



INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

RESPONSE FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

INTRODUCTION

The Department of Education and Training (the Department) welcomes the opportunity to provide a written response to the inquiry into the current child protection system in the Northern Territory. In preparing this response, the central issue of child protection has been viewed from the broadest possible perspective.

An underlying premise guiding action is that students' safety and wellbeing is enhanced when they are regularly engaged in care, education and training that is a positive experience, supported by their parents and which positions them well for real life choices.

This submission reflects on the Department's current activities in relation to child protection, the challenges currently faced and possible solutions in moving forward. It includes the Department's perspective on the child protection roles and responsibilities of other government organisations and intergovernmental actions and opportunities.

The Department acknowledges the process of ensuring the wellbeing of children and young people is in a constant state of development and improvement and will carefully and purposefully consider any recommendations made by the

Board of Inquiry on this important matter with a view to consolidating and enhancing current practice.

The Department understands and accepts that while its efforts to deliver effective education services and ensure student wellbeing have been committed and purposeful, success at the level we demand has not always been achieved. Within some communities it can be said that we have faced intergenerational failure with our efforts to increase retention and significantly raise attendance and performance. In these communities the outcomes we desire have not been achieved with both the individual students and broader community facing further disadvantage as a consequence.

The Department does not retreat from this reality but acknowledges that new approaches that build on existing strengths are required. Our approach is by necessity increasingly strategic in nature and directed at holistic approaches to deliver system level change, whereas previous approaches could be considered more reactionary and focused on regulatory issues.

We plan to build on the reality that we have a long term connection with students and their families from birth through to employment and beyond. It is our strategic intent to add clarity of purpose to schooling for students, particularly those in our remote locations and to work within communities to deliver real life outcomes for them. Through a more holistic approach we will deliver better outcomes and significantly impact on individual and community wellbeing.

CURRENT DET CHILD PROTECTION ACTIONS AND STRATEGIES

The Department provides a range of education services to Northern Territory families. In this sense the Department is a universal provider of broad wellbeing and child protection services.

The Department is currently implementing a range of relevant national and Territory strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people that access NT school education services. 'Wellbeing' is defined as the promotion of the physical, psychological, academic and emotional health of students and is therefore the core business of our schools. It is however true to say that our success in the child protection sense is sometimes equated to the clinical components outlined below.

1. Early Detection and Referral

Department staff are trained professionals who come into frequent and regular contact with children, young people and their families. They are therefore well placed to observe whether children and young people are at risk of, or actually suffering harm or exploitation.

The Department co-ordinates and provides Mandatory Reporting Training for all staff as a key element of its role in child protection. This responsibility is embedded in Departmental policy which reflects the Care and Protection of Children Act (2007). Similarly, the Care and Protection of Children (Children's Services) Regulations require all licensed services to have a range of mechanisms to provide safe and responsive environments to prevent harm to

children. The Department administers these regulations and regularly monitors licensed services to ensure compliance.

The Department is vigilant in ensuring that staff receive up to date training in mandatory reporting and that they fill their responsibilities in a professional manner.

The Department has a strong, connected and continuing presence in communities. For many communities it is the only point of government service delivery. Through the integration of early childhood services within education and with the advent of initiatives to dramatically increase access to quality early childhood services, the Department is able to connect with children and families much earlier. Through earlier connection, and supported by diagnostic mechanisms in preschool, we are able to more comprehensively screen students at a younger age for a range of wellbeing related issues. This screening is soon to commence in early primary education.

With early identification comes the capacity to intervene early and improve success rates across all age levels. Similarly the Department is restructuring its service delivery model to a more efficient regionalised model which allows for targeted and locally focused services to be placed much closer to clients. This allows for quicker and more responsive intervention services.

2. Prevention

The Department supports a large range of preventative programs and initiatives within schools both directly through the provision of training and resources, and indirectly

through acknowledgement and reference to the curriculum framework which governs the programs taught in NT schools. These programs are designed to strengthen individual student wellbeing. In this way a range of programs are available for teachers to access and use as part of their daily teaching program.

The 'Keeping Safe' Child Protection Curriculum has recently been endorsed as a fundamental curriculum support program. It is being phased into forty targeted remote schools in the first instance and pending resource availability will be implemented into schools across the Northern Territory. It teaches students to understand and enact 'preventative and protective' behaviours to keep themselves safe. It teaches resilience and appropriate strategies for reporting potentially harmful behaviours.

3. Intervention - Early and Ongoing

The Department has a significant commitment to early intervention and a focus on ensuring that such intervention occurs as early as possible. Beyond this commitment the Department provides ongoing intervention services and programs targeted to vulnerable families and children. These include the following:

Student Services Disability Support Services – DET provides a range of specialist services for the early identification, assessment and diagnosis of students with special needs.

School Counsellor Service – the provision of individual and group counselling support for students identified as being at risk. The School Counsellors also provide mandatory

reporting training for DET staff and assist with the implementation of the 'Keeping Safe' Child Protection Curriculum.

Externally funded school-based programs include-

- Clontarf Football Academy Programs (at Palmerston High, Casuarina Senior College, Centralian Middle School, Katherine High, Sanderson Middle School, Dripstone Middle School, Tennant Creek, and Jabiru) provide a football based program that encompasses leadership and other skills for students at risk.
- Smith Family provides administration support to the Indigenous Students Mentorship program.
- Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT) Youth Crime Prevention and Reduction program.
- The Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation Partnership for Success project in Groote Eylandt.

4. Working with Other Agencies

The Department is currently working with a range of other departments and organisations to support child protection and wellbeing. As an example the Department is currently working with the Department of Health and Families to develop an integrated approach to referrals and early intervention processes for at risk children. This includes the development of data sharing and collaboration protocols.

Additionally the Department is working cooperatively with NT Police and the Department of Health and Families in the implementation of the 'Keeping Safe' Child Protection

Curriculum. Staffs from all three agencies are trained to deliver the curriculum in schools and also support the school implementation teams as they work with the community on curriculum engagement. The Department enjoys a positive working relationship with the NT Police and the Department of Health and Families as active members of the Child Abuse Taskforce Management Group through which information on 'hot spots', where issues of child protection have surfaced, is shared so that appropriate action, including the delivery of targeted programs, can occur.

The *Family Responsibility amendment* to the *Youth Justice Act* provides for a collaborative approach to supporting at risk families and the Department is an active member of the Interagency Collaboration Panel. While this legislation is currently limited to the Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs regions, the Interagency Collaboration Panel are looking to have the necessary legislative amendments made to extend the schedule and apply the principles through co-ordinated management across other areas. In the interim, the Department is working to extend the family support concept and take on a lead role across other regions.

5. Provision of Student Support Services

The Department provides targeted and client focused support through its Student Services and Early Childhood sections.

Student Services provides specialist advisory support to schools in relation to children and young people with special needs, as well as creating a policy environment that enables all students to attain quality educational experiences and

outcomes. These specialist services include vision, hearing, early childhood intervention, Autism Spectrum Disorder and special education advisory support.

A focal area is the wellbeing of children and young people. Student Services provides support to schools around whole school and individual student wellbeing, behaviour, child protection, mental health, including school psychology services. Alternative pathways are also provided to support children, young people and their families disengaged from mainstream educational settings.

Early childhood services are provided through the Early Childhood Policy and Regulations section. The section was created through the bringing together of the resources of the Children's Services Unit from the Department of Health and Families and the Early Years Team from DET. This section provides greater integration of early childhood education and care services for children aged from birth to eight years. Its aim is to provide the opportunity for all children to have the best start in life, achieved through improving the quality of, and access to, early childhood education and care services for families and young children.

CURRENT DET CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The Department recognises that there are numerous challenges pertaining to child protection in the Northern Territory. The following information highlights some specific and contextual challenges and includes possible solutions. The Department also recognises that some challenges will

remain and need to be addressed regardless of the changes made to the existing child protection system.

1. Cultural and Geographical Issues

The Northern Territory is one of the nation's most culturally and geographically complex settings with more geographical and cultural dispersal than in most other jurisdictions. Many school aged children and young people come from a very diverse range of language and cultural groups and many retain close social connections to particular communities despite often attending centralised schools and educational facilities. The distances between locations are often extreme and the costs associated with delivering services can be prohibitive. Coupled with this is the relative degree of disconnect in terms of policy and practice between government agencies, often despite significant goodwill and intent.

In many Indigenous Communities schooling is still seen as optional or at best a part time activity. There is only a limited value placed on education as a passport to employment. For many communities what is not present is the collective long term understanding of the connection between success at schooling and employment and positive life choices.

Increasingly communities, both remote and provincial, are indicating a diminished confidence in their ability to influence their young people in socially responsible behaviours. These cultural challenges present as reoccurring themes affecting positive wellbeing in students.

Solution

The solution is complex but involves maintaining and extending the positive relationships that have been developed in many communities with the local school staff. It involves working with local community members to develop new and different agreements which make clear the connections between schooling and employment opportunities for those who attend and achieve. It involves concerted effort from each school principal and staff in working with the local community to change attitudes and increase attendance. This approach will require compacts to be developed between government, the community and local industry. The development of shared co-ordination protocols for community engagement, community mapping and engaging Cultural Consultants will also contribute to the solution.

2. School Attendance

School attendance in remote and very remote settings is a critical issue. Low attendance significantly restricts student access to literacy and numeracy and to programs designed to support holistic health and wellbeing. Community attitudes to school attendance vary, but even in communities where education is seen as important, attendance patterns can often be low due to a lack of understanding and/or acceptance that attendance means a regular rather than spasmodic presence.

Solution

There is need for rigorous and systemic interventions. Strong community engagement is essential to drive the success of attendance improvement interventions. As above, attendance can be improved through clear

community agreements which link attendance to school performance and then job opportunities. At a policy level, a much stronger policy based approach to school attendance is required.

3. Staff Retention

The Department faces a significant staff retention challenge, particularly in our remote communities. Our staff supply base remains relatively stable at the moment, as does demand. However, the average stay for teachers in some remote locations is less than 12 months. Success in schooling, and therefore positive wellbeing outcomes for students, particularly in remote locations, is built around quality community relationships and quality student-teacher relationships, which take time to develop. Without staff stability our capacity to support positive wellbeing is significantly reduced. When teachers leave, training and development effort is lost, specific knowledge of students and families is lost, and community trust and confidence is diminished and needs to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Solution

The Department has clearly identified this challenge and has planned strategic measures to address this issue. The new Departmental workforce strategy focuses on the recruitment and retention of quality personnel, particularly in our remote schools. We plan to better induct and develop staff, to provide better incentives to attract staff to the Northern Territory and then stay for an extended time – at least three years.

4. Inter-agency Coordination

The coordination of services between Government agencies is a challenge. There are numerous examples of agencies either treading over one another to service the same client, or conversely 'passing the buck' onto others.

Interdepartmental collaboration has proved a consistent challenge, not only in the Northern Territory but across jurisdictions.

In the Northern Territory collaborative initiatives have repeatedly stalled. A lack of agreement at Departmental and Divisional level, together with the lack of connected Departmental policy and operational guidelines for child protection may be contributing to the ineffective service delivery. These arrangements are often made in an ad hoc manner between individual staff in response to clients reaching a crisis point. This lack of consistency and reliance on working relationships and personality based negotiation increases the risk of inappropriate, inconsistent, duplication of service provision with further risk of discontinuity with high staff turnover.

Solution

Shared responsibility and accountability with individual and collective agency role clarity is central to improved service delivery. The introduction of shared interdepartmental operational protocols will ensure lead departmental responsibility. The development of guidelines and protocols for shared service delivery responsibilities within the Department and between agencies will also contribute to clarity.

5. Leadership

Leading schools is a complex and challenging role requiring high level educational knowledge, business acumen and high level people skills. In remote locations it also requires an acute awareness of cultural issues and practices if even basic inroads are to be made. It is an ongoing challenge to source and then up skill candidates for school leadership, particularly in remote locations.

Solution

Strategies are in place to develop and support our leaders to operate more effectively. A key initiative is the creation of a Leadership Institute tasked with strengthening leadership quality and capacity within schools. The Department is also preparing for implementation of a capability framework that will deliver greater staff accountability as well as clarify competency expectations of individuals and the role of layers of management. The framework will provide a structure for future leadership as well as enhance the development of future leaders. A particular focus will be ongoing cultural training for leaders to better equip them for effective operation within remote locations.

6. Well Being and Child Safety as Core Business of Teachers

The demands on the teaching profession to improve learning outcomes has created a possible disconnect of expectations between educators and the community. In some instances the mantra of “my job is to teach” is residual and needs constant reframing. While societal expectation on the teaching profession has broadened to include mental health and wellbeing education, in addition to the traditional education of reading, writing and arithmetic, engaging all

teachers to see this as core to their business is an ongoing challenge.

Solution

The Department has adopted a broad view of wellbeing and constantly articulates this as the core business of schools. This needs to continue and be presented in fresh and engaging ways. The core business of schools is continually changing to take into account the issues such as the national curriculum, literacy and numeracy achievement data and the holistic wellbeing of children. It is the Department's challenge to train and support its teaching staff to understand and embrace such changes. The development of clear agreements with communities on the role of schooling and the work to be expected by the school is a key part of this communication strategy.

THE WAY FORWARD

The Department's thinking and planning reflects a belief that if we are to change the practices and outcomes of a generation, then we must think and act differently. If we are to see real change and improvement it makes no sense to replicate the actions of the past. New ideas, new approaches are required. However the Department remains cautious about change that is not grounded in good theory and which is not supported by evidence. As we look to develop new approaches, it is our challenge to embrace and build upon the strong and positive foundations that have been developed over time.

Schools are uniquely placed as central and consistent points of community service delivery. They are often the centre of community activity and fill a crucial role in community relationship building and empowerment. They are organisations where local community members are employed to support the learning needs of children and young people. They are organisations which generally engender trust. The Department places a premium on our capacity to build positive relationships within communities as a basis for working to improve student wellbeing, but acknowledges that this requires constant focus and effort.

The Department has developed a clear strategic blueprint for moving forward to deliver outcomes for all students in the Territory and with this will come improved student wellbeing. The following are seen as key strategies to meet the challenges identified and further improve student wellbeing.

1. A Focus on the Early Years

The Department is looking to play more heavily in the 0-3 space in all schools across the Territory. The Department will be instrumental in providing services to support families and children in the 0-3 age group. These are formative and critical years. Data is reflecting trends that show increased numbers of students enrolling in school either with learning deficiencies or not school ready.

The Department will work to offer services and educational programs that enable families and children to connect with school, thus improving learning outcomes. Our practices will be informed by Australian Index of Educational

Disadvantage (AEDI) data which provides a location based guide to areas of high support need.

2. Coordination Role

The Department sees itself as being well placed to take on a key coordination role and is willing to accept such a role for 0-3 services in our remote areas. Our continuing presence in communities and the sound relationship base from which we endeavour to work has us ideally positioned to take on such a role. The Department sees this role as particularly focusing on care, health and education of students in the remote and very remote regions.

The Department will be the focus point and host location for prevention and education services. The Department is working with the Department of Health and Families to implement integrated family services in the 20 Growth Towns. The aim of the Integrated Family Services program is to support parents to raise their children to have the best possible start in life. The program focuses on improving the quality of, and increasing access to, early childhood development services to ensure parents have the support of the community and its resources. Services will include parenting support, child care, nutrition, maternal and child health, teenage sexual health, preschool, playgroup and early intervention programs.

This is a must for remote and very remote regions. However, while the focus is on remote and very remote locations, there is capacity for this service model to be replicated in the provincial centres.

It must be noted that triage and placement actions are best placed and managed by designated government agencies.

3. Community Engagement in Education Strategy- in our very remote communities

The working title for this engagement strategy, “Pathways to Jobs and Choice” explains the intention and direction of the strategy. The Department will focus on improving student retention through a community engagement in education strategy, particularly in remote and very remote regions. The scope of the strategy will be ‘Birth to Jobs’ with training serving as a key component to up-skill young people and subsequently providing real life opportunities.

Successful education experiences for students are central to addressing child protection and wellbeing issues. A central challenge for many children and young people in our remote locations is that often the family and community commitment to education can be spasmodic.

The Department focus will be on delivering Birth to Job (B2J) programs and support in all regions. This includes an increased focus on the early years (Point 1) through to supporting students to be ready for and gain meaningful employment, particularly in remote locations. The Department will increasingly support young people with job ready training programs and focus on higher level certificate attainment (e.g. Certificate 3) linked more directly to community employment opportunities. Effective vocational learning modules, embedded within the identified learning program and linked to local industry and employment needs are crucial if students are to make meaningful progression towards employment. The intention is to connect

communities with the purpose of education and care and deliver real outcomes for students.

In targeted locations The Department will look to develop B2J Colleges. These will be central to the coordination of education, training and care services for children in the Territory Growth Towns and their respective hinterland communities. The development of B2J Colleges is underpinned by effective and meaningful community engagement; a significant focus on early childhood development, encompassing children and families from birth and a strong interface with the Department of Health and Families resulting in seamless integrated services including child welfare.

The B2J Colleges will include dedicated child and family centres providing, both 'in situ' and outreach programs such as Families as First Teachers, provided by qualified early childhood educators. They will ensure universal access to preschool programs and be the prime interface with the Department of Health and Families, Family and Children's Services and other key early childhood service providers. The B2J College will become a community hub, in the true sense of partnership for the care, protection and education of children. Increased employment in the longer term will significantly impact on child protection and wellbeing matters.

This strategy requires strong buy in from industry, business and local government agencies as potential employers. This buy in must be real and tangible. Setting up such partnerships and maintaining them is a designated role which requires ongoing resource commitment.

4. Focus on Disconnected Youth

The Department will coordinate Alternative Education Programs (AEP) in the provincial centres in a coordinated effort to re-engage disconnected youth. The focus will be on providing a variety of pathways designed to reconnect young people. AEP focus on re-engaging students in education, training, and employment. The Department will do this by working in partnership with key government agencies and other service providers.

5. Interagency Coordination Group

Interagency coordination is fundamental to progressing a 'way forward'. The Department proposes that an Interagency Coordination Group be established and charged with taking responsibility for the development and alignment of strategic and operational policy and implementation planning of child protection.

If it is to succeed, the Coordination Group must be represented by high level inter-department officers who have decision making authority. The group would be formally established for a period of no less than 2 years. The function and outcome requirements of the Coordination Group should be endorsed by Department Chief Executives and relevant Northern Territory Government Ministers.

6. 'Guarantee' for Children in Care

The Department accepts that it will play a crucial role in supporting the learning needs of Children in Care. The Department will provide a 'guaranteed' educational service provision for 'children in care'. The Department is looking to develop an agreement with other agencies around the

timely provision of relevant information to support these children. The Department's 'guarantee' would include enrolment in a school of choice, immediate access to a designated support person (SESO), additional funding to support the implementation of a targeted educational plan followed by longer term support. In order to achieve this there must be clear and concise information sharing between all stakeholders. This actioning of this guarantee will require extra resources available to the Department as needed.

7. Fast Track Intervention

The Department recognises the need for strengthened and timely responses where incidents demand critical interventions. Reports and substantiated incidents of child protection must be investigated and responded to as a matter of urgency. The Department has the view that when a principal or other senior school officer raises the alarm on issues of suspected child abuse there is reason for concern. It is evident that often a non response is more related to resourcing than a lack of trust or perceived need. A guaranteed fast track response would require increased resourcing.

8. A Continued and Expanded Proactive Engagement Strategy in Child Protection

The Department is currently implementing the 'Keeping Safe' Child Protection Curriculum in 40 targeted remote schools (pg 2 Prevention). The Department will look to build on this initiative through a continued and expanded focus on proactive engagement in child protection through the curriculum. There are a number of points within the

current Northern Territory Curriculum Framework that lend themselves to a designated focus on child protection related issues. The Department will look to identify and develop targeted resources for teachers to make better targeted use of these opportunities. The Department is keen to implement the Keeping Safe Child Protection Curriculum in all Northern Territory Schools. However this will require significant extra resources as implementation requires significant professional development as part of the agreement to utilise this resource.

CONCLUSION

The Department of Education and Training considers that there is opportunity to ensure that the promotion of the wellbeing of children, young people and their families is the shared responsibility of all levels of government, and that related services are effectively co-ordinated across government and non-government agencies. While there is no doubt that an integrated model of co-ordinated service delivery is a desirable and more effective course of action, the difficulty continues to be the ability to practically implement such a model. There is a critical need for the availability of funding mechanisms to facilitate interagency collaboration through the establishment of strategic liaison positions to ensure an integrated model is sustainable. The Department acknowledges that there is always more to be done to ensure broad community wide understanding of wellbeing and clarity of referral pathways directly from universal into secondary/targeted services. To this end the Department is committed to collaborating in the development of a public health approach to the wellbeing of

children and young people and strongly endorses the creation of common guiding principles across government and non-government agencies.

The Department thanks the Board of Inquiry for this opportunity to provide this submission.