



THE HON JULIA GILLARD MP
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

11 AUG 2009

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair, Standing Committee on Petitions
Member for Fowler
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 9 June 2009, forwarding a petition recently considered by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions regarding changes to Indigenous bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory. I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Australian Government is committed to maximising the learning opportunities and life chances of Indigenous Australians. The Government is also committed to languages education in Australian schools, and recognises the important role Indigenous language learning plays in some schools. In recognition of this commitment, Australia formally endorsed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* on 3 April 2009.

The Northern Territory Government's policy that programs in its schools are to be conducted in English for the first four hours of each school day is about ensuring that Indigenous children have the opportunity to be taught and learn English. The learning of English is a fundamental skill that all Australians, including Indigenous Australians, must have to successfully progress through school and participate in life beyond their schooling years.

As indicated in other related correspondence, I recognise the importance of Indigenous languages and I am pleased to advise that my Department will be working with the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts to develop an Indigenous Languages Action Strategy.

It is important to note that the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and culture may be scheduled in Northern Territory schools during afternoon sessions.

Significant funding for languages education in government schools is being provided to the states and territories through the National Education Agreement, allowing jurisdictions flexibility to determine how funding is allocated. Funding can be used to support Indigenous language programs.

\$56.4 million is also being provided over 2009 to 2012 through the *Schools Assistance Act 2008* to support the teaching of languages, including Australian Indigenous languages, in non-government schools.

The Government is providing an additional \$56.4 million over four years through the *Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000* to expand intensive literacy and numeracy programs to assist Indigenous students who are not achieving at the level of the rest of their class, and to provide professional development materials and support to teachers to enable them to prepare and maintain Personalised Learning Plans for Indigenous students.

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, agreed to by all Australian Education Ministers in December 2008, commits Australian schools to work in partnership with local communities to promote learning outcomes for Indigenous students.

Finally, through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) processes, all Australian Governments have committed to halving the gap in the reading, writing and numeracy achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students within a decade.

I thank you for bringing this important matter to my attention and trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely

Julia Gillard
Minister for Education