

## Noel Pearson under fire from all sides over Aurukun school experiment

*An evacuation of teachers amid safety concerns has led to a partial government takeover of his 'lighthouse school'*



*Indigenous leader Noel Pearson has been launching salvos against an array of critics. His Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy school at Aurukun reopens to students next week.*

**By Joshua Robertson**

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The upheaval around a single primary school in Aurukun, Cape York, has evidently been a bewildering experience for Noel Pearson.

What began with an evacuation of teachers over safety concerns in the outside community escalated to the Queensland government contemplating a full takeover of the largest of Pearson's "lighthouse schools".

The government review followed community calls for Pearson's Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA) to be stripped of the school contract and the scrapping of the centrepiece of the education platform – the rigidly scripted, US-

imported, highly controversial literacy and numeracy program called Direct Instruction.

A takeover of Aurukun would have represented the first significant public policy defeat for the Indigenous leader, a rollback of a key plank of his welfare reform agenda, which has spawned its own sizeable private bureaucracy.

Pearson, putting himself in the shoes of Jesus Christ about to face his betrayers by invoking the “gloom of the Garden of Gethsemane”, began launching salvos against an array of critics.

Some of these flew wide of the mark.

Pearson claimed that the Indigenous educator Chris Sarra, a trenchant critic of DI, and his Stronger Smarter Institute, had been “responsible” for Aurukun before CYAAA took over in 2009. He said the Productivity Commission had confirmed the failure of SSI’s own program to lift attendance, literacy and numeracy.

But SSI, which runs teaching training programs, said it had never been responsible for delivering education at Aurukun, nor had its program ever been formally assessed by the commission.

Pearson also blamed worsening social problems in Aurukun – and a failure of policing – for declining attendance at the school, from a 2011 highpoint of 73.2% to 50.8% in 2016.

But he is yet to explain what is behind a long-term slide in attendance rates at CYAAA’s two other smaller schools, Coen and Hopevale, from 96.8% and 87.6% in 2008 – the year before its takeover – to 88.7% and 83.3% respectively in 2015.

The review released on Tuesday, with recommendations adopted in full by the state government, represents a partial defeat for Pearson but falls well short of a humiliating rollback.

The education department will have closer oversight of day-to-day operations and governance, including through an “improvement action plan” for the school, which reopens to students next week.

It will reintroduce two years of high schooling and distance education at the campus, originally scrapped by CYAAA, in an attempt to better prepare young Aurukun teens

whose only option for secondary schooling was leaving town for boarding school. The review noted the presence of disengaged youth in the town and community concerns about their links to delinquent behaviour.

But resisting calls from some in the community, including elders and the Aurukun mayor, Dereck Walpo, it has endorsed CYAAA's ongoing stewardship of the school.

It also upheld a place – albeit diminished – for DI, which has cost \$7.8m in state funds to date.

Amid this partial reprieve, a defiant Pearson has continued counter-attacks, including on a review he said was tarnished by “a whole lot of stuff that is patently incorrect, inaccurate”.

Pearson complained that one of the review team was on holidays in Bali while the review was under way, and that the review team, which included six experienced principals, never saw DI in action.

The review itself notes the team visited and observed classrooms at Coen and Hopevale. They also visited Broadbeach state school on the Gold Coast, which Pearson has lauded as an example of the effectiveness of DI, but which the reviewers noted used DI for only part of its program.

Pearson said the review ignored the “great burden of disability” among Aurukun students. The review cited records showing that there were “currently 10 students (5%) in the school verified with disability, and a further 24 students (12%) awaiting verification”.

An announcement that the state auditor general would investigate possible deficiencies in enrolment and attendance recording and financial “irregularities” at the school was welcomed by Pearson but he said its finances were managed by the education department.

The review revealed the department had suspended funding to Pearson's Good to Great Schools Australia network after two internal audits of CYAAA that found “unsatisfactory” accounting of student outcomes from state funding. This funding totalled almost \$18m in the past five financial years.

But it was on the assessment of the results of DI – a remedial literacy and numeracy program based on rigidly scripted teacher-student interactions and class materials – that Pearson’s assessment diverge dramatically from the review findings.

Pearson said DI was the basis for “astounding progress in student results in foundational skills like literacy and numeracy”.

“We are being hailed as making a real difference in the learning lives of these children,” he said.

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**Queensland government review**

Pearson cited progress in years 3 and 5 that was 181% greater than the average Australian school in reading, 98% greater in writing, and 181% greater in numeracy. “I would hate to see that progress halted, or even worse – reversed.”

The review found the results were inconclusive. It cited evidence of some improvement in year 3 under DI, with students in 2015 achieving the highest yet average scores in reading and writing – but with numeracy scores lower than in 2008 when CYAAA took over.

Year 5 students in 2015 achieved the school’s highest average scores in writing, grammar and punctuation, and the share of students above national minimum standards improving in all literacy areas and in numeracy compared with 2008.

But the review concluded that the Aurukun school was not providing the full Australian curriculum and that the “richness of schooling has been compromised by the pressure of delivering literacy and numeracy using only the DI approach”.

“Many teachers interviewed, both beginning and experienced, expressed significant concerns regarding the regimented nature of the teaching approach and its lack of flexibility,” the review said.

One who was “chastised about moving away from the script” was told, “If you can’t follow the script with fidelity then Aurukun is not the place for you.”

There was no sign in school documents of “the teaching of inquiry skills, critical thinking and problem solving”.

Teachers told the reviewers they were concerned that the focus on literacy and numeracy through DI “may not necessarily prepare students to be successful learners through secondary school, further education and work”.

One said children in boarding school were being “teased and bullied and become disengaged” because they lacked the “social skills to live in a dormitory”. Teachers wanting more time to prepare them were frustrated by the time spent on DI, the review said.

Many teachers said the grinding repetition of lessons for groups where one student had not mastered the material was a key driver of disengagement for others who had. Other problems with DI included an obvious mismatch with US-produced material and students in a remote Indigenous Australian community.

One school staffer said it was “completely Americanised”, with students learning more about US states and holidays such as Independence Day and Thanksgiving than Australia.

Another said: “The language program is totally out of context, it doesn’t relate to Aurukun. Pictures and stories are about America. The information doesn’t spark motivation.”

Another echoed community concerns about the absence of local Wik language and culture in the curriculum, saying, “We need to do more with the Wik language or in 50 years that will be lost.”

The government has decided that Wik language will now be incorporated into early schooling, in part to help the induction of new students for whom it is their first spoken language.

This move has special resonance for community members that recall the “burning” of Wik language books from the school library 15 years ago, long before CYAAA’s reign.

The review recommended the government not scrap DI entirely but relegate it to only part of the curriculum delivery at Aurukun. This is in line with calls from both staff and community members for “a balanced approach to the use of teaching practices”.

What is remarkable about the review is the recurring voices critical of a narrow focus on DI – not from those Pearson has characterised as political enemies of an

important education reform – but from within his very own school and the community that wants to reconnect with it.

That it took state government intervention to give these voices some weight in the way things run at the largest testing ground for this education experiment is equally remarkable.