
PEARSON COPS AURUKUN HEAT

BY Peter Michael, Renee Viellaris
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ABORIGINAL activist Noel Pearson faces open revolt over his \$200 million brainchild, Cape York Welfare Reform, in a bitter stoush over lawlessness and schooling in the strife-torn indigenous town of Aurukun.

Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk, Police Commissioner Ian Stewart, Police Minister Bill Byrne and Education Minister Kate Jones met yesterday for crisis talks with Wik elders and the Aurukun council about the "failed social experiment" in the community.

Aurukun leaders called for Queensland Education Department to take back control of the school from the Pearson-led Cape York Aboriginal Academy, which runs a radical United States-based direct instruction program.

Their concerns were shared by federal and state politicians, who publicly and privately blamed Mr Pearson for being part of the problem in the community.

But Mr Pearson hit back angrily, the CYAA chairman saying the school was the "scapegoat of a law, order and policing problem" after it was shut down and teachers evacuated on Wednesday following a spate of targeted attacks by groups of youths.

Wik elder and councillor Ada Woolla, who is a commissioner of the Welfare Reform program, said the community had asked the Premier and senior Cabinet ministers for a return to the mainstream education system and a normal school curriculum.

"It (the CYAA) has been a complete failure. It is a social experiment that does not work," Ms Woolla said.

Ms Jones has ordered a review into the CYAA school closure with about 200 students aged from Prep to Year 6 to be taught by a volunteer state school principal using distance education until the end of term.

"We've been asked by the democratically elected council and elders for the Education Department to take back the school," she said. "Concerns were expressed about the ongoing operation of the school." Federal MP for Leichhardt Warren Entsch implied Mr Pearson may now lose some support from the Commonwealth after the demise of -former prime minister Tony Abbott, who was a keen backer of Mr Pearson.

Mr Entsch also described Mr Pearson's model of teaching as a "failed social experiment", at the same time noting it had cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

"He's got to be man enough to step up and gather his troops and withdraw," Mr Entsch told *The Courier-Mail*.

"What we've got to do is do a review ... personally I think we need to go back to the previous system." But Mr Pearson championed the results of the school.

"There is a terrible insecurity in relation to the premises that teachers live in," Mr Pearson told ABC Radio. "It's disgusting to go out to remote areas - the hardest gigs in education - this is the Afghanistan of teaching, it is that hard." Mr Pearson said school attendance had been "undercut by grog and community violence" but was still above pre-Welfare Reform levels of below 40 per cent in a community where nearly one person out of three is 14 years or younger.

He released a letter he wrote to Police Minister Mr Byrne on September 8 last year warning of a "disturbing" and "worsening" law and order situation in Aurukun where "sly grog, drugs, gambling and cash issues are fuelling the violence".

He wrote that teachers felt police had labelled them as "troublemakers" for asking for help. "Staff tell me they have raised their concerns with the local police to ask for a more effective policing response to a series of incidents involving drug and alcohol abuse, excess noise levels, violence (particularly against women and with children bearing witness) and intimidation," he wrote.

"They feel their fears have not been taken seriously by Aurukun police, and their concerns have been trivialised.

"The treatment of violence as an accepted norm must stop. It is not acceptable for police to be responding only to serious incidents ... All violence and crime must be considered unacceptable. The instability in the community has a direct impact on school attendance and our ability to retain school staff in Aurukun." Federal Labor said it was open to considering a targeted funding package to help Aurukun deal with unrest. Opposition spokesman for indigenous affairs Shayne Neumann said Labor could consider special funding but stressed no decision would be made until the party had spoken with the state and local community.