



Students desert remote schools

EXCLUSIVE

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Indigenous school attendance rates plunged last year, particularly in remote districts, with some areas reporting that not one child met the 90 per cent threshold deemed necessary for sustained progress in learning.

In the 2020 academic year, average attendance rates were down in at least 93 of about 150 government schools — in some cases by as much as 35 per cent — compared to figures for the two preceding academic years.

Politicians, experts and many community leaders say education is the key to closing the gap between Indigenous and mainstream Australian well-being and living standards.

The declines driven by COVID-19 were not across the board: most Greater Darwin schools managed to maintain or even improve on their historical attendance rates of about 90 per cent, but those in places such as Rockhampton Downs saw average attendance drop from about 60 per cent in previous years to below 30 per cent during the pandemic.

Appalling rates of about 25 per cent in places like Groote Eylandt barely budged.

In many remote areas, none or just a handful of enrolled kids made it to class regularly enough to meet the 90 per cent attendance threshold experts deem necessary for sustained progress in learning basic skills.

An estimate based on available data shows only about half of all enrolled Year 1 to Year 10 students Territory-wide met the 90 per cent attendance threshold in 2020. Figures for senior students were unavailable. The Territory was less affected by coronavirus than other jurisdictions and did not need to close schools for long periods.

Bruce Wilson, an education consultant who in 2014 published a damning review of the NT educational system, told *The Australian* that getting children to school was essential. “Attendance is like hitting the ball over the net: if you don’t do it, you can’t win,” he said.

“A child who comes back into school after missing a year of education will be behind and find it very difficult to catch up ... there will be some children who never make up the gap that the pandemic has caused.”

Mr Wilson’s report, commissioned by a previous government, found the Territory’s system had failed a generation of children, with academic standards falling over a decade despite an almost doubling of education funding in the period.

The NT is home to about 40 per cent of all Australian children living in very remote areas.

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The review determined that by Year 3, those children were about two years behind those living in similarly remote areas outside the Territory and five years behind by Year 9.

Education Minister Lauren Moss said her government “knows attendance rates across the NT, especially in remote areas, need to improve so we can close the gap on education and social outcomes”.

“There are many and multifaceted reasons why school attendance rates are unacceptably low and that’s

why there are no quick-fixes; no single cause; and no point in more bandaid solutions.

“Instead, we are working on a comprehensive new approach to the engagement of all students across the Territory, which will be launched later this year.

“The approach ... is holistic and evidence-based, ensuring that we listen to children, families and communities in our effort to engage all children in learning.”

Ms Moss said an “expert reference group” was being established and would develop a strategy that was “meaningful, effective and sustainable”.

The NT Education Department appeared reluctant to discuss its performance record. When contacted about

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pandemic attendance, it took more than three weeks to approve the release of standardised figures normally published online. A written statement said ensuring every student could access and was engaged in education “is a key priority for the Department of Education”.

“We acknowledge the need for improvement in school attendance, interpretation of data (sic) needs to take into consideration the unique characteristics of our students and schools,” it said.

The figures show average attendance was down 10 percentage points or more in 2020 in at least 22 government schools (almost all remote) and by up to 10 percentage points in a further 71 schools.