

MEDIA RELEASE



**Australian Council
of TESOL
Associations**



Misguided policies directly causing remote Indigenous students' poor school attendance and literacy, and rising incarceration rates

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Misguided Commonwealth and NT Government policies are directly contributing to remote Indigenous students' falling school attendance and abysmal literacy levels, according to two scathing submissions by a teachers' organisation to a current federal Parliamentary Inquiry.

"Applying the same education policies to students who are culturally and linguistically different doesn't result in equity," said Fran Murray, the ATESOL NT representative to the Australian Council of TESOL Associations. *"In fact, it's widening the gap, not closing it."*

The submissions explain why Closing the Gap targets for Indigenous education are increasingly out of reach: remote schools are in crisis. Meanwhile, the number of Indigenous young people in NT prisons has doubled in the past year.¹ John Lawrence SC, former head of the NT Bar Association, who has over 30 years' experience working in the NT legal system observes: *"The inexcusable failing of our education system, clearly revealed by their failure to teach Aboriginal children to read and write, is one of the major reasons for the increasing numbers of Aboriginal youth being captured by the oppressive carceral regime that is the NT Juvenile Justice system."*

Clear evidence of Commonwealth and NT Government education policy failure is:

- **Only 14%** of very remote Indigenous students attended school even 4 days a week in 2020.² Numbers may have fallen further in 2021.
- **Fewer than 4%** of Year 9 remote Indigenous students met minimum writing standards in 2019.³
- Currently **100% of young people in Darwin and Alice Springs prisons are Indigenous**, while suicide is now the leading cause of death among NT adolescents in remote communities.⁴

In their submissions, the Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages in the Northern Territory (ATESOL NT) describes how Indigenous education policy consistently ignores the fact that *"more than 8 out of 10 people in remote communities speak an Indigenous language."* For example, Indigenous students in remote communities are required to sit NAPLAN tests, which are designed for English-speaking students. As beginning English learners, the students cannot understand NAPLAN questions, so they are routinely told to guess answers by *"colouring in the bubbles on the test pages"*.⁵ In response to disastrous NAPLAN results, especially for remote Indigenous students, millions have been wasted on imported commercial remedial literacy programs. These are unsuitable for students in remote communities who *"do not use English outside school"*.⁶

The Association identifies nine destructive policies and programs. Chief among them are:

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

Since 2012, the NT Government's "effective enrolment" formula has funded schools according to student attendance (not enrolment) rates for the previous 12 months. As a result, *"many remote schools have lost up to 50% of their budgets"* and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching positions have been cut. These schools are now locked in a vicious cycle of shrinking budgets that lead to lower attendance, causing further funding cuts:

*[Remote] students generally enrol in larger numbers in terms 1 and 4. To staff classes with fewer teachers, class sizes have to be large. These students find large classes intimidating, so they cease attending.*⁷

¹ [Don Dale to expand, years after its closure was recommended, as NT youth detainee numbers rise - ABC News](#)

² ATESOL NT Supplementary Submission, p. 17.

³ [Trend results - Mean scores \(acara.edu.au\)](#)

⁴ [Youth detention census - Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities. FactCheck Q&A: are Indigenous youth suicide rates in the top of Australia the highest in the world? \(theconversation.com\)](#). Robinson, G., et al (2020), *School-Based Prevention in Very Remote Settings*. Retrieved: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.552878/full>

⁵ ATESOL NT Suppl. Submission, pp. 40-42. See this section for how these students should be assessed.

⁶ ATESOL NT Suppl. Submission, pp. 25-31.

⁷ ATESOL NT Suppl. Submission, pp. 16-19. The NT Government's 2017 review confirmed that: *"schools where funding is reduced due to the application of effective enrolment are in remote locations, are socioeconomically disadvantaged and have a*

Unstable and shrinking budgets are making it impossible for remote schools to plan ahead, engage in outreach, and attract qualified and stable staff, all of which are necessary in promoting student attendance.

2. Imported American and British remedial literacy programs and other short-lived initiatives

In their panicked response to inevitably catastrophic NAPLAN results in 2015, the NT Government mandated that remote schools use an **American “Direct Instruction” program costing \$25-30 million**. It included flying instructors from America to remote NT communities several times a year. In 2018, this expensive, inappropriate and clearly failing program was cancelled. **A second remedial literacy program (Read, Write Inc) – this time imported from Britain** – is now in place. Its content assumes that students live in England, and it completely ignores the need for Indigenous language speakers to develop spoken English as a basis for reading in English.

In 2020-21 the NT Government’s own programs, Literacy and Numeracy Essentials (LANE) and Employment Pathways (EP), funded through Commonwealth Indigenous Education money, were also cancelled. The result:

*Indigenous communities are experiencing program fatigue. ... Staff and students are reluctant to engage with programs that may be cancelled a year later.*⁸

3. Restricted secondary schooling options

The 2015-2024 Indigenous Education Strategy limited secondary schooling options for most remote Indigenous students to *either* NT and interstate boarding schools *or* the new local, community-based Employment Pathways (EP) program. In Term 3 2020, EP was terminated, leaving **537 secondary students in 32 remote communities** stranded. Boarding school is now the only option for many remote students. According to a 2020 independent study, and confirmed by numerous anecdotal examples, these students often drop out and return to their communities. The result is:

The sense of failure by students who drop out of boarding school discourages other younger students in the community from continuing their education.

With pathways blocked to secondary education and limited employment opportunities, these young people are at increased risk of being caught up in the justice system and/or, tragically committing suicide. TESOL NT has received reports of Indigenous students suiciding at boarding schools or on return to their communities.⁹ Far from reducing incarceration rates, they are increasing, with the NT Government projecting increases (based on stricter bail laws) of 10% p.a..

4. Failure to employ qualified Aboriginal teachers, Assistant Teachers and English language teachers in remote schools

In 2012 the tertiary course which trained Aboriginal teachers was cancelled. Aboriginal teachers and Assistant Teachers are essential to promoting Indigenous language-speaking children’s learning in and through their first languages alongside English. With reduced and insecure budgets (see 1 above), remote schools have cut Aboriginal staffing, and cannot attract or retain qualified English language teachers. In 2021 the NT Government’s Professional Learning for remote teachers is now focussed on the roll-out of the British program Read Write Inc.

The teachers’ submission contains 32 recommendations that respond to the educational needs and aspirations of Indigenous language speakers in remote communities. High priorities are:

1. **stable, timely and adequate budgets** to remote schools to allow planning, community outreach and the employment and retention of Aboriginal teachers, Assistant Teachers and qualified English language teachers
2. **Australian- and locally-made programs, teaching resources and professional development** appropriate for teaching speakers of Indigenous languages in remote communities
3. restoration of viable **pathways to secondary schooling and employment** in remote Indigenous communities.

FOR ATESOL NT SUBMISSION 105 & SUPPLEMENT 105.1, see: [Submissions – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au/Advocacy: ATESOL NT submission to adult literacy inquiry - ATESOL NT ENQUIRIES) or [Advocacy: ATESOL NT submission to adult literacy inquiry - ATESOL NT ENQUIRIES](mailto:helenmoore@tpg.com.au): Dr Helen Moore AM, ACTA Vice President; ph: 0261938722; helenmoore@tpg.com.au

high concentration of Indigenous students.” https://education.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/464792/Report-from-the-Review-of-the-Global-School-Budgets-Funding-Model.pdf p.33. In 2018, Independent NT MP Yingiya Mark Guyula reported: “The Federal Government states it will provide \$10222 per enrolled student on Elcho Island in 2018. This is over \$6 million in Federal Government funding alone that should be given to the school and community. However, I have met with the School Council and they have been advised they will receive less than \$4 million in total for 2018. I have spoken with other schools in the region and they are all facing similar situations.” (Media release available from Mr Guyula’s office.)

⁸ ATESOL NT Suppl. Submission, pp. 20-22.

⁹ *Boarding Off Country: a study of education in one NT community*. <https://apo.org.au/node/308093>. ATESOL NT Suppl. Submission, pp. 33-34.