



Welfare reform is working, Pearson insists

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CAIRNS - The Queensland government's welfare reform agenda is achieving results despite concerns it is failing in its objectives to encourage greater parental responsibility, Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson says.

The Queensland government adopted the Cape York Welfare Reform, the brainchild of Mr Pearson, in 2008 to improve parental responsibility in four communities. It included the establishment of the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC), which has the power to quarantine the welfare payments of Cape York parents who abuse or neglect their children, fail to send them to school or commit crimes.

The program is two years into a four-year trial in Aurukun, Hope Vale, Coen and Mossman Gorge. However, FRC registrar Tammy Sovenyhazi told a Senate hearing into remote Aboriginal communities on Wednesday that the scheme hadn't been as successful as hoped and would struggle to reach its objectives during its trial period. She said the number of cases referred to the commission by authorities such as schools and courts had not dropped in its two years of operation. "We would have expected by this time that we would have started to see a drop in the notifications that we receive from those trigger agencies. That hasn't happened," she told a Cairns hearing. "Our biggest concern is that the three-and-a-half years we have to operate is not long enough to see any real change in these communities."

However, Mr Pearson said the commission and welfare reform agenda were yielding results. "I'm not as pessimistic about that, I think there's enough promising signs of school attendance and other indicators," he told reporters after the hearing. Mr Pearson said the welfare reform was improving "social norms" within communities and the rise in expectations and standards had resulted in more people being reported for breaches.

For example, he said, schools had stopped accepting week-long absences for funerals or other purposes as explained absences and now treated them as non-attendance, for which parents could be issued with a breach notice. "What people defined as school attendance in the past was very flaccid (but) those figures that we are getting in relation to school attendance figures are very rigorous numbers." The FRC's most recent quarterly report, tabled in state parliament last month, said it received 782 notifications between October and December last year from a population base of about 3000 people.

By comparison the commission received 754 notifications during its first six months of operation from July 2008. The report also showed school attendance at

the most trouble-ridden community, Aurukun, had jumped from 44 per cent to 66 per cent between term 3 of 2008 and the corresponding period in 2009.

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