that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are empowered by, rather than excluded from, decision-making processes.

We commend the Department of Education for recognising the need for strong community engagement and, in that context, would make the point that there is also a need to recognise:

1. The different circumstances and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in urban, regional and remote communities and;
2. The importance of broader support services for families and communities.

We are #IEUnionStrong

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

If we might offer some criticism of the consultation process however, we would argue that the consultation questions are not truly open to engagement with First Nations people and communities in that they should reflect a ceremonial view of engagement, rather than focussing on processes and procedures.

Responses to Consultation Questions

1. Considering the successes that have been achieved over recent years and the current challenges facing education:

a) What should we do more of?

Any plan to increase engagement of Northern Territory students should commence with an explicit commitment to the early years in their own right and, in particular, the provision of instruction in the student's First Language.

The fundamental importance of early childhood education in shaping an individual's psychosocial orientation is widely recognised by international education experts and the economic and social benefits of a shift to broader, long-term goals is a growing feature of political dialogue in prosperous societies [2].

A 2015 report by the McKell Institute examines international trends in government support of early childhood education and it is clear that other developed nations have recognised the value of greater support in the early years [3].

Investing in the early years of a child's life delivers a wide range of benefits, ranging from greater tax revenues through to higher standards of health, reduced public expenditure on social welfare programmes and lower levels of crime [4, 5]. Research by the Nobel-Prize winning economist Professor James Heckman has, in fact, demonstrated that investment in the early years has a substantially higher rate of return than interventions designed to overturn the longer-term consequences of early disadvantage [6]. Further, analysis of the broader economic benefits of quality early childhood education and care in an Australian context indicates that, because many of the social benefits go unquantified, the rate of return might be substantially higher than estimated [7].

Similarly, despite evidence that teaching in First Language (the language which the child and family use in the home environment) delivers academic, social and economic benefits [8], and strong international and national support for inclusive practice [9], in Australia, First Language instruction remains the exception, rather than the norm.

One possible limiting factor for provision of instruction in First Languages is the relatively low number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. In 2016, just 2.02% (9184) of Australian teachers identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander [10].

Schools respond to this shortage in various ways, but a common approach is to engage community members as school officers or assistant teachers, who then work collaboratively with teachers to meet cultural and linguistic needs of First Nations students, and the school more generally.

The report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's *Inquiry into education in remote and complex environments* indicates that, while

We are #IEUUnionStrong

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

the Australian Curriculum recognises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and culture, decisions about how schools offer learning programs, including bilingual education, are described as matters for state and territory education authorities [11].

There is then, a clear role for the Northern Territory government in supporting the provision of First Language instruction.

ABS data indicates that 95% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals in The Northern Territory speak a language other than English at home [12].

Both national and international studies indicate that awareness of, and sensitivity to, identity, language and culture of the child is crucial for establishment of productive relationships that lead to successful engagement with education [13-15].

This, along with a difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood educators in rural and remote communities, is a key justification for programs that focus on education and training that develops the capacity of local community members rather than relying on itinerant workers [16]. There are, however, some limitations to this approach.

A recent ACEQA report on implementation of the National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care indicates that The Northern Territory has continued to improve its record, with 82% of services meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard [17], but this still leaves room for significant improvement.

A change in the type of data collected by ACECQA makes it more difficult to determine whether services in remote and very remote areas are less likely to be rated Meeting or Exceeding NQS than services in rural and metropolitan areas, but an earlier report suggests that this is the case [18].

Addressing the imbalance requires a long-term strategy to promote and enhance the professionalism of early childhood educators in remote communities.

b) What should we do less of?

Consultation with members indicates that the role of boarding schools in education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is an area of significant concern. While we recognise the good intentions behind many schemes offering subsidised placements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students [19], such programs can have unintended negative consequences for students and their home communities.

While the intention may be to provide students with access to quality education and create a new generation of leaders working in a wide range of fields, the reality is that there are many reasons why boarding schools prove unsuccessful for individual students; ranging from homesickness and dislike of the boarding environment to a lack of understanding of the boarding context and expectations.

Anecdotal evidence from members indicates that, in some communities, many students drop out of boarding school and return to their home communities after just one or two terms and many within a few weeks. The sense of failure that some students feel upon return can translate into arrogance or aggression toward their local community school and elders and lead to long-term disengagement with education.

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

A second concern raised by members was that boarding schools from urban centres often time recruitment visits to local communities just prior to school census periods. As the students are enrolled at boarding schools during the census period, when students then return from boarding school and resume their studies at local community schools, allocations of staff, funding and resources are often inadequate.

Additionally, we have noted concerns from members that, while a clear majority (up to 100%) of students at some boarding schools are from a First Nations background, very few staff identify as First Nations. This evokes questions about how committed boarding schools are to providing positive and empowering educational experiences for First Nations students and the extent to which inclusive practice is enabled or disabled by funding arrangements.

While a more ethical approach to recruitment of students and induction into the boarding school lifestyle may reduce the numbers of students who return from boarding school before completing their studies, the prevailing view of members with experience in remote communities was that a reliance on boarding schools cannot, and should not, replace investment in local schools and support services.

c) What should we do differently?

Building the relationships that improve outcomes for students takes time and persistence, because empowering community members and education professionals to work together and develop the highly situated, locally responsive solutions required for success requires long-term, stable funding and resources.

Study of the process of reform in Australian schools indicates that the predominant focus on short-term change is incompatible with the reality of practice.

Optimal translation of reform into practice typically requires 5-10 years [20-22], but government plans rarely allow this much time.

The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs previous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan for example, covered the four year period from 2010-2014 [23].

We do note that the Northern Territory has committed to a ten year strategy [24] which has, as key elements: 1) a focus on the early years; 2) an emphasis on literacy and numeracy as foundational, enabling skills; 3) a commitment to the provision of secondary education; 4) a recognition of the importance of student engagement to learning outcomes and; 5) a recognition of the key role played by teachers and educators.

What is missing from this strategy however, is a recognition that traditional, Western approaches to education have consistently and persistently failed to deliver sustained positive outcomes for First Nations students. We would argue that the embedding of local cultures should be recognised as a sixth key element of any broader strategy to improve educational outcomes. We acknowledge that data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics [1] indicates that the proportion of First Nations students who have learnt about culture at school has been steadily rising [1], but much remains to be done to integrate traditional knowledge and ways of learning.

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

2. What more can schools and early years programs do to engage and motivate children and young people to learn?

A child's experience of education has a significant impact on the trajectory of their life. As referred to more broadly in our introductory comments, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students struggle to engage with learning in the first instance because they face ongoing challenges that have their genesis in unfair and inequitable policies and practices of colonisation.

We have known for many years that changing perceptions and experiences of education for these students requires a long-term commitment, commencing with early childhood education programs that are respectful of the language and culture of the child and continuing through to constructive, collaborative relationships with family and community members and other support services.

As indicated in response to previous discussion questions, our union believes that a focus on provision of quality education in a general and wholistic sense would, quite naturally, lead to improved outcomes in further education and employment.

It is important that early learning centres provide culturally sensitive and culturally relevant learning opportunities for children at their first contact and meeting these aims requires qualified and experienced teachers. In that context, we commend the Northern Territory Government for reinstating the Remote Area Teacher Education program, but as noted below, many kindergartens and schools will remain reliant on teachers from outside the local community and more should be done to ensure that these teachers are able to engage with the local community to provide high-quality, culturally sensitive learning programs for students.

3. What more could the education system or our schools do to create culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments?

In terms of providing culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments for students, the largest resource for First Nations languages and culture has always been, and is currently, Elders. It is therefore important to create opportunities for Elders to come into schools and share cultural knowledge and language with staff and students. A small investment in Elders' wisdom and cultural excellence is likely to result in substantial, positive learning outcomes for both First nations students and students from other cultural backgrounds.

Given the fundamental importance of providing culturally appropriate and culturally relevant learning experiences for students, and the power of First Nations role models, our union strongly support the reinstatement of the RATE program to ensure that more students from remote communities are able to engage with schools and schooling.

We would caution however, that many schools will remain reliant on teachers from outside their local community, at least in the short-to-medium term and, under those circumstances, the needs of students cannot be met without also attending to the needs of education workers.

Broader studies of education reform indicate that professional recognition of teachers and other education professionals is essential to generation of the strong, collegial environments that deliver best results for students [25].

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

While it can be difficult to obtain accurate figures because many teachers remain registered after leaving the profession, globally, it is estimated that between 17 and 50 percent of teachers resign within their first five years of teaching [26-31].

Attrition has wide-ranging effects. Not only does it waste time and money for schools and education systems and cause considerable personal distress for the individuals involved, it has a significant negative impact on student learning. A long-term study conducted in the United States has shown that when teachers leave, learning drops [32]. This effect is most pronounced in hard-to-staff schools and schools with high numbers of at-risk students [26, 32] and is, therefore, relevant in the Northern Territory context.

While most states and territories offer incentives for beginning and experienced teachers to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in regional and remote areas, many of those who take up these options would benefit from greater interaction with the community prior to placement. Our union suggests that further work could be done in relation to providing opportunities for pre-service teachers, and more experienced teachers contemplating a move to regional or remote areas, to enhance their cultural awareness prior to relocation.

4. What can the education system, schools and early years programs and services do to better support the wellbeing and engagement of children, young people and families?

As part of our union's campaign to support provision of First Language Instruction for First Nations students [33], we have undertaken compilation of best-practice case studies from schools within our range of operation, in collaboration with the Queensland Department of Education, First Languages Australia and the Queensland Indigenous Languages Advisory Council. What these case studies reveal is that there is no single approach that can be applied across all settings, but that schools that are able to develop their own locally-responsive solutions achieve excellent results.

We clearly recognise that the Discussion paper acknowledges to the diversity of contexts throughout the Northern Territory and is sensitive to the need for strong community engagement.

We would add to this acknowledgement and sensitivity by highlighting the fact that, in several of the case studies we have compiled, supporting the school's efforts to provide general cultural and First Language learning opportunities can in fact form an industry within the community. In the case of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Thamarrurr Catholic College (Wadeye) for example, students work with a variety of Murrinhpatha language resources developed by the Wadeye Literature Production Centre (LPC). The LPC, which produces a wide variety of educational resources, was established during the era of bilingual education (1973-2000) and is one of few LPCs that remain open. It is currently funded by the Catholic Education Office and, in addition to providing resources to the school and local community, also provides employment for local First Nations people.

Such examples provide a powerful opportunity to recognise the value of local languages and cultures by incorporating them into the local economy, with flow on effects for broader communities and society.

We are #IEUUnionStrong

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

5. What more can the education system do with our partners in health, police, housing and child protection and family support services?

As national and international education systems evolve, there is an increasing recognition that engagement with any program of formal learning cannot be achieved unless a student's more fundamental needs are also being met.

Non-government, community-based schools provide compelling evidence of what can be achieved when schools integrate broader support services with education.

Brisbane's Aboriginal and Islander Community School (also known as The Murri School), for example, commenced as a primary-only school in 1986 and now has attendance rates as high as 86% for primary students [34].

Their success can, and should, be celebrated as an illustration of the key principles that allow communities to provide a safe, supportive and stable educational environment for students. The dedicated staff and community members perform their work for the benefit of future generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rather than recognition from the wider community, but there is much in their approach that can be adapted for implementation in non-specialist schools.

An emphasis on comprehensive support services means Murri School students have access to on-site auditory testing, paediatric assessments, regular health and dental checks and psychological support.

The school, and its staff, also invest in relationships with parents and other community members. Initiatives such as family camps in the school holidays, offering a Certificate III in Education Support for parents and community members, encouragement of parent volunteers and inviting community members into the school for weekly morning teas are important to establish trust with previous generations, whose own experience of the education system has, all too often, been less than positive.

Our union strongly supports this model of embedding quality schools and support services within communities, but we also recognise that not all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reside in communities where establishing and maintaining a community school is a viable option.

In this context, we would like to make the broader point that providing teachers and educators with the time they need to develop and implement high-quality education programs, within their normal hours of duty, should be a priority of any initiative designed to improve student outcomes, as should the engagement and retention of support staff. This is true for both government and non-government schools.

Concluding Comments

IEUA-QNT thanks the Northern Territory Department of Education for the opportunity to provide feedback in relation to its Education Engagement Strategy Discussion Paper.

We are #IEUnionStrong

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

We commend the Department for recognising the fundamental importance of community engagement to the provision of quality educational opportunities for Northern Territory students from the early years through to the secondary schooling context.

As stated at the outset of our submission, reversing the psychological, social and economic impact of the unfair and inequitable policies and practices which have led to disengagement of an unacceptably high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students requires a long-term commitment to respectful and constructive relationships between individuals within local communities.

We would, therefore, encourage the Department to follow through on its commitment to student engagement by providing frequent opportunities for local First Nations community members to engage with their local school community in the context of both providing more inclusive and culturally appropriate learning experiences for students and broadening non-First Nations students' understanding of First Nations cultures, perspectives and histories.



Terry Burke
Branch Secretary

Independent Education Union of Australia -Queensland and Northern Territory Branch
1 July 2021

References

1. Australian_Bureau_of_Statistics. *Education Statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. 2020 [cited 2021 3 June]; Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/education-statistics-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/2018-19>.
2. Hanushek, E.A. and L. Woessmann, *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*. 2015, OECD: Paris.
3. Brennan, D. and E. Adamson, *Baby Steps or Giant Strides?* 2015, The McKell Institute: Sydney.
4. OECD, *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*. 2014, OECD: Paris. p. 570.
5. OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013: Highlights*. 2013, OECD: Paris.
6. Heckman, J.J., *Schools, Skills and Synapses*. *Economic Inquiry*, 2008. 46(3): p. 289.
7. The_Front_Project, *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia*. 2019, PricewaterhouseCoopers: Sydney.
8. First_Languages_Australia, *Global Lessons: Indigenous languages and multilingualism in school programs*. 2018, First Languages Australia: Sydney.
9. Australian_Human_Rights_Commission. *Right to Education*. 2019 [cited 2019 9th July]; Available from: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rights-and-freedoms/right-education>.

We are #IEUnionStrong

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

10. Australian_Council_of_Deans_of_Education. *ACDE ANALYSIS OF 2016 CENSUS STATISTICS OF ABORIGINAL TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER TEACHERS AND STUDENTS*. 2018 [cited 2019 9th July 2019]; Available from: <https://www.acde.edu.au/acde-analysis-of-2016-census-statistics-of-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-teachers-and-students/>.
11. House_of_Representatives_Standing_Committee_on_Employment, E.a.T., *Education in remote and complex environments*, H.o.R. The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Editor. 2020, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives: Canberra.
12. Australian_Bureau_of_Statistics. *4713.7.55.001 - Population Characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Northern Territory, 2006* 2015 [12th October 2015].
13. Ministry_of_Education_Te_Tahuhu_O_TE_Matauranga, N.T.R.a., *Joint Initiative Governance Group Report*. 2015, New Zealand Educational Institute Te Riu Roa and Ministry of Education Te Tahuhu O Te Matauranga: Wellington.
14. Sims, M., *Resource Sheet no. 7: Early childhood and education services for Indigenous children prior to starting school*. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, 2011.
15. Sims, M., et al., *Australian National ECEC Reforms with a Focus on the National Quality Framework and the National Quality Standard: Expert Report for the German Youth Institute*. 2015, German Youth Institute: Munich.
16. Australian_Government_Productivity_Commission, *Schools Workforce Productivity Commission Research Report*. 2012, Productivity Commission: Canberra.
17. Australian_Children's_Education_&_Care_Quality_Authority, *NQF Snapshot, Q1 2021*. 2021.
18. Australian_Children's_Education_&_Care_Quality_Authority, *NQF Snapshot Q2 2015*. 2015, Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority: Canberra.
19. Penfold, A., *Schools scheme a major success*, in *The Australian*. 2014, Fairfax: Sydney.
20. Pendergast, D., *Fast-tracking middle schooling reform: A model for sustainability*. *Australian Journal of Middle Schooling*, 2006. 6(2): p. 13-18.
21. Pendergast, D., et al., *Developing Lifelong Learners in the Middle Years of Schooling: A report about the practices, processes, strategies and structures that best promote 'lifelong learning' and the development of 'lifelong learners' in the middle years of schooling*. 2005, Department of Education and the Arts: Brisbane.
22. Pendergast, D., et al., *The Education Change Model as a vehicle for reform: Shifting Year 7 and implementing Junior Secondary in Queensland*. 2005, The University of Queensland: Brisbane.
23. Ministerial_Council_for_Education_Early_Childhood_Development_And_Youth_Affairs, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014*. 2010, Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs: Canberra.
24. Northern_Territory_Government, *A share in the future: Indigenous Education Strategy 2015-2024* 2015, Northern Territory Government: Darwin.
25. Rawlins, P., et al., *Investing in Educational Success: An investigation of the evidence base*. 2014, Institute of Education Te Kura O Te Matauranga: Manawatu.
26. Cooper, J.M. and A. Alvarado, *Preparation, Recruitment and Retention of Teachers: Education Policy Series 5*. 2006, International Institute for Educational Planning/International Academy of Education: Paris and Brussels.

Submission: Education Engagement Strategy

27. McKenzie, P., et al., *Staff in Australia's Schools 2010: Main Report of the Survey*. 2011, Australian Council for Educational Research: Melbourne.
28. OECD, *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers*. 2005, OECD Publishing: Paris.
29. O'Brien, P., R. Goddard, and M. Keefe. *Burnout Confirmed as a Viable Explanation for Beginning Teacher Attrition*. in *AARE International Education Research Conference*. 2008. Fremantle.
30. Queensland_College_of_Teachers, *Attrition of Recent Queensland Graduate Teachers*. 2013, Queensland College of Teachers: Brisbane.
31. Schuck, S., et al., *Retaining Effective Early Career Teachers in NSW Schools*. 2011, University of Technology Sydney: Sydney.
32. Ronfeldt, M., S. Loeb, and J. Wyckoff, *How Teacher Turnover Harms Student Achievement* 2012, National Centre for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research: Washington.
33. Independent_Education_Union_of_Australia-Queensland_and_Northern_Territory_Branch, *First Languages Workplan 2021-2023* 2020, Independent Education Union of Australia - Queensland and Northern Territory Branch: Brisbane.
34. The_Aboriginal_and_Islander_Independent_Community_School_Incorporated, *2019 Annual Report to the Community*. 2020, The Aboriginal and Islander Independent Community School Incorporated: Brisbane.