



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: NTCOGSO  
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation  
State: NT

### Summary

NTCOGSO's submission takes a constructive, practical approach to improving our public education system through placing priority on; equitable access to services our children need: benefits of encouraging and employing local indigenous teachers: recruiting and retaining educators to rural and remote schools, prepared and ready to stay for a qualitative and extended period of time.

In summary:

As a matter of priority consideration be given to establishing a national classroom acoustics upgrade program prioritising schools with predominantly Aboriginal students. In conjunction, national education protocols and procedures be developed for use of Soundfield amplification systems and individual hand-held amplification devices in classrooms;

Indigenous education scholarships available to indigenous teaching assistants, over a decade ago, be reinstated to encourage local community trainees to embark on careers in education;

To improve the recruitment and retention rates, development of a national professional development strategy for teachers in remote schools, matched with adequate funds, ensuring teacher professional development in cross-cultural pedagogy, English as an additional language pedagogy, and special education principles and practices;

Priority be given to ensure that remote educational leaders are well supported and given adequate encouragement to remain in the school for extended periods of time;

National accreditation guidelines and standards for School Representative Bodies be developed and promoted. To improve connection between schools, parents and the broader community, governance training is required. This needs to be given a

nationally consistent standard and accreditation with provision of adequate federal resources to achieve excellence in accountability and governance;

Continued funding and increased support in the NT for implementation of the KidsMatter and MindMatters programs under Federal Mental Health initiatives be a priority;

Mindfulness in Australian Curriculum by 2020;

Ongoing funding for TeamHealth Youth Suicide, Prevention and Education Program, which provide mental health education free to carers and professionals working with young people experiencing mental illness be a priority.

### **Main submission**

NTCOGSO is the peak body representing school communities, parents, staff and students. It is a community-based, not-for-profit association that is governed by a Constitution.

Evidenced by our 100% affiliation rate of NT Government schools, it is a highly regarded organisation and its objectives are to ensure the interests of government funded schools are represented at the local school, NT and Federal Government levels.

With over 34,000 students in public education, the Northern Territory has many government schools with unique challenges.

It is imperative to note that 70% of our schools are classified as remote or very remote and 50% of NT government schools have an indigenous enrolment of 95% or higher.

Of the 100 most disadvantaged schools nationally, 54 are in the NT and 44% of NT students live in remote or very remote locations, compared to 2% nationally.

With that background provided, NTCOGSO welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the review to achieve educational excellence in schools and outlines a number of proposals for consideration in how school funding can be used to improve school performance and student outcomes.

What students learn and how they learn

Recognising Hearing Loss

The significant issue to consider is how students in the NT learn when the majority of them have English as a second, third or even fourth language. While the Australian curriculum is comprehensive in its span of aims, objectives and developmental content there needs to be flexibility and awareness that it should complement the deeply significant and important cultural background of these students.

Content is not always relevant and academic achievement not always a priority or evident. Therefore more emphasis on Employment Pathways such as readiness and outcomes needs to become a greater focus of the curriculum.

In a response to a survey that COGSO conducted this year, it was noted that change needs to occur to capture the progress of students in very remote regions who do not progress or achieve academic standards.

Preparing students for work with limited and restricted resources due to remoteness and culture is challenging but not if these resources are tailored and identified by each community to match the expectations of parents and students.

Support for two ways learning and/or bilingual education are both successful teaching methodologies that bridge this cultural learning divide and have proven that different classroom practices and priorities in learning can achieve equivalent outcomes.

This history of delivery of education in the NT highlights that different pedagogy has been successful if well-resourced and supported. It is based on the belief that recognising cultural differences, supporting cultural learning with targeted intervention and government support can lead to success.

This review has been commissioned, following the passage of the Australian Education Amendment Bill 2017 to specifically provide advice on how the extra funds provided in the 2017 budget should be used by schools to improve student achievement and performance.

There are, however, significant barriers and challenges within the learning environment that impact directly and immediately on a student's capacity to understand, comprehend and achieve success.

Middle ear infection (Otitis Media) is the predominant cause of hearing loss and of the 4,371 indigenous children and young people who received audiology services from July 2012 to June 2015 some 45% suffered hearing loss.

Assessments of children in remote communities show that up to 90% of children suffer hearing loss leading to and resulting in a massive impact on their learning outcomes and success.

The significant gap is a systemic failure to understand that in education, resources need to be provided in our schools to ensure hearing loss students are equipped with the communication tools they need to learn.

Without practical communication tools being provided in our schools indigenous students will continue to be set up to fail as a result of a "pandemic" of Otitis Media (middle ear infection) which means many literally can't hear their teacher.

Evidence-based research shows that to improve their ability to learn, children with hearing loss need an environment that reflects:

- Improved classroom design and acoustics so that noisy and reverberant acoustic environments do not impact on a student's listening even further.
- Soundfield Amplification in classrooms to provide a more consistent level of a teacher's voice evenly transmitted around the room and above any background noise (signal-to-noise ratio) and to optimise listening for all students.
- Improved training of school staff so that they have the appropriate skills and knowledge to understand the benefits of Soundfield Amplification and to understand the use and maintenance of particular systems.

This review asks the question how can additional money be spent to improve student achievement. Within this context the question to also ask is why these children aren't learning and hence why isn't the education gap closing. The question is really how do you learn when you can't adequately hear the teacher?

Professor Amanda Leach, leader of the Ear Health Research Program, at the Menzies School of Health Research, provided a presentation to the Ear Disease Roundtable, AMA, in Canberra in 2016.

Professor Leach's paper highlights the evidence-based research and relationship between hearing loss and the impact on speech and language development.

It states that for students with hearing loss, listening in the classroom environment and in group activities becomes harder and therefore a group learning environment becomes more challenging. This has an impact on behaviour and learning outcomes. Persistent and ongoing hearing loss in children can affect their literacy, learning and understanding, education, behaviour, communication skills, inter-personal relationships, well being and later employment.

The impacts of hearing loss on young children and students who do not have English as their first language are more significant when in a classroom and when trying to learn this new language.

Classroom communication strategies need innovation and resourcing to ensure the use of Soundfield Amplification. The use of speakers to more evenly distribute sound in an area such as a classroom with the teacher speaking into a microphone, making it easier for children with mild hearing loss to hear and engage in the classroom.

Soundfield amplification systems are not funded by Australian Hearing and are not funded across Australia in a systematic or consistent way. Schools often have to source their own funding, apply from sporadic funding programs when available or some have been fortunate to have funds provided by local service groups.

COGSO recommends that as a matter of priority consideration be given to establishing a national classroom acoustics upgrade program that prioritises schools with predominantly Aboriginal students. In conjunction national education protocols and procedures should be developed for the use of Sound field amplification systems and individual hand-held amplification devices in classrooms.

#### Teachers and School Leadership

#### Local Indigenous Engagement

School attendance in rural and remote communities in the NT has always been a major barrier to the successful participation and academic outcomes for children in the NT.

In 2014, the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS) was a program designed and implemented whereby communities engaged local school attendance officers working with teachers, families, parents, and community organisations to ensure all children go to school every day. Getting children to school is the number one priority for all children as identified by parents in Indigenous communities.

RSAS is now operating nationally in 77 schools across 74 communities.

RSAS teams, in conjunction with input from the local community, tailor approaches to improved school attendance within the local context. Since it started there has been a 14% increase in school attendance in those schools and marked significant difference in the way students and families engage in the education process.

The success of this program highlights that the engagement and employment of local community members, that have a connection to the children and their families, can and does make a difference to their educational outcomes. While there has been success in getting more children to school, it is now time to build on these achievements and ensure that those children now coming to school continue to do so.

The next vital step is to ensure that there are adequate support services to encourage students to continue attending regularly.

Indigenous teaching assistants are a vital part of the education support and resources needed at the school and in the classroom. Local community engagement, from people that children know and can relate to, has shown that this leads to another layer of confidence and support with the education system.

Across the NT, there are many successful stories of indigenous teachers who started in a classroom and at a school as an assistant and have since gained formal educational qualifications to become teachers and, in time, Principals. A career in education should be encouraged to ensure those in the community who begin as

teaching assistants have the incentive to foster this interest and talent and make a difference to those students around them.

Therefore COGSO proposes that the indigenous education scholarships that were available to indigenous teaching assistants, over a decade ago, should be reinstated to encourage local community trainees to embark on a career in education.

#### Recruitment and Retention

Recruiting and retaining well-prepared teachers for rural and regional schools, remains an ongoing issue faced by all State and Territory based jurisdictions in Australia regardless of their size. The reality is that the further the school is geographically located away from a capital city the more difficult it is to recruit and retain staff.

This problem continues despite a focused effort to provide financial incentive programs to entice teachers to work in rural and regional communities and despite an oversupply of newly qualified teachers each year.

Teachers' recruited to remote schools rarely stay beyond the minimum period due a large range of reasons such as poor standard of housing, lack of professional development, especially in cultural awareness and assistance to engage with Aboriginal families.

Professional isolation and lack of peer support plays a key role in making the delivery of education a massive challenge in these remote communities and these difficulties need to be recognised.

To improve the recruitment and retention rates, consideration needs to be given to develop a national professional development strategy for teachers in remote schools, matched with adequate funds, to ensure teacher professional development in cross-cultural pedagogy, English as a second (or additional) language pedagogy, and special education principles and practices.

#### Leadership

Almost half of Northern Territory schools cater for fewer than 100 students led by a Principal who has a substantial teaching commitment. Remote schools warrant close attention from policy makers and federal funding streams as the role of the Principal is now more challenging.

These Principals are required to manage annual and monthly budgetary planning/monitoring, create a high performing learning environment for students and teachers, provide mentoring and professional development, embrace and manage change, ensure parental engagement through a school representative body, perform increasing administrative tasks and maintenance tasks in very remote communities.

Principal turnover is equally high and it is not uncommon for two or three principals to occupy a position within one school year.

Remote schools with more than two teachers need their Principal to be taken off substantial teaching duties and additional duties, such as maintenance work and yard duties, in order to devote their time to improving student outcomes and achievements. There is a need to ensure funding covers an adequate number of classroom teachers while removing the Principal from a teaching load and providing for professional development, leadership and administration support.

Leadership has a direct effect on the school ethos, staff morale and retention. Principals who understand and motivate others, successfully manage both positive and negative emotions and create environments where everyone can be their best.

Priority should be given to ensure that educational leaders/ Principals in remote schools are well supported and given adequate encouragement to remain in the school for extended periods of time.

#### Parent and Community Engagement

The NT Education Act recognises the importance of parents and community involvement in Government schools; and for that purpose, provides for the establishment and operation of School Representative Bodies (SRB).

NTCOGSO assists remote school communities to build local, community engagement and partnerships with schools. This is achieved by empowering communities to establish and maintain a School Representative Body. Their legitimacy is within the NT Education Act & Regulations which require a fifty percent, or higher, membership of parents with stated Functions and Powers.

NTCOGSO is funded by the NT Department of Education to provide governance training to Rural, Regional and Remote School Representative Bodies. In delivery of Governance Training, over the past year NTCOGSO has reached 81 schools across the Northern Territory with a total of 613 participants.

Legislative requirements vary between states and territories however, there remains a need for national standards or protocols to provide a common, sustainable governance framework across all jurisdictions to ensure compliance, professionalism and strong governance practices.

While in the Northern Territory there is the establishment of SRB governance training this currently lacks national recognition and nationally agreed governance standards from the federal education system. Such governance training programs need independent national accreditation and endorsement.

NT School Representative Bodies promote meaningful family and community partnerships, engage with school community on student learning, lead conversations

about key issues and challenges, evaluate and communicate with their school community about their activities, focus on improved learning outcomes for students and review progress on student learning outcomes.

They are to be genuinely consulted and part of the process for the School Strategic Plan; Annual School Improvement Plan; Global School Budget and are the signatory to each one.

School Representative Bodies that function effectively and professionally, strengthen the interaction and engagement with schools and the broader community.

Empowering School Representative Bodies to have an effective voice in their school is a powerful means to improve connection as it builds ownership.

National accreditation guidelines and standards for School Representative Bodies need to be developed and promoted. To improve connection between schools, parents and the broader community, effective decision making and governance training is required. This needs to be given a nationally consistent standard and accreditation with provision of adequate federal resources to achieve excellence in accountability and governance.

Identifying, sharing and driving good practice

Investment in Well Being

All students deserve access to an effective and culturally appropriate wellbeing curriculum, behaviour management program and interventions to ensure their personal wellbeing and that of their classmates and teachers.

NT COGSO is working closely with Principals Australia Institute to support the expansion and use of KidsMatter and MindMatters across the Northern Territory. We also acknowledge and commend the NT Government for trialling a culturally-appropriate mental health and wellbeing student curriculum at NT schools that would complement the KidsMatter framework.

We acknowledge that the Federal Government has been funding these programs through Beyondblue and believe that the ongoing funding of KidsMatter and MindMatters is crucial to strengthening the work undertaken to improve overall student wellbeing, address poor mental health among susceptible students, and reduce the alarming rates of suicide across our communities.

Efforts to identify and support our children who are at risk are extremely worthy of ongoing federal funding and we acknowledge that this requires a multi-faceted approach in supporting the children, teachers and staff, parents and carers.

NT COGSO believes that KidsMatter and MindMatters funding needs to be provided ongoing. We recognise that the Federal Government's Mental Health Strategy notes the value of these programs and we look forward to their continued funding.



In view of the statistics suggesting a higher than average rate of mental health disorders among NT students and the Federal Government's commitment to Close the Gap, we request that there is an increase in spending to address the issue of student mental health and wellbeing in the NT.

We note that KidsMatter and MindMatters are optional programs in which schools can choose to participate and to an extent what is suitable for each situation. Yet post-intervention suicide programs are universally mandated. We think that the non-consistent implementation of prevention, early intervention and post-intervention programs is at odds with the universally accepted view that prevention and early intervention is the most effective approach to mental health.

NT COGSO would like the Federal Government to increase support for schools in the NT to take a proactive approach in fully implementing the KidsMatter and Mind Matters frameworks. Furthermore, we would like to see every school in the NT implement a culturally-appropriate curriculum specifically addressing mental health and wellbeing.

NT COGSO submits that increased funding and resources in the area of early intervention would decrease the need for post-intervention programs when broad scale tragedies such as a student suicide occur, which impact entire communities.

Another program of particular importance is the TeamHealth Youth Suicide Prevention and Education Program which provides education and training to young people and adults who work with young people around wellbeing, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention. This program is available in Darwin, Palmerston, Batchelor, Belyuen, Daly River (Naiiyu) and Gunbalanya. Under this program school staff can access, for free, education that includes how to recognise and respond to a young person developing a mental health issue or in a mental health crisis, as well as how to connect families to appropriate professional support.

In identifying and driving good practice NTCOGSO encourages continued funding and increased support in the NT for the implementation of the KidsMatter and MindMatters programs under the Federal Mental Health initiatives funding.

We would also seek the ongoing funding for TeamHealth Youth Suicide and Prevention and Education Program which provide mental health education free to carers and professionals working with young people experiencing mental illness.

NTCOGSO supports Mindfulness in the Australian Curriculum by 2020. Mindfulness training has at least five broad beneficial effects, according to Felicia Huppert, Professor of Psychology of the University of Cambridge's Well-Being Institute:

- increased sensory awareness;
- greater cognitive control;

- enhanced regulation of emotions;
- acceptance of transient thoughts and feelings;
- the capacity to regulate attention

Research is clear, student benefits across sleep quality, mental health, wellbeing, engagement with learning, student safety, reductions in bullying and classroom disruptions.