



A tale of two systems

The needs of students in remote communities have been neglected for too long. We can and must do better, writes Jarvis Ryan

In the wash up from the NT election I was asked by media and ministers alike what the main education focus over the next four years should be.

To me, the answer is simple: remote schooling.

We have made some great gains in NT education in recent years, but our story is still too much a tale of two systems: urban versus remote.

The last four years saw improvements in various elements of NT education, but the basic framework of remote education barely changed. Precious little was done to repair the enormous damage done by the Giles Government, which shook things up with Bruce Wilson's 2014 Indigenous education review.

Among other things, the Wilson review led to the introduction of Direct Instruction in 15 remote schools (with no consultation with local communities), the massive reduction of secondary pathways and the promotion of boarding schools as an alternative to community education.

The changes advocated by Wilson amounted to a scorched earth policy for which no one has been held accountable. Teachers and principals in remote schools who had worked hard over many years to build fledgling secondary programs saw them torn down in front of their eyes.

Poor results in the bush were used to justify the policy

changes. Six years on, where are we at? Have the changes led to improvements?

If they have, I'll be the first to welcome them. The Families as First Teachers program seems to have been a success. Beyond that, the picture is gloomy.

A barrier to positive change is the level of official dishonesty and concealment in the remote Indigenous education sphere. Our system is either not honest about flaws in policies or persists with them despite evidence to the contrary.

Five years ago, Direct Instruction was the saviour that was going to light the path for all remote schools. Today, the Department of Education has quietly dropped its support and DI clings on in only three schools. An evaluation conducted by John Guenther found that students in DI schools may have gone backwards in their learning (you can find my interview with John in the previous issue or online).

Other programs continue despite being ineffective, and are not evaluated (publicly at least). A prime example is the Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS), a federally funded program introduced in 2014 which has had almost no impact. In my discussions with remote principals, they almost always criticise RSAS. That hasn't stopped the Federal Government from pouring millions of dollars into the program.

Remote education was largely an afterthought for the Gunner Government in its first term. Lip service was paid to local decision making, but I saw no evidence of this on the ground. Infrastructure spending funded new schools and STEAM centres in urban areas, while

remote schools and teacher housing crumbled.

A housing for local recruits policy was endorsed, but not a single house was provided to a local recruit. Very late in the piece, the government announced that the Remote Area Teacher Education program would be revived next year – on a trial basis. That's promising, but we shouldn't have had to wait five years.

I know our members – especially those of you working out bush – are passionate about wanting to improve educational and life outcomes in remote communities. I want to assure you that our union will put pressure on the government and the Department to step up their game on remote schooling.

We don't want to be adversarial and point fingers. We want to work together to find constructive solutions. But that starts with being honest about where we are at as a system – and asking some hard questions.

For example: What does the evidence show us in terms of what's working and what isn't? What are local people saying about why their kids might not want to come to school? What additional resourcing and support does the government need to provide?

We are six years into a 10-year Indigenous Education Strategy. This strategy is about to be subject to a second phase review. In light of what I've outlined above, I will be urging the Minister and the Chief Executive to ensure this is an opportunity for honest reflection on our progress – or lack thereof.

