

Aurukun: pressure mounts for overhaul of Noel Pearson reforms

Community is divided over the merits of school curriculum and income controls supported by Pearson, but critical voices are getting louder



Noel Pearson has emphatically defended Cape York Academy's running of the Aurukun school in a place he branded 'the Afghanistan of teaching'.

By Joshua Robertson

Thursday 9 June 2016

Calls for an overhaul of Noel Pearson's welfare reforms are growing in Aurukun as the Queensland government considers the first ever rollback of his contentious education program.

Bruce Martin, a Wik entrepreneur from Aurukun who sits on the prime minister's Indigenous advisory council, has joined critics of schooling in the town. He says it bears symptoms of a "hugely expensive" and "fundamentally flawed" welfare regime.

But Pearson's Cape York Partnership has defended the cost of welfare reform – which it puts at \$1 in every \$20 of government funds spent in Aurukun – and its introduction after an "unprecedented" effort at community engagement.

Martin, who has been appointed to work with the government on a new advisory group to give locals a leadership role in driving economic development, said Pearson's Cape York Academy had taken an "authoritarian" and "us and them" approach to running the school.

He said this reflected a broader welfare reform agenda that was developed without substantial local participation, hinging on a punitive approach to social problems through income controls.

"When you have a program like welfare reform, an agenda that's developed independently of Wik people, and when the school program, the education program is a fundamental tenet of the welfare reform agenda and it's again developed in isolation and it isn't driven or led by Wik people, people obviously have no buy-in into it," Martin told Guardian Australia.

"When you promote that this is the only model for social welfare reform, this is the only model for an education program – ie direct instruction and only at primary school, every high school student has to go to boarding school – if that doesn't fit in with the priorities of the community, well of course people are going to disengage."



Bruce Martin (second from left), a Wik entrepreneur and social worker from Aurukun who opposes the welfare reform agenda, with Queensland treasurer Curtis Pitt, Craig Koomeeta (right) and Phillip Marpoondin (left).

The state treasurer, Curtis Pitt, who met Martin to discuss economic development in Aurukun on Monday, said he was "very keen to ensure we get the best value for

money in all government investments”, including the primary school’s controversial multimillion-dollar “direct instruction” program.

Pitt said he would “take a keen interest” in a review due as early as next week to decide whether the government takes over the school, which was shut over fears for the safety of teachers.

A distance education program run at the school by four temporary teachers until next term is catering for an average of 80 of the school’s 230 students.

Pitt, who is also minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander partnerships, said the government “may well need to consider” redirecting investments within education, health and social services “if we aren’t spending the dollars effectively”.

Cape York Partnership, which has a group companies providing many of those services in Aurukun, estimates from almost \$65m in federal and state funding, \$3m a year is spent on welfare reform activities. A spokeswoman said more than half of that went to programs that would be in place anyway, including school and parental support.

She said the welfare program was “designed in close conjunction with Wik people over a number of years”. This included two full-time engagement officers based in Aurukun for 18 months, conducting interviews, workshops and forums – with a special attempt to engage “the most dysfunctional members” of the community.

“Cape York welfare reform is perhaps the best example we have of Indigenous people working to co-design an initiative in a genuine partnership with government,’ she said.

A group of Wik female elders last week asked the premier, Annastacia Palaszczuk, for direct instruction to be scrapped as part of a government takeover amid concerns students were not being prepared for high school.

The elders, who sit on both Aurukun council and the family responsibilities commission – a body that manages income for parents of truant students – also asked the government to reopen a local high school that was closed in 2012 after Cape York Academy took over.

Concerns about the presence of an estimated 70 high school-age students who were in the community without schooling were highlighted after youths allegedly

twice carjacked the school principal and allegedly tried to break in to teacher accommodation.

Cape York Academy has boosted the number of Aurukun students in boarding school – their only high school option – to an all-time high of 57.

Guardian Australia understands 16 boarders have either been expelled or suspended or refused to return this term.

Francis Woolla, 20, who went to boarding school in Brisbane from Aurukun aged 14, said it was a positive experience but not for everyone.



Francis Woolla, 20, with friends in Aurukun, went to boarding school from aged 14 and enjoyed the experience but says a local high school should be reopened.

“It’s good if they’re going to put [the high school] back for other kids who are older, still staying in Aurukun,” he said.

“It would be good for the kids instead of just staying home, doing nothing.”

Pearson, who has called the government review “routine”, has emphatically defended Cape York Academy’s running of the school in a place he branded “the Afghanistan of teaching”.

"This past week has been a travesty of a conversation that was about youth delinquency and law and order in the community has been turned around into a story of the failings of what is a lighthouse school," Pearson has told ABC.

Pearson has also said the key obstacle to welfare reform in Aurukun was a lack of new economic opportunities over the past eight years.

"The thing that's missing at Aurukun is jobs – you can't have welfare reform without jobs and where we have jobs we have welfare reform succeeding," Pearson has said.

However, the criticism from Martin echoes disaffection among some educators, social workers, and local government figures who have previously been reluctant to speak out about the Cape York organisations' role in the community.

This year is the first that Aurukun school – the largest trial school for direct instruction before its national rollout to Western Australia and the Northern Territory – has a student body taught entirely on the program.

The US-imported program – which focuses on basic literacy and numeracy through highly scripted lessons and has attracted \$30m in state and federal funding – has drawn fresh criticism from educators in the wake of the shutdown, including from a former executive principal of the academy.

The school program still has its influential supporters in Aurukun. Wik Women's group cofounders Keri Tamwoy and Phyllis Yunkaporta have written to Palaszczuk defending direct instruction and calling for the school reopening this week.

"Shutting down this safe haven for our children has been gut-wrenching," they wrote. "Premier, our children are learning and achieving at this school and we simply do not understand the logic in its closure due to uncivilised teenagers and ineffective policing.

"The current schooling model has achieved results that we didn't think was possible."

Another former Cape York Academy executive principal, Don Anderson, said he could not understand calls to scrap direct instruction as "the reality is the old [program] wasn't working nearly as well as it's working now".

Naplan data for 40 Aurukun students in year 3 in 2013, shows the proportion that met or bettered national minimum standards two years later increased in spelling (59%) and numeracy (32%).

However, that percentage declined for reading (40%), grammar and punctuation (30%), and was lowest in writing (14%).

An education department source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said this reflected the fact students under direct instruction were not being taught to “analyse and write expository test” which was critical for high school.

Anderson said writing skills were taught to children who progressed through direct instruction, and that the program “wasn’t designed to cure cancer and ingrown toenails”.

“DI will ensure a child who’s got erratic attendance when they come to school, they’ll be taught at the level they’ve left from,” he said.

Anderson said the high school had been closed with the support of the former Aurukun mayor who was “against having that soft option [that] encouraged people to come back instead of going through the struggle that everyone has when they’re going to boarding school”.

The small cohort and narrow range of subjects offered meant the school, which went to year 10, “didn’t prepare [students] at all for the even more complex grade 11 and 12 they were going into”, he said.

Martin, a former youth justice worker who became one of the first Aurukun students to finish year 12 when at Canberra Grammar, said the “reinstatement of a high school isn’t going to be a panacea but it is another important tool in the puzzle that is Aurukun”.

“I got the benefit of an outside education but that isn’t the answer for everyone,” he said.

“We have to have those other opportunities here for those other kids as well, otherwise, once they’re graduating from year six, we’re just writing them off and that’s inexplicable.

"The fact that there are 70 to 80 kids of high school age who currently aren't proactively engaged in mainstream education I think is a travesty."