

3.0 The Principles behind a Quality NT Secondary Education System

The community of the Northern Territory has given serious consideration to a wide range of issues discussed in the Secondary Education Report released by the Government in April 2004.

The initial responses from the community focused on a few issues and/or recommendations which created angst or concern, such as the proposed closure of the distance delivery school, the Northern Territory Open Education Centre (NTOEC) and the creation of learning precincts. However the final submissions and school and community debates have demonstrated a depth of understanding of the proposals in the Report and a careful consideration of their potential value in improving the quality of secondary education in the Northern Territory.

There are some key principles which appear across a broad range of submissions and the consultations. These are the core principles which frame the thinking of Territorians in their response to the Report:

- equal access to a quality secondary education system is the right of every Territorian. The distribution, diversity and population of the Northern Territory mean that this will always be more expensive than in the more densely settled southern states. However it is fundamental to the future economic prosperity and social development of the community
- a quality stable supported teaching force is central to this system. Nothing, in people's view, produces better educational outcomes than a well trained and resourced teacher in a face to face situation. These teachers can be supported by a range of technologies, specialists and services, but they are core
- a teaching and learning framework has the potential to produce and maintain this quality teaching force
- the failure to provide or engage young Indigenous people in secondary education is the single greatest failing of the current system. It is regarded as a very serious matter that needs to be urgently addressed. No one believes that it is within the capacity of the Northern Territory Government to fund what is needed. This is a national responsibility and the Northern Territory Government's role is to design and manage the system and get the Australian Government to pay
- while the current system may be designed for secondary school age students, access to the system should be available to all, especially young adults who have missed out on a secondary education
- teachers and parents who know how the system works, reject the current competitive framework in which projects on innovation, curriculum development and student development programs are funded. They oppose the process of funding short term projects with applicants competing. This leads to a conclusion that only some communities have value
- education must be designed for the development of the whole person and the various pathways that students take should be seen as worthwhile. Broadly the pathways are seen as preparation for further tertiary education, job training and skills development for work and education to play a useful role in the community in which you choose to live

- while the community accepts that education has to be delivered as a system with system wide standards and minimum conditions, local responsiveness and some local autonomy are seen as critical to success. That local autonomy relates to all stakeholders:
 - to parents, whose capacity to play a direct role in decision making at the local school level is seen as a fundamental right
 - to teachers, whose capacity to innovate using special program funding is often limited by bureaucratic conditions and constraints that bear little or no relevance to local conditions
 - to community elders who have expressed very clearly their desire for locally delivered secondary education and to participate in the design of and take some local responsibility for the education of Indigenous young people.

Initial responses from the peak councils on the report also focused on whether the recommendations of the Report should be read as proposing a package of reforms or recommendations which should be considered separately.

The AEU in its submission said, “We acknowledge a number of important and positive recommendations in the Report; however the weaknesses of the overall package detract from their potential to be implemented.”

The community consultation was designed to analyse the various elements of the “package” and evaluate each on its own merits. The community responded well to this approach and worked through each of the issues. They anticipate that the Government will deal with the proposals this way.

The other overarching comment from the community is that silence on particular proposals does not mean agreement. There are a number of recommendations and some fine detail from the Secondary Education Report that has not been dealt with in this report. This is because the community did not see them as a priority for discussion. However this must not be interpreted as agreement on their part.

Finally the community believes that the Northern Territory has to be responsible for its own education system. It is not something that can be outsourced to another state. If the Territory is to have a future, even statehood, then it must take sovereign responsibility. This does not mean that it should not source the best in terms of curriculum or learnings from around Australia or elsewhere. It may even be appropriate to enter into partnership for the development of new materials or use of technologies, but the ultimate ownership must be in the Territory.