

1.0 Executive Summary

The Northern Territory community agrees that for most schools and most students, there is much that can be done to improve the quality of secondary education in the Territory. This Report presents the community view on who is responsible and what needs to happen to improve outcomes. It also identifies some of the leading edge examples of innovation, great teaching, good learning, happy and productive students that are currently part of the Northern Territory education system.

Only two of the Northern Territory's sixteen high schools and seventeen community education centres, Casuarina Senior Secondary College and Darwin High School don't want to see the system changed. According to the surveys and discussions undertaken by those schools and colleges the vast majority of their parents, students and teachers are satisfied.

The community approaches education from a different perspective to that taken by the Secondary Education Report. Where the Report takes a systemic and structural approach to improving education, the community focus is primarily on what is happening in the individual classroom and in the playground between the student and the teacher and between students and how well teachers are resourced to get good educational outcomes. The community has two other main considerations. If students are not bothering to go to school then what needs to change to get them there? How well equipped are they when they leave school to get a job, go on to further study or where there are no jobs, play an active role in community life?

These community perspectives meant that initially various stakeholder groups had some difficulty in coming to terms with the complex and detailed arguments and proposals in the Report. However over the last four months (May to August 2004) they have made a great effort to analyse and discuss the report to present their views about its recommendations.

The priority for the community is the recommendations in relation to teaching and learning and the curriculum. How well are the students learning? To them this relies on how good are the teachers, how good are their teaching methods and how useful and well presented is the curriculum? As a community, do we expect students to fit the schools or should schools adapt to meet the needs of students?

Teaching and Learning

There is wide support for the development of a Teaching and Learning Framework and for professional learning communities among teachers. Teachers spoke of the many challenges they face daily. Parents sympathized with them. Not the least of these is the earlier maturation of students, the rapidity of the change in students and the speed of the introduction of new technologies. Compound these challenges with teachers' concern about respect and being valued and we can understand why the community places such high importance on providing the widest professional support for teachers. This covers not only appropriate orientation programs for teachers entering the system but continuing external and in-school professional development programs. Another urgent requirement is support for more school counsellors and careers advisers.

Curriculum

The breadth of the curriculum and the definition of success are other key concerns of the community. The Report argued that success at school needs to be redefined to embrace a wider curriculum. This has wide support across the Territory which is not surprising given that fewer than 30% of students go on to tertiary studies. It should be noted however that, in Darwin, in submissions and public forums some teachers and parents argued that the system must not lose the focus on university entrance scores (TER).

The general view presented by the community supports the recommendations of the Report in relation to curriculum. Students and parents argue for a curriculum that is relevant to students' interests and needs. Employers and others argued for a stronger focus on VET. There is strong support for school based apprenticeships and hands on learning. Parents and employers spoke of the need for the schools to identify skill shortages and make sure that there were young people able to fill jobs.

The community does not see the TER – VET discussion as an either/or option. One successful student who had an expectation of a high TER said at the Alice Springs forum this is not an either/or choice. "Just because I am going to be a scientist does not mean that I do not want to learn practical things." It is argued that already in Alice Springs up to 90% of secondary students in Year 11 are doing at least one VET course.

There is a specific concern about VET in isolated areas. The local communities argued that VET funding under the TRY system is erratic, communities are forced to compete as if one community's needs are greater than others, and that the reasons for funding or non-funding are not explained.

The NT Curriculum Framework (NTCF) has been well received by the community. Primary schools in particular believe it has been very valuable. The jury is still out in secondary schools although a number of submissions argued that if some effort was made through professional development programs to get teachers familiar with the framework then its acceptance would be rapidly improved.

This is particularly true of middle years school programs. This is discussed further in the section on the stages of schooling

Remote Indigenous Education

Beyond the individual classroom the community's greatest concern is the parlous state of education for Indigenous young people in remote communities. Some see the problem as based in the lack of interest of the young people in school. Others see the problem as centred in the lack of schools, the lack of facilities, the cultural inappropriateness of the curriculum offerings (particularly that offered by distance education) and language difficulties.

Community elders, time and again in this consultation, told of their frustration about their young people not being engaged in school, and the wider Territory community who acknowledged this situation. We heard repeatedly that "we", that is the Territory Government funded by the Commonwealth Government, need to provide secondary schooling for Indigenous students in remote communities. They need face to face teaching. The teachers need support from a distance provider to assist them in their teaching. The curriculum needs to be relevant to the students and be language and

culturally sensitive. The outcome however has to be students who have the English, job and life skills to compete for a job where it is available. For this to be achieved there are a number of other things that have to be done.

Teachers, particularly recent graduates, need much better orientation programs, and they need ongoing support so that the churn rate is reduced.

Teacher housing is also a major issue. One teacher asked that renovations be done. The house was inspected and assessed as not worth fixing up, so nothing was done. Teachers in remote communities look with envy at what is provided for the police housing and then for health workers. They argue that what they are expected to live in is definitely third best and at worst, condemned. Indigenous teachers also note the discrimination that occurs in housing. Where some teachers are provided with housing and power bills are subsidized, others get only the housing and the Indigenous teachers have no housing subsidy.

The curriculum being offered in these remote locations is also an issue. While there are some exciting integrated studies programs being developed within individual schools, there is no system for supporting their documentation and applying them in other school settings. For curriculum that is provided externally, there are a number of teachers across remote locations each in turn modifying the curriculum products to make them culturally sensitive. This is seen as a waste of resources.

The other aspect of education of Indigenous students is the role of Indigenous communities, particularly the elders in whether the students attend. This report contains some excellent examples of Indigenous community initiatives supported by homeland schools and CECs where there is a true partnership and young people are re-engaging in secondary education. It is already happening. All the community wants is for it to become the norm rather than the exception.

Distance Education

While initial reactions to proposals in the Report in relation to distance education focused on the closure of NTOEC the community debate developed into a sophisticated appraisal of distance learning in the Northern Territory. This was in part due to representatives from NTOEC making the shift in the debate themselves and then taking their community with them. In their final submission NTOEC called for a revised and enhanced model of distance education.

The community view is that distance education needs to fulfil a number of roles:

- a school for some
- a curriculum service for use by schools where they do not have the staff with the necessary expertise to provide the appropriate curriculum
- a teacher support service where the teachers need appropriate levels of support to assist students who are using distance delivered curriculum.

Such a model assumes that there are:

- curriculum creators
- curriculum product developers
- delivery providers
- curriculum support services for generalist teachers
- accreditation and assessment services.

The current model has not recognized this. The community has come to the defence of NTOEC recognizing that it was never mandated to undertake all these roles. However they all have now been identified and the community expects that the NT Government will now redesign and enhance the system for the benefit of all those interested in getting an education, not just compulsory age school students.

The Report is criticized because it argued that if face to face teaching is increased in remote communities then there will be less demand for distance education. From submissions this is clearly not the case. The demand will shift from a teacher–student relationship to a distance service-support local teacher relationship. Otherwise the local offerings in remote communities will be limited to the knowledge of the face to face teacher. The Report also argued that the demand for distance education in urban communities would be reduced if Learning Precincts are established. The community has rejected Learning Precincts but has taken up the idea that the “best “ teachers of specialist subjects should be shared around among all students of a subject and that all teachers of that subject and their students should be able to access those classes by distance mode.

They see a huge opportunity for the Northern Territory to become the leader of distance education across Australia.

Stages of Schooling

The community separated the discussion on the stages of schooling into two distinct discussions, on the location of Year 7 and Year 10.

Except for some school communities in Darwin this can be a non-controversial issue. For a wide range of schools in the Territory, Year 7 is already in high school or groups of schools are planning for its introduction. The question is should there be a Territory wide standard for entry? The Defence families argue yes because most come from the more populous states in the south where it is the state standard.

For the rest, the Year 7 discussion was approached from the perspective of a middle school pedagogy. It was argued that the middle years are the waste years and if students could be engaged in Year 7 with a middle school approach they may have more success.

Both the Schools of the Air proposed that Year 7 could go into a middle school and they could become a middle years provider. It would allow isolated parents to keep their students at home longer and reduce the cost of boarding school. The isolated parents supported this proposition.

Primary teachers in remote communities proposed that Year 7 could become part of the middle school associated with their local primary school. Then children would not have to leave their remote community at the end of Year 6. If children had to go away for Year 7 then, for many Indigenous students, school would finish at Year 6 rather than Year 7.

A number of remote primary schools for Indigenous students are running secondary classes on primary funding formula to overcome the lack of secondary classrooms or schools.

The objectors to the move of Year 7s are some small urban primary schools who fear for their viability if the Year 7s move to high school. Another is Darwin High which is already 100 students over enrolled and simply cannot fit Year 7 on their campus. Some parents are concerned about students who may not be as well developed as the rest of their age group and unable to cope in a high school environment.

Overall, if a middle school approach is taken to the issue, the Schools of the Air allowed to extend into the middle years, the remote primary schools allowed to keep Year 7s in the homelands, small urban primary schools given some assurances about being able to continue to operate there is very little opposition left.

The proposal to move Year 10s into senior high generated less debate but also had less support. The opposition derives from the distinction between compulsory schooling (which includes Year 10) and school by choice (Year 11 and 12). The NT Curriculum Framework also covers Year 10 so teachers would be teaching two separate frameworks.

Casuarina Senior College was very strongly opposed. The College is already overenrolled and every group within the school made a separate submission in opposition to the proposal.

Generally, students are quite keen on going to senior school in Year 10. Many of them commence their NTCE in Year 10 and see it as a natural consequence that Year 10 become part of the senior years. However, this was also rejected by the student body of Casuarina Senior College even though most had done NTCE subjects in Year 10.

The rest of the community has a mixed if muted response to this proposal. They are likely to take a more positive position if there are proposals for future senior secondary colleges. This in turn would require the government to take a stronger position on the middle years pedagogy.

Learning Precincts

This was the most unpopular of all of the recommendations. It was received as a total restructure of secondary education without any substantial argument why it should occur.

The community sought to understand it. The resources that might be shared include teachers as well as equipment and facilities.

On the positive side they agreed that sharing is good and there is a lot of it going on already. If precincts supported sharing they had some value particularly if they mandated and funded the sharing and provided organizers to support it. This is because a lot of the sharing is transient as it relies on the goodwill of the parents and teachers organizing it and when they move it often falls over.

This view was more prevalent outside Darwin where resources are apparently thinner on the ground.

Alternatives might be the existing clusters but they need to be resourced to be effective.

The negative ledger was much longer.

The local school is the core of the system and to the community it has almost sovereign status. Each school has its own identity. There is great pride in many of the schools for the efforts of parents and teachers and the identity shaped by them. Each school has its own resources funded by both the Department and the efforts of the school community. The parents have a strong sense of ownership of **their** resources.

Most importantly the sharing of resources between schools is seen as an act of consent, undertaken only on the basis of goodwill on a voluntary basis, and not a departmental directive.

The other key objection to precincts related to potential for precincts to change the whole way that teachers are employed, to whom they are accountable, and with whom they would negotiate the conditions of work. This has been rejected absolutely.

Monitoring and Evaluation

How do we know how well are schools are doing? That is at the heart of community concerns about the monitoring and evaluation of our schools.

Some people argue that the information is already there, some that it is hidden from view, some that what is collected has little value.

There is a divide between parents and teachers. Parents would like some clearer idea of how a particular school is performing, the schools generally think there is enough information out there. Greater transparency about what is currently available would help parents form a better view about whether there is already enough useful data to inform themselves.

Almost all agree that we don't need a Quality Services Agency, filled with bureaucrats to find out what is going on. They would rather that DEET become smarter and more transparent about what it monitors and evaluates and the rest of the money be spent on the professional development of teachers, more resources for schools and more teachers in remote communities.

What now?

The community has expectations that their efforts in considering the many issues involved in the Report will be rewarded. The community is not interested in any change that is not properly resourced. They are tired of seeing reviews whose recommendations they applaud, not being properly considered or resourced.

A wide section of the community has put in many hours to come up with opinions and alternatives to the proposals. They ask that they be heard and receive a prompt response.