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Mr Shayne Neumann
Chair
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
PO Box 6021
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Dear Mr Neumann

Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities

The Northern Territory is a diverse society with a rich Indigenous heritage and culture and welcomes the opportunity to submit to this inquiry. The NT population comprises 32 per cent Indigenous people, more than 100 Aboriginal languages and dialects are spoken in the Territory, and many Indigenous Territorians speak English as their third or fourth language.¹ The Territory is both committed to preserving, maintaining and enhancing our culture and developing an approach to social inclusion that recognises and responds to this diversity.

A number of Territory Government Departments and divisions contribute to our policies and practices in relation to language learning in Indigenous communities, including the Department of Education and Training (DET), the Aboriginal Interpreter Service (AIS)², and the Northern Territory Library (NTL)³. All have particular and relevant perspectives on language learning according to their functions and I have therefore included these separately in relation to the relevant terms of reference.

1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

Attention and recognition allows Indigenous people pride in their language, heritage and knowledge. It enables full engagement as citizens, facilitates access to rights and services and contributes to the richness of our culture and society.

Where Indigenous languages are recognised and respected, Indigenous first language speakers are more likely to speak up, contribute, engage in and understand their own affairs. Through interpreting services in a range of Northern Territory Aboriginal Languages provided by AIS, this is now happening in areas as diverse as Centrelink, private business, housing services, court proceedings and medical treatment.

The greater the attention to and recognition of Indigenous languages, the more likely communication between Indigenous language speaking communities and English speaking service providers will be effective. A lack of recognition of language diversity and over-estimating English competence may lead to meaningless communication. In cross-language communication situations parties need to recognise language deficiency (Language speakers not strong in English, English speakers not strong in Language), and work from both sides to overcome it.

The Territory's population is particularly unique in the extent and proportions of speakers of Indigenous languages. About 30% of NT school students are English as an Additional Language learners (EAL) with one or more Indigenous home languages. With this diversity in language and cultural backgrounds in NT schools, it is critical that all school staff work together to develop teaching programs for EAL learners that recognise and value home language, knowledge, experience and culture with a view to maximising English language learning outcomes.

2. The contribution of indigenous language to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture

Language can be both a source of pride and a source of difference. In promoting Indigenous culture and identity through language; understanding and self-esteem are strengthened with resulting improvements in well being. Language awareness is an important contributor both directly and indirectly to health and well-being outcomes through improved service delivery, access and participation, greater understanding of health impacts and remedies, and positive self image and sense of belonging and related improvements in mental health.

Improving Indigenous education outcomes is one of the Closing the Gap priorities. The importance of factors such as culturally responsive schools, positive racial and cultural education and strong, school community partnerships to successful early learning outcomes is highlighted by recent research by the Menzies School of Health research⁴. The benefits are outlined under the following term of reference. Early childhood targets are also supported by NTL projects which involve community language speakers to promote, record and make accessible materials and programs in both local language and English for young children.

Where service delivery can be improved areas of disadvantage can be better addressed. Interpreter programs make services accessible and available to Indigenous people and are crucial to closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. The impact of programs has been particularly highlighted in the areas of justice and health. The Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement specifically commits to build the capacity of interpreter services to support engagement between indigenous communities and government and non-government agencies and provides for funding to the Northern Territory Government for further development and strengthening of interpreter services.

The NTL facilitates strengthening Indigenous identity and culture through local community contributions to collections and online databases, and active involvement in programs and events. NTL also contributes to the National Policy Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library Services and Collections, which was developed in 2007 by National and State Libraries Australasia.

In 2004, NTL launched the Public Libraries and Knowledge Centres program, to actively collect, record and preserve the history, language, songs, images and stories of Indigenous people in 22 remote Northern Territory communities. NTL supports these public libraries and knowledge centres, through the provision of ongoing peer support and training opportunities with locally employed Community Library Officers. This equips local library staff to assist family and community members to build comprehensive and inclusive digital archives of their cultural material, using the Ara Irititja Our Story database. The databases include significant audio and text records in Indigenous languages. Given the interest and popularity of the database, an updated version of Our Story, called Community Stories, is now being implemented across 40 sites in the Northern Territory.

3. The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

In the Territory, for a significant proportion of the population, Indigenous language is the home language and so will automatically be part of a child's early education and necessary for communication with family and older members of the community. For others, formalising Indigenous language learning from an early stage will assist in developing a positive identity and also establish skills that will assist them in later life.

In July 2009, the DET commissioned the Menzies School of Health Research to conduct a literature review on the evidence for different instructional approaches in supporting early English acquisition and the school learning outcomes of Indigenous children (the Menzies Report, Attachment A).⁵ The report indicates that children who commence school with a wider vocabulary and proficiency in their first language have generally better literacy development than other students with less well developed early language skills. The most successful outcomes were reported where literacy and indigenous support programs are delivered in a culturally supportive manner and designed to integrate with the child's entire environment of up-bringing. It found that the optimum time for children to commence second language learning is at the same time they begin learning their first language.

The report has informed new draft policy on the Literacy Framework For Students with English as an Additional Language, released for consultation on 31 August 2011 (Attachment B).

NTL's *Walk to School* strategy 2008-2010, aims to foster and improve Indigenous early years literacy and school-readiness in the NT through community library programs and by increasing library participation in communities. Its broad aim is to build the social habit of library use with young families across the Northern Territory through utilising both English and Indigenous language. All library programs managed by NTL promote the notion of "literacy as a social practice"⁶ and through involvement of the community and community language seek to promote the importance of literacy formally and informally.

Over the next five years, all families with newborn babies in four initial target communities will receive a bilingual baby board book with a local story, local illustrations, and text in both their language and English. Many of the books also include a CD of the story. The books speak across the generations as a genuine

reflection of the community's cultural and contemporary history, brought to life through art and language.

In collaborative workshops to put the books together people discuss mutual obligations amongst individuals, family and community, to develop meaningful stories. These positive messages of pride, purpose, self-respect and empowerment are worked into an original contemporary song, chant story and artwork that becomes the content of the book. The benefits of the participatory approach used to create the resources connect families and kin-groups, and preserves traditional and contemporary culture, language and song.

Bonding, Bopping and Books is a new NTL library program in which shared creative play sessions involve family members and their young children in listening and responding to music, visual art, dance, literature and multimedia, to enhance oral language and emergent literacy understandings such as book familiarity. Bonding, Bopping and Books is also involving families and other community members in creating, producing and using bilingual literacy materials. For example: bilingual singing stories, picture stories, talking stories and e-stories, with accompanying artwork, music and audiovisuals. These print and electronic materials are being created using iPad creative applications, and XO laptop⁷ multimedia programs. These same technologies are being used as tools for teaching and learning in many schools throughout Australia and are a step towards preparing young children for formal education opportunities once they reach school-age.

Reading and Communicating with Kids (RACK) is a literacy program managed by NTL which supports the acquisition of school readiness and literacy skills in young children from birth to five years, in selected remote and semi-remote communities in the Katherine region. The RACK program promotes intergenerational teaching and learning with a literacy focus on book familiarity. RACK aims to model and observe reading behaviours in the first, second and third years of exposure to a range of reading materials. The outcomes that RACK is working towards include:

- Fostering a community culture recognising the importance of language and literacy development skills in children from birth to 5 years.
- Increasing levels of bilingual literacy resources available in the community.
- Employing Indigenous Reading Mentors who speak local language/s to providing the opportunities for the development of a love of reading that can grow to become part of a child's daily life as they grow and become adults with their own children.

4. Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second Language

DET

One of the key Government and Departmental priorities is getting in early with young parents and their infants.

The Families as First Teachers programs provide high quality early learning opportunities and parenting support to more than 1500 young Indigenous children (birth to 3 years) and their families in 30 remote sites across the NT. Programs

include dual generational playgroups, parent workshops, transition to preschool programs and early literacy parent coaching in the home. Programs focus on building capacity of families to give their children the best start in life and supporting their successful entry to preschool. These programs are funded through partnership agreements between the Northern Territory and Australian Government and represent an investment of \$20m over the next three years.

The Universal Access project is working with schools and across sectors to increase access, enrolments and attendance for Indigenous and disadvantaged children, including those in remote communities.

During 2010 and 2011 a variety of preschool delivery models have been piloted in a number of remote, homelands and town camp communities where children had not previously had access to preschool. These included on-site preschool, outreach program and mobile preschool models. Preschool is delivered in a range of settings and flexible arrangements are implemented where necessary to satisfy unmet need.

Quality Teaching is another key Government and Departmental priority that contributes strongly to improved educational outcomes in communities where English is a second language.

Indigenous workforce development has been a key priority for the Department for a number of years with key initiatives such as the Remote Indigenous Teacher Education program, the More Indigenous Teachers program, Indigenous Teacher Upgrade Program and a range of scholarship options resulting in gradually increasing numbers of quality Indigenous teachers across NT schools. The Department has just committed to a '200 More Indigenous Teachers by 2018' priority which will include targeting senior years students among a suite of initiatives in order to meet this ambitious but important target.

Quality professional learning is also a critical component. To this end, a range of English as an Additional Language (EAL) professional learning is provided to NT educators. This includes the formal Graduate Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, offered through Charles Darwin University. Since commencing implementation in 2010, over 130 teachers have completed at least one unit of this formal qualification. In addition, extensive support is provided through a network of regionally based EAL advisors.

In addition, the Additional 200 Teachers for the Northern Territory commitment has developed through the Quality Remote Teaching Service and over the last year retention rates have increased by over 20%.

It is well recognised that students who attend school regularly to participate in quality learning programs will have improved learning outcomes. To this end, the DET is implementing the Government's Every Child Every Day strategy. The strategy improves enrolment, attendance and participation of young Territorians through strong leadership, clever and strong strategies and real partnerships. Attendance rates have shown an improvement across all areas in the last year with the most significant improvements in very remote areas.

AIS

Good language awareness (analysis of own speech: language, dialect, register, structures) promotes competency in the second language by utilising scaffold learning on structures of first language.

Strong language and cultural awareness is most noticeable in interpreters with bilingual education backgrounds. Having the ability to analyse one's own language means you are a lot more likely to identify what has gone wrong in a communication breakdown.

5. The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities

English language competency is an essential pre-condition to participating fully in Australian society. Without English language competency there are limited educational and vocational options available for community people and the lack of English in older Indigenous people is likely to lead to generational divide.

The ability to read and write in English and to be numerate are critical if young people are to successfully complete their schooling, exercise choice about what they do in life beyond school, participate fully in the economic and social development of their communities, and become global citizens. Young people can be taught and learn through English, while at the same time being supported to develop their culture and language.

Community support for and participation in English language competency is a key feature of the Strong Start Bright Future programs. These programs are bringing community into the school for a range of formal and informal learning after school hours. The focus of these programs is determined by community interest and hence varies from site to site however a number of the programs provide for enhancing English language competency and also to develop Indigenous language competency of non-Indigenous staff, particularly teachers. The latter are conducted by community members.

Most programs aimed at addressing disadvantage are in English. For example, the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Public Internet Access (RIPIA) in the Northern Territory contains strategies to deliver information technology hardware, software and training to people in forty remote Indigenous communities around the NT. Digital and workplace literacy improvements are supported by training programs which are delivered in English.

NTL's Public Libraries and Knowledge Centres offer Indigenous people employment opportunities in their home communities. The ongoing and multiple benefits of meaningful employment include English and digital literacy support to enable career progression and information access.

6. Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

Funding from FaHCSIA through the National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap has contributed to recruiting, training, accrediting and employing more Indigenous language interpreters through the AIS. In addition to their role in facilitating service delivery and communication, part time and full time interpreter positions are offering a career path to otherwise casual interpreters. A further benefit is the reinforcement and legitimisation of community language through interpreters speaking publicly in language in their professional role.

Interpreters also contribute to the maintenance of Indigenous languages, drawing on resources, discussing accurate and meaningful interpretations and using Indigenous languages to grapple with new topics and vocabulary. Workshops and briefings allow interpreters to gain further insight into the subtleties of their own language and the problematic leap between language and English. The AIS as a NT organisation, is in a strong position to capitalise on the preservation and maintenance work that is going on at community level and to be responsive to the development of home languages in the NT.

Mentoring of younger interpreters by older generations also facilitates inter-generational knowledge transfer and the maintenance of more traditional forms of language.

Audio recording jobs that are now regular bookings at AIS contribute to the wealth of language recordings being made in languages across the Territory. As well as informing the Language-speaking audience, these recordings also contribute to language awareness when they are played over radio and television. Hearing languages in such public forums is also a source of pride to the language speaking community.

Education of users helps interpreters perform their intended function (to interpret between English and Language), rather than being used as liaisons and tour guides.

The NT's Language Services Policy has been developed to promote and support access to services by speakers of languages other than English (Attachment C). It aims to:

- support NTG agencies to develop procedures and practices to ensure that speakers of languages other than English are not disadvantaged when accessing Government services;
- develop and promote a unified approach to language services ensuring all clients have access to fair and equitable services.
- enhance Northern Territory Government use of interpreter and translation services to maximise service provision.

Under the Policy all departments/agencies will:

- ensure that all staff are aware of the Language Services Policy and recognise that effective communication is integral to the delivery of all agency services
- acknowledge clients' entitlements/rights to the services of an appropriately qualified interpreter or translator and be aware of the situations in which an interpreter should be used

- commit to the appropriate use of qualified interpreters and translators in the delivery of all services for people who speak a language other than English
- be aware as to when interpreters must be used, taking into account the agency's obligations to their clients, the legislative requirements and risks that could impact clients' health, safety and/or human rights if an interpreter is not utilised
- ensure where necessary that agency documents are translated into languages appropriate to client groups' needs and promote the presence of the national interpreter symbol as well as the AIS or ITSNT poster in all areas accessed by the general public
- attempt to recruit more staff with cultural and linguistic skills matching those of their clients and promote the use of the community language allowance to bilingual or multilingual staff
- provide staff with guidelines to assist them in determining the appropriate language service for clients, ensuring that all staff are aware of how to access and use interpreters and translators
- provide all staff with appropriate training in cross cultural communication, deafness awareness and how to work with interpreters
- collect necessary data to guide the us in developing the our language services. Data collection will include languages spoken, ethnicity, country of birth, English proficiency, and need for interpreter. The agency will ensure that the data collected is readily available to all staff
- acknowledge that the use of language services by staff is a justifiable and necessary expense - each agency has an obligation to plan and budget for interpreting services to ensure that these services will be available when the need arises. Staff and divisions will incorporate language services strategies into their budget, their human resource programs, and organisational planning.

7. The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages

The work of Territory Government agencies has contributed to maintenance and revitalisation of language through generating interest in language, promoting language learning, developing a greater awareness of language barriers, particularly in relation to service delivery, and making it more visible and accessible.

The DET emphatic policy position that home languages are to be used in all EAL programs provides additional impetus for language maintenance and revitalisation.⁸

The NTL, as the major reference library for the Northern Territory, has a unique and important role to play in preserving and providing access to the Northern Territory's documentary and cultural heritage, including Indigenous culture,

heritage and languages. NTL's collecting role is also deeply linked with its role to encourage and support the use of its collections. By encouraging literacy and learning for life, the "story of the Territory" can be told, collected, shared, preserved and distributed, in new and different ways.

NTL supports Indigenous language preservation in remote libraries, where family and community members are involved in creating, producing, and using bilingual literacy materials, as a way of recording and sharing cultural memory. These materials are a contemporary record of Indigenous cultural knowledge, and are preserved as part of NTL's collection.

A specific NTL project which supports the endeavour to collect and preserve Indigenous languages is the Bilingual Baby Board Books project mentioned above. The project will be replicated in 11 additional communities with additional funds from the Australian Government's Office for the Arts, Indigenous Arts, Culture and Language Programs and through other external sources, including funds from the NT Department of Education and Training.

8. The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments.

We have not been monitoring the impact of the Commonwealth Government policy and it does not have high visibility or recognition in the Northern Territory.

The Northern Territory currently has a Language Services Policy, referred to above, which focuses on language issues in service delivery. In other areas the Territory is reviewing its language policies and, in particular, the DET has recently revised policy on the literacy framework for students with English as an additional language based on the Menzies Report (Attachment C):

As part of the NT Working Future program, Local Implementation Plans (LIPs) have been developed in consultation with NT remote communities which set out the priorities for each community and include targets, actions, success measures and timelines for achieving these priorities. These all make specific reference to the local languages of each community and to the importance of learning Indigenous languages.

The Indigenous Affairs Advisory Council (IAAC) are assisting the Territory to understand and foster the cultural strengths that exist within Indigenous societies by working with my Department to develop an overarching Aboriginal Language Policy. The framework IAAC have set out is as follows:

Vision

By 2030, all Territorians will celebrate the diversity of our languages and cultures. We will walk and talk together in two worlds to achieve a healthy society which values respect, harmony and wellbeing.

Purpose

To ensure the diversity of Aboriginal languages and cultures is acknowledged, respected and embraced.

Principles

1. Aboriginal people can communicate and speak in their own language when talking to government people.

Use of Aboriginal languages when dealing with government will be prioritised and embedded into policy. Indigenous Territorians have a right to speak in their own language and access government services through an interpreter.

2. Communities and families have a right and are encouraged to celebrate their languages, speak in language and teach children language.

Community ownership and maintenance of Aboriginal languages will be encouraged and facilitated. Aboriginal languages belong to their speakers and it is the responsibility of communities and families, with the support of the wider community, to maintain their languages.

3. All Territorians will understand that Aboriginal languages are endangered and recognise the cultural value of preserving them.

The IAAC and myself are keen to support the inquiry, and to share learnings, and look forward to a co-operative relationship.

Yours sincerely

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MALARNDIRRI McCARTHY