

Submission to Senate Community Affairs Committee
Re: Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory

I am deeply concerned about the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Bill 2011 proposing welfare cuts for non-school attendance. The Bill is based on the premise that such measures were requested by the communities during consultations conducted by FaHCSIA. However, there is no clear evidence that the communities actually asked for these measures as the process of consultations lacked transparency.

The question arises: **Why weren't the consultations recorded by FaHCSIA and transcripts made available?**

Apparently the Minister was asked by 'concerned Australians' in an open letter to record the consultations but the Minister did not agree to the request. I would like to point out that 'concerned Australians' recorded 10 consultations, and in those 10 consultations there was not a single request for welfare cuts for non school attendance. This raises considerable doubt whether other communities asked for these measures.

Furthermore, the Government is proposing to extend the SEAM (School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure) programme and align it with the N.T. ECED (Every Child, Every Day) programme although these programmes have not been properly evaluated and it is doubtful that these programmes with their punitive measures would achieve higher school attendance.

The question arises: **Why does the Government propose an extension of SEAM and linking it with ECED before these programs have been properly evaluated?**

Above all, anyone who has been involved in education knows that coercion does not produce results. If we want to raise school attendance, we have to increase the quality of education, make education relevant and provide enabling facilities and incentives.

I therefore ask the Senate Hearing Committee to give full consideration to requests made by Northern Territory Elders and community Representatives in their recent statement of 4 November 2011 (www.concernedaustralians.com.au) as well as requests from communities (as shown by the records of 10 consultations recorded by concerned Australians):

- Return the bilingual learning programmes to schools;
- Engage with Elders to ensure culturally relevant curriculum planning;
- Improve incentives to attract and support Aboriginal teachers;
- Provide funding for basic services like internet connections, music classes sports programmes, school trips etc. similar to funding received by non-indigenous schools;
- Provide additional services as found in other Australian schools like special needs teachers;
- Provide school transport;

- Start school earlier than in the southern states (taking account of the warmer weather and enabling parents to get their children ready for school before they go to work).

I recommend that these measures are implemented to offer the children of the Northern Territory quality education. My recommendation is also based on my experience as a teacher linguist in the remote Bardi community of One Arm Point in W.A. I spent over a year in the community where I helped develop teaching material and compiled a dictionary.

And I recommend that the punitive measures of the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Legislation are deferred until there is conclusive evidence that the above positive measures do not result in lifting school attendance.

Gedda Fortey
24/01/2012

Ref: www.concernedaustralians.com.au