

Boarding school policy 'comprehensively failing' remote Indigenous students, study finds

ANU researchers say 59% of 100 young people from one community dropped out in first year of off-country boarding



Top End kids learning on-country: a report says the off-country boarding school system was a 'revolving door' for young people.

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A policy that sees Indigenous students from remote communities board “off-country” in an attempt to advance their educational opportunities is a revolving door that is “comprehensively failing” Aboriginal children and their families, according to a new study.

Australian National University (ANU) researchers tracked the education histories of 100 young people aged between 12 and 21 years old from one Top End community.

They found that over a 10-year period, the community’s young people had been dispersed among 38 different schools across 16 cities or towns in every state or territory of mainland Australia.

Fifty-nine per cent dropped out of boarding school in their first year. Some attended as many as four different boarding schools but none of those who switched completed a full year in their subsequent schools.

The majority of students dropped out in years 7 and 8 and never returned to education.

Families reported it was hard to find schools and secure places for their children. Less than a third of families said they received help from the Northern Territory government's transition support unit.

“In many instances, researchers saw no evidence of free, prior or informed consent,” the researchers wrote. “Many interviewees had not visited the school they attended prior to starting, some could not name the school or even the state where the institution was located. Parents reported that they were just grateful to have found a position and secured funding for their child.”

The report, the first of its kind, was produced by Dr Marnie O'Bryan and Dr William Fogarty from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at ANU.

O'Bryan said the boarding school system was a “revolving door” for young people, who dropped out because they felt socially and culturally isolated – and unhappy being away from country.

“The youngsters found themselves academically unprepared for mainstream secondary education,” O'Bryan said.

“With poor outcomes, high rates of attrition and no alternatives, the NT Indigenous education strategy is comprehensively failing this community.

“These young people are exiting the education system in their early teens never to return. It's an indictment on the provision of education in remote Australia and, in particular, for this remote community.”



‘Young people were very clear they wanted to remain connected to community and family, to country, culture and language.’

There are 78 remote NT communities where young people are required to board off-country because secondary education is not available nearby.

Fogarty said the findings were anecdotally representative of the situation facing most remote communities but more research into secondary education across remote Australia was needed “to see exactly how our First Nations young people are faring.”

“Being disconnected from family and community causes great anxiety for young people, they suffer acute homesickness and anxiety about their families back home, many of whom are experiencing bereavement or health problems,” Fogarty said.

The report found some successful examples, like one interstate boarding school whose teachers visited the community each year to forge and maintain relationships.

The report recommended developing a plan to establish a secondary school on-country.

“The community was very clear they want a school on-country for their young people that they have a hand in shaping and running,” O’Bryan said.

“Young people were very clear they wanted to remain connected to community and family, to country, culture and language.”

The study was carried out at the request of elders concerned about available educational opportunities in their community several hours’ drive from Darwin. The community has been kept deliberately anonymous to protect the residents.