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The Association of Teachers of
English to Speakers of Other
Languages [ATESOL NT](http://ATESOLNT.org.au)

22 September 2021

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM, MP
Minister for Indigenous Australians
House of Representatives
Parliament House)
Canberra. ACT 2600.

Dear Minister,

RE: The crisis in remote schools in the Northern Territory

We write to bring to your attention a submission to the current Parliamentary Inquiry into the Importance of Adult Literacy made by our ACTA member association in the Northern Territory. Please find the submission attached.

Although ACTA and our colleagues are hopeful that the Inquiry will consider the contents and recommendations in this submission, we believe they merit the immediate attention of yourself and Education Minister Tudge.

The submission provides evidence of a serious gap between stated Commonwealth and Northern Territory Government policies and what is actually happening on the ground. Over 7000 students in remote NT communities are currently attending schools which are understaffed, under resourced and unsafe for them. Remote schools are in crisis.

For example, regarding two key Closing the Gap targets:

- **Increased school attendance.** The Commonwealth's funding arrangement with the NT Government as outlined in the 2018 *Children and Schooling Implementation Plan: National Partnership on Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment* states that the NT Government is committed to raising the attendance of remote Aboriginal students to 90% (p. 7). But attendance is actually dropping. In 2016, 19% of very remote Indigenous students attended school 4 days a week, itself a horrific statistic. But by 2020, the figure was 14%. We suspect it will be lower for 2021.
- **Improved educational achievement.** In 2019, fewer than 4% of Year 9 remote Indigenous students met minimum writing standards.

Current Commonwealth and Northern Territory Government policies are not simply flawed or ineffective. Some policies are **directly causing** current failures.

Specifically:

1. FALLING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

The policies directly contributing to falling school attendance are:

i. The NT Government's "effective enrolment" funding formula

Since 2012, NT public schools have been funded according to student attendance for the previous 12 months. In consequence, remote Indigenous community schools have lost up to 50% of their budgets. The NT Government's "effective enrolment" policy has diverted substantive Commonwealth funding from remote schools.

Unstable and diminishing school budgets are a direct cause of:

- drastically reduced numbers of Aboriginal teaching staff (see 1 (ii) below)
- greatly increased teacher casualisation
- inability of schools to plan ahead
- inability to staff senior secondary classes.

In turn, these problems result in Aboriginal children feeling unsafe and alienated at school, so they stop attending. Shrinking budgets prevent schools from reversing these trends, much less engaging in outreach and supporting disengaged students to return.

Attachment A to this letter provides data on the 50% funding discrepancy between remote schools whose populations are almost entirely Indigenous and those with predominantly non-Indigenous students. This discrepancy would appear to be one perverse effect of funding based on school attendance. An even greater discrepancy (over 200%) exists between remote Indigenous and Darwin-based private schools.

In its own right, the effective enrolment policy is a sufficient explanation for plummeting school attendance.

For further details, see attached submission Problem 1, pp. 16-19.

ii. Lack of funding to employ Aboriginal teachers and Assistant Teachers in remote schools

Diminished funding for remote schools has been accompanied by a significant drop in Aboriginal staffing. As you will know, more than 8 out of 10 people in remote NT communities speak an Indigenous language. In those communities, young people do not use English outside school – it is effectively a *foreign* language. Aboriginal teachers are essential in these schools in mediating classroom learning and school experiences for students, because they can explain things in the language and ways that children understand. Children are alienated and withdraw from schooling if they cannot understand what the teacher is saying.

Attachment A to this letter documents the grossly unsatisfactory number of Aboriginal teachers in remote East Arnhem Land schools, regarding which we could obtain data.

For further details, see attached submission Problem 6, pp. 36-39.

iii. Increasingly restricted pathways to secondary education for remote students

The NT Government's Indigenous Education Strategy has effectively limited remote students' pathways to secondary education to boarding schools only. The alternative (funded through this Strategy) was terminated in Term 3, 2020, leaving 537 students in 32 remote schools stranded (see also 2 (ii) below). Although a few students may do well in boarding school, existing evidence suggests that many drop out and return to their communities with no way to continue their education and minimal, if any, employment opportunities. These outcomes are discouraging young people in remote communities from pursuing formal education. We note that suicide is the main cause of Indigenous youth deaths in remote communities and is among the highest in world for any group.

For further details, see attached submission Problem 3, pp. 23-24.

iv. School leadership requirements

School principals and Education Directors are appointed in remote communities with no requirements for experience in Indigenous education. Short-term (3-4 year) contracts do not encourage continuity, independent and knowledgeable perspectives in school leadership, or community trust and engagement.

Attachment A to this letter provides data on Aboriginal teachers appointed to senior positions. Attachment B is a recent position description for Senior Education Director Education East Arnhem, where no mention is made of capacity or experience in working in Indigenous communities.

For further details, see attached submission Problem 9, pp. 45-46.

2. INDIGENOUS STUDENTS' ABYSMAL LITERACY LEVELS

The policies **producing** remote students' low English literacy levels include the following.

i. Unsuitable English mother tongue remedial literacy programs

Through the NT Indigenous Education Strategy, **English mother tongue remedial literacy programs** were imported first from the USA (2016-2018) and then the UK (2017-present). The American program cost \$25-30 million but was cancelled in 2018 (see also 2 (ii) below). These programs assume fluency in English and their content is unsuitable for use in remote Indigenous communities. Children are mystified and alienated by them, and are not assisted to develop spoken English as a basis for reading in English.

For further details, see attached submission Problem 2, pp. 20-22.

ii. Stop-start literacy initiatives

Two further NT literacy initiatives began in 2016 as part of the NT Strategy but were cancelled in 2020/2021 (see also 1 (iii) above). Stop-start programs create cynicism, alienation and program fatigue in communities, schools and teachers.

For further details, see attached submission Problems 2 and 5, pp. 20-22, 33-35.

iii. No policy support for employing qualified and experienced teachers of English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D) in remote schools

Specialist EAL/D qualifications are not required or even prioritised in appointing teachers to remote schools. The Teachers' Registration Board does not keep records of teachers with these qualifications. In communities where English is a foreign language and children do not use or encounter it outside the classroom, they need to be taught English by teachers with the appropriate knowledge and skills.

For further details, see attached submission Problems 1 and 8, pp. 16-19, 43-44.

iv. Inadequate and weak support for bilingual/biliterate programs

The evidence is overwhelmingly clear that learning to read in the mother tongue is the most effective foundation for literacy in another language. However, like all educational programs, bilingual programs require adequate quality support (teachers, resources, professional development) in order to succeed. Nine NT remote schools are designated as offering bilingual programs, of which only four are actually implementing bilingual/biliterate pedagogy.

For further details, see attached submission Problem 4, pp. 25-32, also Problems 1, 6, 7, 8.

v. Inadequate, and unsuitable professional development for remote teachers

Professional development is delivered to remote teachers through non-interactive, on-line packages focussed on the imported English mother tongue remedial literacy programs (see 2 (i) above). Because teachers have discovered that these programs are unsuitable and have not produced the desired outcomes, they have lost professional confidence and their morale is lower than it has ever been.

For further details, see attached submission Problems 2 and 8, pp. 20-22, 43-44.

vi. NAPLAN testing

All NT students must sit NAPLAN tests. In remote communities, children with insufficient English to understand NAPLAN questions are routinely told to guess answers by colouring in the bubbles next to multiple choice options. This procedure and the inevitably disastrous results label Indigenous students as failures, and are profoundly discouraging for both students and teachers. Panicked Government responses to NAPLAN results include item 2 (i) above and unsuitable pedagogy that pays no attention to developing students' spoken English.

See attached submission Problems 2 and 7, pp. 20-22, 40-42.

vii. Disregard for appropriate measures of learners' proficiency in English as an additional language/dialect (EAL/D)

Over 95% of remote students are English language learners. Teachers are expected to use the NT *EAL/D Learning Progressions* every semester to assess learners' English development and proficiency levels. However, teachers frequently do not know the *Learning Progressions* exist. Training in doing these assessments is minimal or non-existent, and nothing is provided on interpreting EAL/D assessments to guide teaching. No monitoring or oversight occurs to ensure accuracy in schools' EAL/D assessment reports. NT policies and initiatives no longer reference these reports but focus exclusively on NAPLAN.

See attached submission Problems 2, 7 and 8, pp. 20-22, 40-42 and 43-44.

Regarding assessments (2 (vi) and (vii) above), ACTA has argued for a common national approach to assessing English language learning since the late 1980s. In 2015 (11 Dec), the Education Council endorsed the development of such a national approach. We are profoundly disappointed that the project was halted in December 2020.

We realise that the list above encompasses a complex intersection of policies and programs for which the Commonwealth is not always directly responsible. However:

- in some cases, Commonwealth resources are directly supporting adverse policies, for example, 1 (iii), 2 (i), (vi) and (v) above.
- in other cases, Commonwealth funding is not reaching the designated target, notably as a result of 1 (i) above; also 2 (ii).
- in yet other cases, we respectfully suggest that the Commonwealth could exert its influence to promote positive change: for example, 1 (ii), (iv) and 2 (iii), (iv), (v) above.

According to a recent news report following an ACTA media release (attached), "*the NT Education Department is set to launch a revamped student engagement strategy to improve educational outcomes in the coming weeks*". However, the report continues:

Independent member of the NT parliament, Yingiya (Mark) Guyula, says community voices have been ignored and many remote community schools are in crisis. ... Mr Guyula called on the NT Education Minister Lauren Moss to delay the new Education Engagement Strategy so elders and communities can be consulted to create local solutions. ... Mr Guyula said the department held invite-only meetings

in a few communities and more voices need to be heard if the problems plaguing remote education were to be fixed. ([Concerns over NT remote education failure | 7NEWS](#); accessed 20/09/2021).

We note that the 2018 *Children and Schooling Implementation Plan: National Partnership on Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment* included an allocation of \$15 million for 2018-22 to “increase community engagement, including with relevant cultural authorities and governance in remote schools” (p. 8). We are concerned that yet another round of misjudged initiatives is in train that will continue the adverse policies just listed and induce yet more policy fatigue in remote schools and communities.

On the basis of what we have just outlined, we respectfully request that you:

1. together with your Department and Education Minister Tudge:
 - a. investigate the details documented in the attached ATESOL NT submission
 - b. use the Commonwealth’s influence to ensure that:
 - i. Commonwealth funding for remote Indigenous schools reaches those schools
 - ii. reverse the policies we have outlined above, a priority being “effective enrolment” as the basis for funding remote schools
 - iii. the NT Government is requested to delay its new Education Engagement Strategy until credible, publicly available evidence is available of in-depth and comprehensive consultations with remote communities
 - c. consider the 32 recommendations in the ATESOL NT submission, bring them and the submission before the Closing the Gap Council or its appropriate sub-committee, and use the Commonwealth’s influence to advance these recommendations, priorities being:
 - i. re-establishment of local quality secondary education pathways in remote communities
 - ii. increased appointments of Aboriginal teachers and Assistant Teachers
 - iii. support for quality bilingual/biliterate teaching and quality Australian resources for teaching English as an additional language/dialect to Indigenous-language speaking students
 - iv. increased and improved professional development for teachers and principals in remote schools
 - v. exemption of English language beginners from NAPLAN tests
 - vi. use of the NT *EAL/D Learning Progressions* as the basis for reporting on English language learners in the NT as an interim measure, pending the completion of a nationally agreed measure (as per 3 below).
2. appoint an established expert in Indigenous languages and a further expert in teaching English as an additional language/dialect to Indigenous-language speakers to a relevant sub-group/committee of the Joint Council on Closing the Gap.
3. request Education Minister Tudge to reinstate the ACARA national project to establish a nationally agreed English language proficiency measure for assessing and reporting on the English learning needs and progress of students learning English as their additional language or dialect in schools by:
 - a. conducting a trial of the *EAL/D Learning Progression* as a nationally comparable measure for reporting the English language proficiency of EAL/D students
 - b. cross-validating and refining the *EAL/D Learning Progression* as required
 - c. aligning different EAL/D data collection practices and approaches across State and Territory jurisdictions
 - d. creating a national data platform for annual reporting of EAL/D learner outcomes.

ACTA and our colleagues in the Northern Territory seek to support your work in improving outcomes for Indigenous students in remote communities in Australia. We are heartened by your words at the 2019 Garma Festival: *“to make a difference then we must also walk with our young because it is not only the elders who shape the future – it is our community in totality.”* We hope that you find this letter a positive beginning to a continuing dialogue with ACTA and our NT colleagues towards this goal. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and/or your advisors.

Yours faithfully,

Margaret Corrigan

President

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cc:

Ms Pat Turner AM,

Co-Chair Joint Council on Closing the Gap, Lead Convener of the Coalition of Peaks, CEO
National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO)

Senator the Hon. Bridget McKenzie

Minister for Regionalisation, Regional Communications and Regional Education

The Hon. Alan Tudge MP

Minister for Education and Youth

The Hon Linda Burney MP

Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians

The Hon Warren Snowdon MP

Shadow Assistant Minister for Northern Australia,
Shadow Assistant Minister for Indigenous Australians

Mr Julian Leeser MP

Chair, Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs

Mr Andrew Laming MP

Chair, Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

Senator Lidia Thorpe

Australian Greens Spokesperson on First Nations, Justice and Sport

Mr Luke Gosling OAM MP

Member for Solomon (Northern Territory)

Senator Sam McMahon

Senator for the Northern Territory

Senator Malarndirri McCarthy

Senator for the Northern Territory

The Hon. Lauren Moss MLA

Minister for Education, Northern Territory

The Hon. Selena Uibo MLA

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Northern Territory

Mr Stephen Edgington MLA

Shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Northern Territory.

Mrs Jo Hersey

Shadow Minister for Education, NT Legislative Assembly

Mr Yiniya Mark Guyula MLA

Member for Mulka (north-east Arnhem Land), Northern Territory.

ATTACHMENT A

Data on School Funding and Aboriginal Staffing

SCHOOL FUNDING

Figures from the My School website for 2020-2021.

1. Government Schools

Table 1 compares funding for the three largest remote schools with **majority Indigenous student enrolments** (Shepherdson College, Millingimbi and Ramingining) with funding for the three largest schools with **majority non-Indigenous student enrolments** (Nhulunbuy HS, Nhulunbuy PS and Alyangula).

Average funding per student:

- 3 schools with majority Indigenous student enrolments: **\$10,492**
- 3 schools with majority non-Indigenous student enrolments: **\$15,412**

Table 1: Comparison of Funding for Remote Indigenous and Non-Indigenous NT Government Schools

Remote Government Schools	% Indigenous students	2021 Total Funding	No. students enrolled (2020)	Amount per student
Shepherdson College	99%	\$4,936,113	485	\$10,178
Millingimbi	98%	\$3,652,473	311	\$11,744
Ramingining	98%	\$2,553,701	266	\$9,600
TOTAL	98.5%	\$11,142,287	1,062	\$10,492
Nhulunbuy HS	31%	\$5,722,486	316	\$18,109
Nhulunbuy PS	24%	\$4,936,785	367	\$13,450
Alyangula	29%	\$2,841,715	193	\$14,723
TOTAL	29%	\$13,500,986	876	\$15,412

2. Non-Government Schools

Table 2 shows Government funding for three large independent Darwin schools in 2019 (2020 data n/a). Parent contributions are excluded.

- Average funding per student: **\$23,785**

Table 2: Funding (2019) for three independent Darwin schools

Schools	% Indigenous students	Total government funding (2019)	No. students enrolled (2019)	Amount per student
Haileybury	15%	\$12,320,187	517	\$23,830
St Johns	41%	\$6,434,078	197	\$32,660
Marrara	21%	\$6,315,386	340	\$18,575
TOTAL	21%	\$25,069,651	1,054	\$23,785

ABORIGINAL STAFFING

Data based on answer 149 by the NT Minister of Education to Written Questions by Mr Yingiya Mark Guyula MLA, Northern Territory.

Table 3: Employment of Indigenous teachers in NE Arnhem schools

Teacher level	Teachers from the local community who speak the local language	Teachers from outside the community
Principal/Co-principal	1	14
Assistant Principal	0	10
Senior Teacher	4	26
Classroom Teachers	8	158
TOTAL	13	208

ATTACHMENT B

Advertisement for Senior Director East Arnhem

Agency	Department of Education	Work unit	Education NT
Job title	Senior Director Education East Arnhem	Designation	Executive Contract Officer 2
Job type	Full Time	Duration	Fixed for 4 years
Salary	\$237,573	Location	Nhulunbuy
Position number	42858	RTF	218664
		Closing	22/08/2021
Contact	Susan Bowden, Acting Deputy Chief Executive on 08 8999 5785 or susan.bowden@nt.gov.au		
About the agency	http://www.education.nt.gov.au/		
Apply online	https://jobs.nt.gov.au/Home/JobDetails?rtfId=218664		
Applications must be limited to a one-page summary sheet and detailed resume			
Information for applicants – Inclusion and diversity and Special measures			
<p>The NTPS values diversity and aims for a workforce that represents the community. The NTPS encourages people from all diversity groups to apply for vacancies and accommodates people with disability by making reasonable workplace adjustments. If you require an adjustment for the recruitment process or job, please discuss this with the contact officer. For more information about applying for this position and the merit process, go to the OCPE website.</p> <p>Under the agency's Special Measures Recruitment Plan eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) applicants will be granted priority consideration for this vacancy. For more information on Special Measures, go to the OCPE website.</p>			

Primary objective

Provide critical system leadership, be responsible for the performance and development of 13 principals to support the delivery of improved educational outcomes in assigned schools, early childhood services, executive experience in implementing, coordinating and influencing interagency, stakeholder and Whole of Government Education priorities and projects in the East Arnhem region.

Context statement

The Department of Education delivers services to children and young people to maximize educational outcomes, safety and wellbeing from early years through to senior years of schooling. There are 153 government schools across the NT, with 71 per cent located in remote and very remote areas. Education NT consists of 6 regions – Central, Big Rivers, Barkly, Top End, Darwin and East Arnhem.

Key duties and responsibilities

1. Provide executive level leadership and work collaboratively with principals to inform, set and drive the strategic direction of the organisation and to implement a whole of system high quality approach to school improvement.
2. Be responsible for the strategic direction and executive leadership in driving the strategic performance to deliver education outcomes aligned to the Department and Government's strategies and drive and influence stakeholders across the region in implementing Government's strategic objectives for Education reform.

3. Develop a strategic education vision for the region, ensure best practice standards in the delivery of education, drive and implement change and build a positive culture in the East Arnhem regional office.
4. Develop, drive and maintain positive, collaborative and effective working relationships through effective leadership and engagement.
5. Provide high level advice to the Deputy Chief Executive, senior management team and key stakeholders.

Selection criteria

viii. Essential

1. Tertiary qualification in Education and extensive experience in the education and training sectors and Working with Children Card.
2. Extensive senior management level experience in the leadership and management of a complex professional based organisation, including experience in driving change and reform and building a positive organisational culture.
3. Proven experience leading highly effective education improvement strategies to lift performance and student achievement levels with demonstrated knowledge of contemporary curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in early childhood and/or Transition to Year 12.
4. Demonstrated capacity to build strong stakeholder relationships and to drive and influence stakeholders to gain commitment to the department's strategic objectives.
5. High level oral and written communication skills, interpersonal and negotiating skills.
6. Contemporary knowledge of organisational, financial, business, procurement, people and resource management principles and practices, including governance responsibilities at a senior management level.

ix.

x. Desirable

Relevant tertiary and post graduate qualifications.

Approved: June 2021

Susan Bowden, A/Deputy Chief Executive