



Time for positive measures in new partnership with Indigenous communities

Aboriginal people want effective and reliable services, schools and jobs in their own communities. This is the clear message from the recently released 'Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory' report. "That's what it takes to grow the NT fairly," said Jonathan Pilbrow, Coordinator, Central Australia, NTCOSS.

The Stronger Futures report states that Aboriginal people feel hurt at the way the Northern Territory Emergency Response was implemented. These mistakes should never be repeated. "New policies should be based on what communities, non-Government organisations and governments know works."

Community members suggested a raft of measures to improve school attendance, including introducing Aboriginal culture into the curriculum, involving elders and parents more in school activities, developing mentoring programs for parents, and doing more to attract and retain good teachers. "We must use this feedback from Aboriginal communities to find a way forward," said Mr Pilbrow.

"NTCOSS shares the widely held concerns in the community that too many children are missing out on a good education either because they don't attend every school day or because the schools don't offer what they need. However, we are concerned that the Government is considering extending programs that take a punitive approach by suspending parents' income support if their children don't attend regularly - before such measures have been properly evaluated.

"The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) trials in the NT and Queensland haven't yet been evaluated and there's no solid evidence they have been effective - and the scheme is very costly to administer.¹ A similar trial in Halls Creek was evaluated, and failed largely due to lack of engagement between the school and the local community.

"The suspension of income support payments, like the Income Management scheme, discriminates against the poorest and indirectly against Indigenous Australians, who are the most impacted by these policies. Truancy is not confined to families on social security payments only, and low income and Indigenous parents are not the only ones with responsibilities to get their children to school.

"A fairer and more effective approach requires communities and schools to find solutions to this complex problem that match the needs of each community. An intensive case management approach, with workers closely connected to both school and community, will produce better results than a punitive approach which could create financial hardship. Policies in this area should recognise that parents, communities and Governments are all responsible to ensure children get a good education, not the parents alone," Mr Pilbrow said.

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¹ National Welfare Rights Network President Maree O'Halloran: "At a cost of \$28.2 million, the schooling requirements trial must be close to...one of the most expensive social policy experiments in Australian history", *Parents taken off welfare for failing to get children to school*, P Karvelas, [The Australian](#) 21.2.11