

Djarragun `rife with nepotism'

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THE nation's showpiece indigenous school allegedly suffered under a culture of bullying, harassment and an ``unhealthy" incidence of nepotism in staff appointments, a secret independent review reveals.

The Australian has obtained the 116-page report into Djarragun College by Cairns solicitor Jim Brooks, which was commissioned by the independent school's board and delivered in March.

Mr Brooks concludes that principal Jean Illingworth led a school that operated on a ``hierarchy of favouritism" of staff, employed unregistered teachers and sacked employees unfairly.

The report is based on 35 interviews with 24 current and former Djarragun staff, including three interviews with Ms Illingworth, who has denied any wrongdoing.

The educator has been on enforced sick leave since shortly after the report was handed to the board and has been banned from speaking publicly about her situation.

Her 50-page rebuttal is being considered by the board, but she has been prevented from releasing it. Before the ban, she told The Australian the claims were untrue.

In a statement provided to The Australian, the board expressed concern that the report had been leaked, noting that Ms Illingworth argued it was ``fundamentally flawed, is biased and failed to ensure a process of natural justice". ``The Djarragun board remains focused on the immediate concern of keeping the college open and negotiating the best way forward for indigenous education and the students, families and staff of Djarragun ," the statement said.

Noel Pearson, whose Cape York Partnerships organisation is in negotiations with the board to take over and overhaul the school, declined to comment.

In the report, Ms Illingworth said the complaints had arisen from ``disgruntled former staff whose employment was terminated because of poor performance" and a campaign by former chief operating officer Louise Redmond to discredit her.

Mr Brooks acknowledged that Ms Redmond ``relentlessly harvested stories of wrongdoing" from staff about Ms Illingworth and senior staff, and that his

investigation was sparked by Ms Redmond's complaints.

However, he said ``many of the concerns" raised by Ms Redmond were legitimate and not all complaints arose from ``malcontents".

Ms Redmond could not be contacted yesterday.

The report lists at least 10 examples of employees' family being given jobs at the school, including Ms Illingworth's daughter.

``Such a circumstance can only be the result of insular, if not nepotistic, rather than merit-based selection processes," Mr Brooks writes.

Djarragun is being investigated by Queensland Police fraud squad, after an audit in April discovered the school wrongly claimed government funding for 250 missing students over three years.