

Labor government starves Aboriginal schools of funds in Australia's Northern Territory

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In the midst of the Australian federal Labor government's campaign for a yes vote in its Voice referendum, claiming it will improve the lives of indigenous people, data has emerged showing that the Labor administration in the Northern Territory is grossly underfunding schools in Aboriginal communities.

The territory Labor government is continuing to impose a punitive schools funding model based on attendance, not enrolment. This regime was initially implemented by a Country Liberal government in 2015, but Labor has maintained it since taking office in 2016.

This has exasperated the vast social inequality involved, creating a cycle of worsening literacy rates. Indigenous people make up nearly 30 percent of the Northern Territory's population of about a quarter of a million, and almost 8 percent of Australia's indigenous population. About 45 percent of the territory's young people are indigenous.

Many schools are not receiving adequate support, with attendance rates as low as 20 percent in some cases. This has resulted in 58 percent of all students and 85 percent of indigenous students in the Northern Territory falling below minimum literacy and numeracy standards.

Remote Aboriginal homeland communities have been hit hardest. Many students are learning in buildings without power or water, and 78 of these communities have no access to local secondary education, resulting in high dropout rates and crime.

This is a breach of the basic social right that every child has access to free, high-quality education. In some instances, students are receiving only a part-time education, with a registered teacher providing classes just once or twice a week. Many local assistant teachers are forced to run classrooms for months.

The Australian reported that a remote school at Gamardi, in central Arnhem Land, had its first registered teacher appear on May 18, over three months after the start of the school year.

One in five Northern Territory students have no money spent on their education and over half the student cohort lack funding at some schools. In 2022, it was reported that a school in Gunbalanya had not received any funding for 121 of its 229 students and a school in Yuendumu had 89 unfunded students out of 165.

In 2021, 34 of 151 government schools received less than 50 percent of the allocated income in their school budgets. Every school but three of these had an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island student population of more than 95 percent.

The *Australian* claims that the budget shortfall is due to a bloated education department bureaucracy and proposes reducing employment in the territory's public service by 10,000, as suggested by former senior economist Rolf Gerritsen.

In reality, the deprivation of students flows directly from a funding model that blames schools, communities and students for low attendance rates, which are bound up with poor facilities and deep social problems. This model only multiplies the problems by punishing children.

A 2022 Deloitte report revealed that in 2020, students in the Northern Territory received only 78 percent of their estimated \$29,831 per student required to provide minimum standards of education. That standard, set by the federal government's "Gonski model," is itself inadequate.

Deloitte is an active participant in the corporate world. It "provides audit, consulting, financial advisory, risk advisory, tax and legal services" to the

ruling elites. Its purpose is not to ameliorate social conditions, but to recommend options that “streamline” and improve “efficiency.”

Deloitte’s 2022 report was commissioned by the Northern Territory Department of Education in partnership with Charles Darwin University’s Northern Territory Institute to review “the use of Effective Enrolment in the School Resourcing Model.”

Nowhere does the report mention the squalid conditions suffered as a result of this attendance-based funding model. Deloitte’s only brief was to assist the Northern Territory government in “appropriately allocating” funds as “aligned to the [Education] Department’s strategic goals.”

Neither the federal nor the Northern Territory (NT) Labor governments have made any detailed outline as to how these issues will be addressed. NT Education Minister Eva Lawler essentially defended Labor’s record. She said “intensive work is currently under way to build stronger foundations for long-term improvement for Aboriginal students in the NT.”

Earlier this year, Lawler announced that a shift back to enrolment-based funding would be made “within five years.” The government is in no rush to replace the current system, nor is the Albanese federal Labor government.

In July, Lawler said the territory government would use the attendance formula, which she referred to as “effective enrolment,” to distribute \$40 million of funding that was announced earlier this year by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare last week admitted that Northern Territory schools receive “approximately 80 percent of their full and fair funding level” and “on average, public schools in the NT are the most underfunded schools in the country.”

Clare refused to criticise the proposed five-year delay in scrapping the attendance-based system. Instead, he said his office was “working with” Lawler’s office to ensure funding would be distributed “based on the Gonski model.”

Other statistics from the Northern Territory point to the fraud of the claims made by both the Yes and No campaigns in the Voice referendum that “billions” of dollars are being spent on indigenous programs, insinuating that funds are being wasted.

As 95 percent of the Northern Territory’s prison

population was Aboriginal in 2019, 95 percent of the territory Labor government’s prisons budget was counted as indigenous expenditure. Former senior public servant Bob Beadman told the *Australian* that this was why the government reported “generous” indigenous expenditure.

Despite decades of promises to improve the lives of indigenous people, including via the Voice referendum, conditions have only deteriorated for most of them, and for the working class as a whole. That is why the Socialist Equality Party is calling for an active boycott of the referendum and advancing a socialist perspective to unite the working class against the capitalist profit system that is responsible for the social crisis.

Note: Under conditions of compulsory voting, which makes it a crime to urge a boycott of the vote itself, the SEP calls on workers and youth to register their opposition by casting informal ballots and join our active boycott campaign in the lead-up to October 14, that goes well beyond the individual act of voting.

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