

This article is from the April 13 issue of The Age Digital Edition.
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A \$30 million federal government literacy program twice extended across some of the country's most remote schools has failed to boost the literacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, with schools instead reporting a significant decline in attendance.

The Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Program was first funded in 2014 as a three-year trial to improve teacher skills and student literacy across 34 remote schools in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia, and was extended twice until 2019.

It used Direct Instruction, a controversial teaching method from the US where teachers read from a scripted lesson plan while students respond orally and as a group. The program was based on a system used in Cape York schools, promoted by Aboriginal community leader Noel Pearson.

But research published in The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education, which analysed MySchool data for 25 participating remote schools where more than 80 per cent of students were Indigenous, found the program did not improve reading results despite interim evaluations describing its positive impact.

The study by University of South Australia researchers used grade 3 and 5 NAPLAN reading results as a proxy for literacy as well as school attendance rates, to compare outcomes in remote primary schools with and without the program in the three years before and after it began. It found grade 3 reading NAPLAN scores in schools with the program declined by 23.43 points, compared with schools without the program where results increased by 4.47 points. Grade 5 reading scores also fell 19.48 points, while at other schools they declined by 15.12 points.

Researchers John Guenther and Sam Osborne said declining results "suggest the intervention has a potential to be associated with educational harm to at least some students". Average attendance at participating schools also dropped 7.52 per cent, compared with 2.09 per cent at other schools.

A House of Representatives standing committee on Indigenous Affairs recommended no further funding be allocated to the program beyond June 2018, but Education Minister Dan Tehan extended it to 2019 on the basis "the program uses innovative teaching methods to improve literacy results".

Dr Osborne said "decisions to extend the program were not necessarily based on the available evidence", with the report noting that one-size-fits-all approaches to education rarely work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

"Most of these very remote communities are where English is a second language and they are largely living on traditional lands. They have a rich diversity and a wealth of assets that can be drawn on in terms of family, local languages, community, community histories and the land itself. But when you take an off-the-shelf instruction program, you render all of those potential resources as unnecessary and I think that in part contributes to the students feeling like school doesn't necessarily mirror who they are and where they belong."

An Education Department spokesperson said a final evaluation report "is expected to be released in due course".

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