

Aurukun blame turns onto Noel Pearson welfare reforms

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Annastacia Palaszczuk talks to Aurukun councillors, from left, Ada Woola, Vera Koomeeta and Doris Poonkamelya. Picture: Brian Cassey

Noel Pearson stared down critics of his signature welfare reform program in remote Queensland Aboriginal communities yesterday as the state government moved to review his organisation's control of a school at the centre of the Aurukun security row.

Queensland Education Minister Kate Jones told *The Weekend Australian* that community leaders in Aurukun had pleaded for Mr Pearson's Cape York Academy to be stripped of a contract to run the local school after its closure this week over fears for teachers' safety.

"I will be reviewing the school, the current administration arrangements and the funding," Ms Jones said yesterday, while Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk and senior police held crisis talks with community leaders. Her intervention builds pressure on Mr Pearson, one of the country's highest

profile indigenous leaders, after Cairns Coalition MP Warren Entsch slammed the Cape York Academy and its controversial direct instruction teaching method.

But Mr Pearson hit back in a blistering statement, rejecting as “nonsense” claims the model had failed. He said neither Mr Entsch nor another critic, Aurukun mayor Dereck Walpo, had set foot in the school.

“It’s astounding to see that the school is now the scapegoat of what is very clearly a law, order and policing problem,” Mr Pearson said. “I welcome any examination of the school’s results or a review of the Cape York Aboriginal Academy.”

At the same time, Mr Pearson released to *The Weekend Australian* searing accounts by teachers of violence they had witnessed in Aurukun before the carjackings and attacks of the past three weeks.

In a closed-door meeting with the Aurukun Council, represented by Mr Walpo and three senior Wik women councillors, Vera Koomeeta, Ada Woolla, and Doris Poonkamelya, Ms Palaszczuk was told the education - experiment had failed.

The elders said the community wanted the school returned to state control and intermediate high school to Year 9 reinstated, scrapping arrangements championed by Mr Pearson for high school-age students to be funded to attend boarding school or job training away from Aurukun. The local leaders also called for direct instruction teaching to go.

“The concern that was raised with me was regarding the direct instruction model and concerns that it was not providing students with a smooth transition to further study,” Ms Jones said. “The council would like me to consider the Department of Education running the school. That’s something I’ll have to look at.

“As Minister for Education, when three Aurukun elder Wik women, part of the democratically elected council, tell me their concerns, I have to listen.’”

From 2010-15, the Queensland government provided \$8.3 million to the academy to operate schools catering mainly for indigenous students in Aurukun, Hope Vale and Coen, while another Pearson body, Good to Great Schools Australia, was awarded \$22m in 2014 to roll out direct instruction - nationally.

Ms Jones said she would also review a \$600,000 contract to Mr Pearson's group of organisations to fund six fulltime equivalent staffers to case manage students in Aurukun moving from Year 6 to further schooling outside the community or work programs.

Queensland Police Commissioner Ian Stewart said force presence in Aurukun had been boosted to 21 officers who would stay until security was stabilised.

A team of 20 teachers was evacuated from the community for the second time this month on Wednesday night after children as young as six hurled rocks at security guards and attempted to steal a car. This came on top of earlier confrontations by abusive youths and ordeals faced by the principal, Scott Fatnowna, in two carjackings by machete-wielding thugs. "There is a very small minority of people who have no respect for themselves and the rest of the community, who cause a lot of the issues we have to deal with," Mr Stewart said. "We can't simply arrest our way out of this problem."

Defending his welfare reform initiative on Cape York, Mr Pearson said attendance at the Aurukun school had increased from 28 per cent in 2007 to 75 per cent in 2011. But he conceded attendance had since dipped, which he blamed on alcohol abuse and community violence.

NAPLAN test results since 2011 showed more children each year were achieving in the highest two bands, Mr Pearson said. Last September, he wrote to then police minister Jo-Anne Miller about complaints from the Aurukun teachers concerning their safety and the levels of violence in the community of 1400 people.

"They feel that their concerns have not been taken seriously by the Aurukun police, and that their concerns have been trivialised," Mr Pearson warned.

In one case, two female teachers were confronted by four aggressive young men on a dark corner and propositioned for sex. "We made no eye contact and we did not take in a very clear description of their appearance as we feel intimidated and didn't to encourage them," one teacher wrote. "We did not report it to the police as the previous night we were told we shouldn't be walking in the community as it is unsafe."