

Release of schools audit angers Noel Pearson



Queensland Education Minister Kate Jones's department 'informally released' sensitive documents relating to Good to Great Schools Australia. Picture: Jack Tran

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Cape York leader Noel Pearson has lodged a complaint with the Queensland Crime and Corruption Commission and the Ombudsman's office after state Education Minister Kate Jones' department "informally released" to the ABC sensitive documents relating to Good to Great Schools Australia.

Internal reports undertaken by the department on the operation of the Aurukun school at Cape York were released outside the state's Right To Information Act.

The informal release of documents contradicts a statement by Ms Jones to the Queensland parliament that the audits undertaken by the department were "released to the ABC under the right to information legislation".

Under the legislation, a concerned third party is supposed to be alerted when sensitive documents are released, but in this case Mr Pearson and GGSA were not informed.

Weeks after an right to information application was lodged by the ABC, documents were "informally released" on October 27, the same day ABC reporter James Thomas sat down to interview Ms Jones about a "confidential" audit of the Cape York Academy.

From that report, Mr Thomas selected excerpts which he claimed showed financial mismanagement involving GGSA.

The Australian had earlier reported it wasn't GGSA that had caused financial issues but rather poor bookkeeping by Queensland bureaucrats.

In his official complaint against the department and director-general Jim Watterston, sent late yesterday, Mr Pearson highlighted that the 2015 Cape York Academy Audit report was a "confidential report" prepared by the department's internal audit branch.

Mr Pearson said under section 37 of the Right to Information Act, GGSA should have been considered a "third party" needing to be consulted, with references made in the report to commercial arrangements, student management, and human resource management.

"The consultation process in section 37 is mandatory and designed to protect the interests of third parties (such as GGSA) who may be affected by the release of a document of an - agency."

Mr Pearson, who has strongly criticised the ABC's coverage of indigenous affairs, said the department's release of the audit report was "unlawful; improper and an abuse of process".

"The 2015 Cape York Academy Audit Report was released to the ABC at a time when the Queensland Audit Office was undertaking a review and audit of Cape York Academy at Aurukun ... and thus the release of the 2015 Cape York Academy Audit Report did or had the potential to prejudice that investigation," he said.

"As a result of the ABC's publication based on release of the 2015 Cape York Academy Audit Report, GGSA suffered reputation damage."

Weeks after its initial report on GGSA, the ABC aired accusations of intimidation made against Mr Pearson, quoting a June letter sent by Dr Watterston.

While admitting the ABC had successfully sought the internal departmental reports, a department spokeswoman refused to confirm that Dr Watterston's letter was also released to the ABC. She confirmed that internal audit reports were released to the ABC "informally".

"A right to information application was received seeking access to internal reports," she said.

The informal release allowed the department to circumvent alerting Mr Pearson and his associated organisations, as is dictated by legislation.

Cook MP Billy Gordon, who represents the vast cape including Aurukun, has grilled Ms Jones in parliament over her role in the release of information regarding Cape York Academy.

"I still have concerns that the minister and or her public servants have not followed due process at all," Mr Gordon said.

"This has all the hallmarks of a leak designed to damage the work of Cape York Academy with little regard for the education opportunities for the children of Aurukun."

A spokesman for Ms Jones said she stood by her comments to Queensland parliament when she said documents were released according to legislation.