

Are Indigenous Voices Being Heard? - Proposed Education Bill

Mrs Tabby Fudge, newly elected President, Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations (COGSO) has today encouraged Minister Chandler to work with stakeholders on the feedback received from Territorians regarding the proposed Education Bill.

Mrs Fudge said “Minister Peter Chandler always promised that families and school communities would have input into any proposed changes to the Education Act.”

“On behalf of Territory families and school communities we provided their feedback and clear recommendations for any new education legislation”.

“Of particular importance is the voice of Indigenous families who provided strong feedback to us regarding the current ‘parent’ definition which does not allow for a person who, under Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition, is regarded as a parent of a child.

“This current definition of a parent is not inclusive and reflective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family traditions and we have requested that the definition of a parent be redefined as a matter of priority.”

“Furthermore, the impact for families with the proposed lowering of the compulsory age of schooling is significant. With research demonstrating that by delaying kindergarten enrollment for one year there are significant mental health benefits for children. Researchers found that children who were held back from kindergarten for as little as one year showed a 73 percent reduction in inattentiveness and hyperactivity compared to children sent the year earlier.”

“COGSO listened to the majority of the almost 800 voices who provided feedback on their concerns with the proposed Education Bill. The Minister has their feedback. We now ask the Minister;

Has the Bill changed from what we originally saw?
Are Territory voices reflected in the legislation?
Has the Minister listened?” Mrs Fudge concluded.

Key Issues following..

16 November 2015

KEY ISSUES **Proposed Education Bill 2015**

COGSO remains concerned, *but not limited to*, the following issues;

Definition of a 'parent' – *NT current and proposed definition* includes the person who has the actual custody of a child and the person with whom a child resides.

1. COGSO is requesting that the definition of a parent be redefined to the following meaning of parent;

Meaning of parent

(1) A parent, of a child, is any of the following

- (a) the child's mother;
- (b) the child's father;
- (c) a person who exercises parental responsibility for the child.

A parent of an Aboriginal child includes a person who, under Aboriginal tradition, is regarded as a parent of the child.

A parent of a Torres Strait Islander child includes a person who, under Island custom, is regarded as a parent of the child.

2. The 'Education Regulations' which will take effect on the commencement of a new Education Act, have not been provided.

It is these Education Regulations which provide school councils with the rules and requirements to govern.

3. **Proposed lowering of the compulsory school age from 6 years old to 5 years old, removing a 12 month period from parents to decide.**

(97% of children aged 5 are participating in school – what is the motivation for change? Is it to take punitive action against the 3%? Are they remote families?)

A clear two-thirds of over 700 Territorians surveyed do not support this change. Research does not support the lowering of the compulsory age of schooling.

	Month of and age for compulsory enrolment
Australian Capital Territory	At least 6 years old
New South Wales	Of or above 6 years old
Queensland	At least 6 years and 6 months
South Australia	Of or above 6 years
Victoria	Not less than 6 years
Tasmania	Turning 6 in the year
Western Australia	5 years and 6 months by 30 June



4. Proposal for a set allocation for each child of 26 semesters of government schooling.

It is COGSO's position that a child's education needs must be met. There must be no limit on or "quota" on a student's education.

5. Fees and Charges for Public Education

COGSO supports the right of every child in the Northern Territory to have access to a high quality, free education regardless of their parents' ability to pay fees or charges.

6. Compulsory Attendance at School.

COGSO is concerned that the following has been removed from the current Act; *"...it is a reasonable excuse if the defendant establishes that he or she is unable to control the child's behaviour to the extent necessary to ensure the child attends school."*

7. Northern Territory Board of Studies (NTBOS) – to be reduced from sixteen members who represent a wide range of education stakeholders, to seven members;

- **Four appointed by the Minister**
- **One a Department of Education employee**

- The current structure of NT Board of Studies is wider reaching than the proposed structure, and is accessible to stakeholders;
- Reduces the independence of the NTBOS as an advisory board.
- May result in curriculum decisions that are based on the opinions of Ministerial appointments and departmental staff only, rather than a wide range of stakeholders.
- Association of Independent Schools and Catholic Sector invited to serve on the Board with no representation from public schools.

8. The Minister remains focused on implementation 1 January 2016; however the need to rush such important legislation and regulations remains unclear to school councils.

Particularly given that the Regulations have not been released. The Bill references the Regulations and we should see both at the same time.

To date there has been no response to the feedback provided from Territorians.

Will we see Territorians feedback incorporated into any proposed legislation?

When will we see the changes?

Further information:

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