



## SENATOR THE HON MARK ARBIB

Minister for Employment Participation

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Government Service Delivery

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

29 JUL 2009

Dear Mrs Irwin

Thank you for your letter of 9 June 2009 to the Hon Julia Gillard MP, Minister for Education, forwarding a petition recently submitted for consideration by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Petitions. The petition requested that the Australian Government develop a National Indigenous Languages Policy and establish a National Indigenous Languages Institute. I am responding as the Acting Minister for Education and I apologise for the delay.

The Minister responsible for Indigenous languages, culture and heritage is the Hon Peter Garrett AM MP, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts.

I have been advised that Minister Garrett has instructed his department to commence drafting an Indigenous Languages Action Strategy, and I understand the Strategy will be coordinated through relevant areas of Government. I look forward to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations collaborating with the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts and playing a key role in shaping the Strategy.

In developing the Strategy, there will be an opportunity to consider the Northern Territory Government's policy to ensure Indigenous children are taught and learn in English for the first four hours of the school day. 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 school.

The Government recognises the important role Indigenous language learning plays in some schools. In Northern Territory schools, the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages and cultures may be scheduled during afternoon sessions.

The Government recently commissioned the *Indigenous Language Programs in Australian Schools – A Way Forward* report, which revealed that between 2006 and 2007 over 16 000 Indigenous students and 13 000 non-Indigenous students located in 260 Australian schools were involved in Indigenous language programs, covering over 80 different Indigenous languages.

Significant funding for languages education 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 and maintain the many Indigenous language programs operating in government schools.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Arbib  
Acting Minister for Education