

## Millions flow to Noel Pearson's education venture against department advice



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By Natassia Chrysanthos

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Millions of taxpayer dollars are being poured into an Aboriginal education venture headed by prominent Indigenous leader Noel Pearson against departmental advice to the education minister that it should not receive any more federal government money.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* investigation has spoken to more than 20 current and former employees of Good to Great Schools Australia, the not-for-profit education organisation founded and co-chaired by Mr Pearson, who say the organisation is “on its knees” under the leadership of chief executive Bernardine Denigan.

They allege Ms Denigan regularly bullies and humiliates employees, leading to an alarming level of staff turnover that has stymied what the organisation can achieve for Indigenous children.

Good to Great Schools has received \$10.8 million to launch a new program this year, despite evaluations that found the organisation's previous program was not ready for scale and did not lead to any statistically significant results when compared with other schools.

The organisation's flexible literacy for remote schools program - which received \$31.55 million in federal government funding between 2014 and 2020 - served a peak of 35 schools across the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia in 2017.

But schools dropped off each year until just eight were still participating at the end of 2020.

A government source not authorised to speak said the federal education department warned the government that the program was achieving poor educational outcomes and federal funding should be reconsidered.

Documents obtained by the *Herald* under freedom of information laws reveal the department in late 2019 advised then-education minister Dan Tehan to inform Mr Pearson that 2020 would be "the final year of Australian government funding".

A draft letter to Mr Pearson, contained in a briefing for Mr Tehan, also rejected two of his organisation's proposals for further funding and advised Mr Pearson to instead "engage with states and territories".

"While the Australian government has a national policy leadership role in education, state and territory government and non-government education authorities have responsibility for education delivery and are best placed to make decisions on which programs are delivered in their schools," the draft letter said.

Limited documents released to the *Herald* do not reveal what happened next, but Good to Great Schools nevertheless received a further \$5.8 million from the federal government in the 2020-21 budget for a new pilot program in 10 schools, to extend the previous program for which federal funding had ceased and expand it into numeracy and science subject areas.

In August 2021, before schools had been signed to the new pilot, GGSA received another \$5 million to cover an additional 10 schools as part of a closing the gap package announced by Education Minister Alan Tudge. It had signed 18 of 20 schools by term one this year, two of which are GGSA's Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy schools.

Mr Pearson has long been regarded as the country's most influential Indigenous figure and has said he counts former prime minister Tony Abbott as a close friend. Over years he has secured millions of dollars in funding from state and federal governments on both sides of politics for various initiatives in Cape York.

Mr Tudge - who is currently stood aside and awaiting a decision about his future in parliament - previously spent three years as deputy director of Mr Pearson's Cape York Institute and outlined his priorities as education minister alongside Mr Pearson last year. Mr Pearson has described Mr Tudge as "a co-fighter in our cause".



*Former prime minister Tony Abbott visits Cape York with Noel Pearson and MP Alan Tudge in 2011.*

The *Herald* requested GGSA's proposal for the new pilot program under freedom of information laws but was refused access to the 40-page document.

Questions sent to acting Education Minister Stuart Robert were referred to the education department. The department did not answer questions about why new funding was granted against its advice, whether the program went to tender, or if there were any criteria for providing additional millions to extend the program before it had begun.

“The Australian government is committed to improving school outcomes in regional and remote communities and its investment in a Good to Great Schools Australia pilot program is one aspect of the plan to achieve that improvement,” a spokesperson said.

### **Staff speak out against chief executive**

The *Herald* has spoken to more than 20 former and current GGSA staff members who criticised the government's funding decision and claimed “there's nothing achieved because staff are constantly leaving” due to the behaviour of Ms Denigan. The Cairns-based organisation employs 26 full-time staff and 14 part-time staff, according to its latest information statement to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.

One internal staffing document seen by the *Herald* shows it hired at least 135 employees between 2018 and 2021 who have since departed. Fifty-five of those people resigned, 16 were fired, and at least nine people were hired as Ms Denigan's executive assistant over the three-year period.

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**Former GGSA staff member**

The former and current employees - who requested anonymity because they fear reprisal - allege Ms Denigan’s behaviour included yelling and name-calling, belittling or disciplining staff members in front of their colleagues, targeting specific employees, undermining workers’ credentials and micro-managing performance.

One former staff member, Carl Manoff, wrote to Mr Pearson and the board of directors in early 2020, urging them to investigate the “incredibly high turnover of staff” and harm inflicted on employees as a result of Ms Denigan’s behaviour.



*Former and current staff at Good to Great Schools have accused chief executive Bernardine Denigan of bullying employees.*

“During my short time at GGSA I have witnessed verbal abuse, employee humiliation and victimisation so blatant and so severe I had not imagined it possible in the modern workplace,” he wrote in the letter which has been seen by the *Herald*.

“Ms Denigan regularly speaks to her people with a degree of incivility unlike anything I have encountered elsewhere... Her tone, her sarcasm, her desire to make me look pathetic was reminiscent of being picked on by the school bully.

“The majority of the ... office and I witnessed Ms Denigan raise her voice at [her assistant] at least three times a day every day for over a week. On two occasions I found [her assistant] red-eyed and tearful as a result of these verbal barrages.”

The Good to Great Schools board did not meet with Mr Manoff to discuss his concerns but emailed him saying they had undertaken an “internal review and preliminary investigation”.

“The board has formed the view that: the matters you allege are not substantiated on the available evidence; or where certain interactions did occur, those interactions were not contrary to the policy or capable of amounting to workplace bullying according to the legal definition,” their response said.

“Accordingly, it has not been established that any inappropriate conduct has been engaged in by the CEO.”

Another former employee told the *Herald* that when she arrived for her first day in the office, a woman was crying at her desk and another of her team members had just quit.



*Good to Great Schools CEO Bernardine Denigan and founder Noel Pearson.*

Multiple people told the *Herald* employees frequently cried at work; one said she lost hair while working there and several others left due to mental health concerns.

The majority of people who spoke to the *Herald* said work was frequently being started from scratch, and several admitted they left the organisation themselves without giving a formal handover.

“Staff turnover is so high, no-one was there for long enough to have handover or consistency in the implementation. You’ve got to figure it out, you figure it out, and you’re out of there,” one person said.

Many complained it “wasn’t accomplishing anything for Indigenous children”.

“That would be the opinion of most of the people that worked there,” another person said. “They came in thinking they were going to do great things for Indigenous schools.

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The *Herald* put detailed questions to Ms Denigan and Mr Pearson three days before publishing this article but did not receive any comments for publication.

### **Program evaluation shows mixed results**

Education consultant Pete Goss wrote a business plan which contributed to the literacy program’s initial government funding. “I’m very proud of that. It’s really important that Australia tests out programs that are backed by evidence and could have the potential to dramatically improve outcomes,” he said.

“The underlying approach has substantial evidence behind it. The question is: does this work in the context and the way it is being delivered? In general terms, successful programs demonstrate that they are impactful and sustainable, so that practitioners want to keep using them.”

The University of Melbourne has produced three government-funded reviews of GGSA’s original literacy program. The final evaluation, which covered years up to 2018 and was published in 2021, said some schools had “tremendous success” with the program but overall there was a mixed perception of its impact on student outcomes and teaching practice.

Analysis of NAPLAN data found most schools improved their average literacy results, four schools’ results declined, and other schools’ results could not be determined.

However, there were no statistically significant differences in effect sizes between the GGSA schools and control schools “in any domain” regarding NAPLAN. “Control schools have recorded greater mean NAPLAN scores compared to schools participating in the program,” it said.

Evaluation data was not made readily available from Good to Great Schools Australia or the individual schools and systems, which the review said was “an indicator of lack of engagement in the evaluation process”.

“Targeted literacy data to determine literacy change has not been made available, which has made it difficult to determine the influence of the implementation of [the program] on individual students over the three-year period.”

It also said there was variation in how schools implemented the program, with external factors such as high teacher turnover negatively affecting some schools’ adherence. “Despite great successes in some schools, the high variability in implementation means the [flexible literacy program] does not appear to be ready for scale.”

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An education department spokesperson pointed to the fact the majority of schools demonstrated a positive change in NAPLAN literacy.

“Looking at the program as a whole, the evaluation found the program is a significant resource for schools that can add value when sufficiently supported,” they said.

“The government will continue to focus on evaluating the effectiveness of program implementation and the department continues to work with GGSA to support the roll-out of the program.”

One school principal who stayed with the literacy program for several years told the *Herald*: “At first when it was on the ground it had fabulous experts and then it all just went down the tube. There was a huge transition in [Good to Great Schools] staffing and what that meant for [our] school was it was too difficult to continue with.”

***Natassia Chrysanthos*** is the education reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.