



SENATOR THE HON
SARAH HENDERSON
SHADOW MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
SENATOR FOR VICTORIA

The Hon Jason Clare MP
Minister for Education
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
via email: minister.clare@education.gov.au

Dear Minister

Urgent review of Studio Schools' Indigenous boarding schools

I refer to your decision to axe the construction of two Indigenous boarding schools in the Pilbara and East Arnhem Land which were fully funded by the former Coalition government.

As a result, around 160 Indigenous children in these remote communities are missing out on an education they deserve. That is deeply regrettable and must be urgently remedied.

I seek your urgent review of this decision along with Studio Schools' costings which we have obtained through Senate Estimates.

The construction of remote boarding schools was a hallmark Coalition policy designed to lift attendance rates and provide indigenous students with a safe and secure learning environment.

The dramatic escalation in costs for the Pilbara school, from \$22 million to \$64 million, and the East Arnhem Land school, from \$22 million to \$56 million, is deeply concerning. I am also concerned about your department's assessment of the cost increases of the capital works being that "... *it has been prepared by industry experts and reflects construction cost increases for remote infrastructure projects ...*"

Minister, I seek information as to why you did not question these exorbitant costs or investigate how these schools could have been delivered on time and within a reasonable budget such as considering alternate methods of construction, notwithstanding that additional funds may have been required. Instead, your government determined to cut \$4.1 million from the *Building Boarding Schools On Country Program* as well as cut the number of new schools to be built or upgraded under this program from four to two.

Dhupuma Barker school in East Arnhem Land is building a K-9 school budgeted at \$11 million, noting that this is a day school and does not include boarding facilities.

Can you please also provide a breakdown of Studio Schools' salary and operational costs? Some \$16.2 million has been allocated for operational costs to deliver a new school at Windjana, upgrade the Yirramalay school and construct the Indigenous Education Research Centre which appears very high.

I also request information about the salaries of the top two executives of Studio Schools who received \$815,000 over an 18-month period while other staff received much lower wages.

I believe the issues I have raised further build the case for a complete audit of all Indigenous programs and expenditure consistent with the Coalition's policy.

Finally, I am disappointed that you have continued to assert that the Pilbara and East Arnhem schools were not fully funded by the Coalition government which, as can be demonstrated by documents released by your own department, is patently false.

With respect to the information I have requested, could you please advise your departmental officials that I am seeking this information prior to their appearance before the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee for Supplementary Budget Estimates on 26 October 2023.

Yours sincerely



Sarah Henderson

22 October 2023