

# **Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities**

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This submission has been prepared by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) for the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities. It is a summary of *Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory* a policy monograph published by the CIS in 2008.

## **Indigenous education in the Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory has known for more than a decade that Indigenous students are completing its Aboriginal schools (Learning Centres and Community Education Centres) with the numeracy and literacy skills of five-year-olds. Ten thousand illiterate, nonnumerate teenagers and young men and women in their twenties are unemployable because of the educational failures of the last decade.

The causes of failing education—inequitable school facilities, inappropriate curriculums, and inadequate teaching—in Aboriginal schools are also known. Unfortunately, these causes have not been addressed in the Rudd government's recent appropriation of \$98 million to add 200 teachers to the Northern Territory by 2011. This initiative falls far short of the measures necessary to bring Northern Territory Indigenous education to mainstream standards.

Many Aboriginal schools do not have standard facilities such as electricity, ablution blocks, and teaching equipment. But the principal causes of the absence of literacy and numeracy are not physical shortcomings but separate Aboriginal curriculums and substandard teaching. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children that live in the

open Australian society and attend mainstream schools perform as well as their peers. Many of the men and women who actually stand in front of the class in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory have so little training that they are not numerate, literate, or even articulate in English. Poor teaching is also the result of teachers driving or flying in for one, two, or three days a week to Homeland Learning Centres. This leads to short teaching hours, discontinuity, and lack of class control. Many Aboriginal schools are not open five days a week. Yet a few effective teachers, who often have to break Northern Territory Department of Education rules, achieve high attendance, literacy, and numeracy for their students.

Because most children graduating from Aboriginal primary schools were unable to manage the work in mainstream high schools, the Northern Territory Department of Education extended Community Education Centres and even Homeland Learning Centres to year 10 and even year 12. Most of these extension classes do not cover mainstream secondary syllabuses. At best, they provide remedial primary-school-level literacy and numeracy. The almost total absence of Indigenous tradesmen such as electricians and plumbers in the Homelands and remote communities is an indictment of the Northern Territory's Aboriginal vocational training. Vocational courses that do not require English, literacy, and numeracy are merely pretend courses. The Northern Territory has not seen the rising participation of Indigenous students in mainstream professional courses that is marked in the rest of Australia.

Parents are constantly blamed for poor educational outcomes. Three generations of welfare dependence, poor education, and public housing have led to family and community dysfunction, so that teenage pregnancies, alcoholism, drug addiction, and crowded housing often undermine school attendance. But the principal causes of nonattendance are the ineffective curriculums and poor teaching that have children sitting in class year after year without learning. Indigenous parents know that Aboriginal schools do not provide the minimal learning needed to work in shops and on construction sites, let alone in the more skilled positions that continue to be dominated by non-Indigenous staff in their remote settlements.

Indigenous parents are no longer prepared to be cajoled, pressured, and bullied into second-rate, separate Aboriginal education for their children. They argue that they speak vernacular languages at home and that their communities teach children traditions and culture. Parents want their children taught mainstream curriculums in English from kindergarten so that they are truly fluent in English, fully literate and

numerate, and have computing skills, and so are prepared for jobs and life.

## **An agenda for action**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children deserve and must have the same school facilities, curriculums, and teaching as other Australian children so that they may choose how and where to live.

More than 4,000 preschool places are needed immediately for Indigenous children in the Northern Territory.

All primary schooling must to be brought up to mainstream standards with fully equipped schools, mainstream curriculums, and full-time qualified resident teachers, to put an end to the years of failure by non-performing Aboriginal schools. This will require more than 200 houses to be built for teachers. Training to ensure that teachers and Assistant Teachers who lack mainstream qualifications become qualified is long overdue.

If mainstream schooling is not deemed to be viable in very small communities, arrangements will have to be made to board children or assist their parents to move so that they can attend school.

Remedial teaching for the Indigenous early teenagers who have missed out on primary education is a major challenge for the Northern Territory. The needs of these youngsters must be recognised and addressed. They cannot remain hidden in pretend secondary classes in remote locations. As Indigenous children learn the full primary syllabus, they must have access to the same range of academic and vocational secondary courses, equipped and taught to mainstream standards, as non-Indigenous students.

The benchmark literacy and numeracy tests that are to be administered in May 2008 nationwide for the first time for years 3, 5, 7, and 9 must be used to monitor the transformation of Northern Territory Indigenous education. All children must be tested. All parents must be informed of the results. The number of children tested, and the pass rates, must be published by the years tested and by school to inform parents and taxpayers of progress.

All remote schools should be twinned with mainstream schools so that exchanges of students, teachers, and parents can expose substandard conditions and enable Australians to learn at first hand how their taxes are being spent.

Vocational training can only begin when trainees have a command of English and are literate and numerate. Resources now devoted to pretend vocational courses should be used for a major remedial education, literacy, and numeracy campaign for older teens and young men and women in their twenties who have missed out on schooling during the past 10 years.

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