

9.0 Learning Precincts

The community comes to the discussion on Learning Precincts from the following perspectives:

- the core structure of the education system is the local school. In the community's view it has almost sovereign status, especially in urban communities
- anything else, for example the cluster or the group school principal is an addition or an extra that might provide a potential benefit but equally a potential liability or constraint
- 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. This has no time constraints. The pride demonstrated by the parents, teachers and students of Casuarina Senior College which provides only two to three years education is as great as anywhere else in the Territory
- each school has its own resources, from the Department and funded by the efforts of the school community. The parents have a strong sense of ownership of **their** resources
- sharing 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.

These perspectives shape the way in which the community in urban and regional centres received the recommendations in the Review about Learning Precincts.

At the outset we must make it clear that there was a fundamental disconnect between what the Report argued and how the community responded.

9.1 Points of agreement

Both sides agree on the key drivers for the recommendations, in particular:

- some students in the Territory, most noticeably in parts of Darwin are able to access a wide range of NTCE and VET programs and others very little or none at all
- some students have access to a range of quality specialist subject teachers and others have to learn by distance education because the numbers of students are not there to support a specialist teacher
- some students have access to counsellors, career advisers and other para-professional staff while others have no access at all
- some students have access to a range of support services and programs and others little or none.

9.2 General community reactions

The Report proposed a solution to this inequity by arguing for the creation of 'groups of schools' in a Precinct to share resources. The reaction has varied from outrage to "let's explore the possibilities."

The initial concern focused on a number of issues:

- the proposal for precincts included primary schools. The primary schools were concerned because they thought that the original review was only targeting secondary education and did not envisage that it would have an impact on them
- the recommendations removed school councils' decision making role in their school and reduced it to an advisory role to a Precinct Board. The community described the Board as everything from a bunch of faceless bureaucrats in the shadows to a district board with the right to hire and fire teachers locally
- on the one hand, the proposed structure in the Report was very fluid about how or with whom a Precinct would be constructed. Yet the governance structure was explained in significant levels of detail. Suspicion about purpose was rampant.

Arising from the responses of Phase One of the community consultation where many participants wanted to know more about the subject of Precincts, a Topic Sheet on what the Report said about Learning Precincts was developed to assist school communities in their consideration of the proposal.

This explained the rationale behind the proposal. Put simply, the Report said that the great challenge has always been to have sufficient resources to fund a quality education for all students in the Territory. It argued that if more students were to receive a better go there needs to be a fairer sharing of existing educational resources across the Territory.

The community took the issue of 'distribution' up in the consultation. Interestingly, responses have varied according to regions, predominantly between those within the Darwin region and those outside of Darwin. For example, it was put to us that almost two-thirds of TEPs are located in Darwin High School, Casuarina Senior College and NTOEC. There is only one TEP among all the remote schools across the Territory. Or for example in the small high schools in Darwin, teachers are teaching specialist subjects to classes of 6 and 7 students in NTCE subjects and in remote areas some students have no secondary teacher at all.

During the community forums the alternative side of the argument was put. For example, an executive member of the Casuarina Senior College Student Representative Council argued against the sharing of TEPs from his school as it would limit CSC students' access to them and potentially impact negatively on the results achieved by the students of that college.

In essence those strongly opposed to the recommendation argued that Precincts threatened the excellence of their schools and diluted the efforts of parents and teachers in their local school.

Outside Darwin the response was different.

The lack of resources and opportunities is more marked in regional and rural areas and the willingness to examine options for closer co-operation and sharing of resources is much stronger. This has been reflected in the pattern of responses.

The general responses included the following:

- there is already a lot of sharing going on
- it is nearly always transient because it relies on the goodwill of the parents and teachers organizing it
- when they move it often falls over
- the sharing relies on people doing it as an extra with no official support or funding to assist their efforts
- Learning Precincts would mandate the sharing and may provide the organisers to cement it so that it is formalized into the structure of schools.

However, the key elements of the proposal on Learning Precincts from the Report were rejected across the Territory.

9.3 The Governance Model

There is very little support for the governance model for Learning Precincts as described in the Report. The Report proposed the following:

The precinct would be led by a Head of Precinct (HOP)

This position is seen by the community as one more highly paid bureaucrat. The community felt that what was more urgently needed was more teachers in schools. They want to know that, if resources are scarce, why do we need another bureaucrat?

Teachers and principals spoke of other historical models of grouping schools. Some see the proposal in the Report for a Head of Precinct as returning to the bad old days of the Regional Superintendent.

The precinct would be governed by a Learning Precinct Board

The Board was seen as comprising more faceless bureaucrats. Individual school and parent representation would be limited. This is seen as a transfer of power from the school to a new administrative organization. It was argued that this was counter-productive and that it could produce the opposite effect of what was intended.

Individual school councils would become advisory to the Precinct Board

This is rejected absolutely by COGSO and many parent members of school councils across the Territory, as well as teachers.

Staff and parents on the Precinct Board would be given professional development to undertake their roles on the Precinct Board

This is seen as offering professional development to run a bureaucracy rather than the professional development which is urgently needed to improve teaching and learning in schools.

A restructure of leadership and management positions within the precinct

A range of stakeholders have simply said that they do not understand what is meant by this.

The AEUNT have rejected this and any other suggestion about local employment of teachers by the Precinct Board. ANTSEL submitted that “at this stage we do not believe that Learning Precincts will make sufficient difference to learning outcomes.” However, they continue to support the concept of devolution and argued that Learning Precincts will develop as considered necessary by groups of school communities and “they would need to be offered and grown, not forced.”

Staff would belong to the Precinct, not to one school

The AEUNT rejected this proposal for teachers as it could lead to the right to hire and fire.

However there is a high level of acceptance that schools may need to share a group of support staff such as counsellors. We repeatedly heard that job vacancies for counsellors are advertised and no applicants come forward. Everyone has identified the need and the idea of a group of schools sharing a group of support staff is a better alternative to what many have at the moment – nothing.

9.4 Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations that make reference to Learning Precincts or assume Learning Precincts as the basic structure. The following recommendations are those which deal with the establishment of Learning Precincts or where the focus is on Learning Precincts.

Recommendation	Commentary
<p>14. the NT Government endorse the principle of Learning Precincts and support their introduction by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing for their establishment in legislation • authorising a plan similar to that outlined in Chapter 7 for establishing their functions and operations • requiring schools, within six months of the acceptance and publication of this report, to have completed initial discussions about which schools will join together, so that precinct development might then proceed through the phases outlined in Chapter 7 • supporting the establishment of each precinct with additional funds in the form of a Precinct Establishment Grant to cover development costs, paid annually, but contingent upon successful completion of each of Phases One to Three • re-naming School Councils and re-defining their roles and responsibilities as contained in the Education Act. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The principle of Learning Precincts received very little support. The community overwhelmingly rejected the forced introduction of Learning Precincts and plan as described in the Report.
<p>17. to assist in the planning for learning precincts, NT DEET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work with schools their communities and other relevant agencies to develop Learning Precincts as defined in this report according to the specific and different needs of urban, regional and remote areas • when a particular set of partnerships is agreed upon, work with an initial implementation group to be formed, consisting of the current school principals and school community representatives, to prepare a plan for precinct development, following the phases outlined in Chapter 7 • as a matter of priority, hold discussions with the Palmerston and Taminmin High Schools communities and the wider Palmerston and outer Darwin communities to determine the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This recommendation was rejected by the community because it is conditional upon the endorsement of establishing Learning Precincts.

<p>most appropriate option for the new secondary education facility in Palmerston, and that options considered be in accordance with the Learning Precinct model as outlined in this report</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as a matter of priority, hold discussions with the CDU so that the memorandum of understanding between DEET and the university regarding Centralian College is in accordance with the Stages of Schooling and Learning Precinct models • work with its own schools and any non-Government schools that wish to be involved with a precinct, to establish individually negotiated Memoranda of Understanding about the terms of their participation. 	
<p>18. to assist in the establishment of Learning Precincts NT DEET work with schools to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implement the introduction of Learning Precincts through a staged process according to the four phases of precinct development as outlined in this report. The development of precincts should coincide with the movement of Year 7 into high school in the Top End, and with Year 10 consolidating with Years 11 and 12 at the same time, planned for 2006 • adopt as guidelines for precinct development and implementation the advice provided in this chapter about the responsibilities and operation of learning precinct governance structures, about relationships between precincts and between them and NT DEET, and about links between the Quality Services Agency and the precincts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This recommendation deals with the operational aspects of implementing Learning Precincts and was rejected by the community.
<p>32. NT DEET, as part of its responsibilities to oversee the formation of learning precincts, work closely with <u>urban</u> and <u>regional</u> schools and learning precincts to develop and implement a strategic plan of infrastructure utilisation, maintenance, re-modelling and rollout to support the range of new pedagogies proposed by this review.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The concept of developing and implementing a strategic plan of infrastructure utilisation, maintenance, etc was supported by some school communities. However, their support is not conditional upon the establishment of Learning Precincts.

9.5 Community Ideas

Overall, the responses on Learning Precincts are negative. It was summarised by ANTSEL as, “At this stage we do not believe that Learning Precincts will make sufficient difference to learning outcomes.”

In sum, the community outside of the Darwin region supports the principles behind Learning Precincts - that is, given the size and distribution of students in the Northern Territory and limited resources, schools accept that sharing of resources and expertise is inevitable. They are also much more receptive and optimistic about the benefits that can come about by pooling their resources and sharing their expertise.

However, the community is cynical about how a restructure will deliver better educational outcomes. The community is also concerned that many logistical issues, such as transporting of teachers and students, have not been thought through in considering how Learning Precincts can work in a practical sense. Many have commented about how ‘they just cannot see how it can work’.

Value of School Councils

While some sections of the community are willing to embrace the principles behind the Learning Precincts proposal, the governance model described in the Report received the most criticism. The community places a high value on school councils and any move to diminish their status and remove their decision making powers was totally rejected. The governance model threatened the ‘sovereign’ status of schools.

A number of suggestions were made in the submissions received.

Strengthening Clusters

The most common response was that the clusters could be strengthened or expanded rather than create yet another alternative (i.e. Precincts).

ANTSEL argued that the purpose of clusters was little understood outside the principal and director ranks.

Conversely some remote principals talked of the value of clusters, of the professional development opportunities that clusters had provided for them (East Arnhem principals visiting remote schools in Queensland), of the fact that they could provide a much stronger locality based network for Teaching and Learning.

There is a general sense in the submissions that we have not fully explored or supported the structures we currently have. Instead the Report looked to creating yet another solution by restructuring.

Regional Structures to Broker Schools' Needs

COGSO recommends that an alternative way of improving service delivery and integrating services supplied by different agencies is to establish a regional structure to broker school needs with different providers and coordinate their delivery. The structure will be set up regionally, in urban, regional and remote locations, to organize and coordinate the delivery of support services. Unlike Learning Precincts, they are not intended to manage the total human and physical resources.