

Noel Pearson's program part of problem in Aurukun, Indigenous educator Chris Sarra says

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PHOTO: Dr Sarra said a review of the school's operations was warranted

A controversial education program being run by Noel Pearson at three Aboriginal communities in Queensland's Cape York region is part of the problem in Aurukun, Indigenous educator Dr Chris Sarra says.

The direct instruction syllabus has drawn heavy criticism after Aurukun's school teachers were moved out for a second time this month due to safety concerns.

Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk has since floated the idea of the State Government taking control of the Cape York Academy primary school.

Mr Pearson manages the school at Aurukun via his Cape York Academy, which uses direct instruction teaching developed in the US in the 1960s.

The direct instruction system focuses on the needs of children with learning difficulties, and breaks each learning task to its smallest component to help students master simpler skills before moving to more difficult skills.

Dr Sarra said the problems in Aurukun showed the US direct instruction teaching system was not working.

He said the method would never be used in a private school because it was viewed as sub-standard.

"It's an extraordinary set of circumstances — what offends me the most is watching the people of Aurukun being further demonised, when clearly what needs to be questioned the most are these crazy and clumsy ... very expensive, ideological, social engineering projects," he said.

"It is time to stop treating the people of Aurukun as if they are somehow sub-human, because when we treat people as sub-human, then of course these kinds of sub-human behaviours are going to emerge."

Some Aurukun teachers feel 'completely demoralised'

Dr Sarra said Mr Pearson's program had been running for six years, costing tens of millions of dollars, with performance indicators in some areas going backwards.

What is direct instruction teaching?

- Dr Chris Sarra says direct instruction is an explicit way of teaching where the student listens and responds, which is a necessary part of teaching
- The system is highly scripted, where teachers are told what to say, and students encouraged to respond in a particular way
- However, if the whole day is spent doing that, it is very boring
- It can affect the teacher-student relationship and assumes all students are at the same level
- The problem at Aurukun's school is the direct instruction teaching system is a product brought off-the-shelf from the US, Dr Sarra says

"The facts suggest that attendance is going backwards and performance in most areas is going backwards," he said.

"People might point to some areas where there are shoots of hope.

"But that is indefensible when you consider the amount of money that has gone in there — enough to enable sometimes a ratio of three teachers to one student ... particularly when other schools in the Cape are performing much, much better, with no extra funding.

"That's not to say that the teachers who are there [at Aurukun] are not good people — they are excellent people and I still talk to some of those [people].

"But they are in a circumstance where they are feeling completely demoralised by this kind of sub-standard approach, which does nothing to honour the children of Aurukun and nothing to honour the teaching profession."

Evidence 'screaming out' that approach not working

Dr Sarra said a review of the school's operations was warranted.

He said many other schools were outperforming Aurukun, including Pormpuraaw, Lockhart River and Bamaga, which have not had extra funding.

"What the Government needs to do is have the courage to say 'this approach is not working', and they need to stop wondering about whether or not they're going to be losing votes by saying enough is enough, and they need to do what is right," he said.

"They need to live true to this kind of rhetoric of evidence-based policy, because the evidence is screaming out to them 'this is not working'."

He said the people of Aurukun also needed to be consulted about how the school was run.

"Instead of spending \$30 million on a US-based product like direct instruction, in Aurukun we could spend just \$150,000 on a curriculum writer specialist teacher who could sit down with the people of Aurukun and write a high expectation kind of curriculum program for every year level," he said.

"[A program] that's accepted and embraced and gets the people of Aurukun excited, gets the children excited and engaged, and enables them to have a very strong and positive sense of cultural identity, while at the same time nurtures a sense of excellence so they can thrive in a modern society.

"I believe something like that would work, because I've executed that very same strategy and I've watched it work in hundreds of other schools across Australia."

Pearson wants review of policing in Aurukun

Mr Pearson has said he completely accepted a review of the school was needed, but also wanted a review of policing in the community.

He said he wrote to the Government about his concerns about policing in the Aboriginal community in September 2015.

But a spokesperson for Queensland Police Minister Bill Byrne said on Saturday a search of office correspondence on Friday night and again on Saturday morning found no record of a letter received by the former police minister from Mr Pearson in September 2015.

Mr Pearson has said the school should not be the sole focus of the community's problems.