



Welfare reform hurting, not helping, school numbers

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CAIRNS - Tough welfare reforms in Cape York are making it harder, not easier, to get kids to attend school, despite attendance almost doubling in one community, a leading indigenous educator says. Dr Chris Sarra accused the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) of taking undue credit for the jump in attendance for 37 to 63 per cent at Aurukun in the past year. The FRC, which has the power to quarantine and manage the income of parents whose children repeatedly fail to attend school, has been active in Aurukun for the past 12 months. It is also present in three other Cape York communities - Hope Vale, Mossman Gorge and Coen - as part of the larger welfare reform program spearheaded by indigenous leader Noel Pearson.

Dr Sarra said the jump in attendance at Aurukun could be attributed to the efforts of the principal and staff, and he believed the "big stick" approach of the FRC was undermining their standing in the community and deterring many from attending. He called for an independent review of the effect of the FRC on school attendance in the community. "If the FRC hadn't been there one could surmise that the jump in attendance would have been higher," he told AAP. "The school leadership is filthy that the FRC has taken credit for their efforts."

Dr Sarra said he had been helping staff at Western Cape College to make the school a more attractive place to students for the past two years. Similar initiatives had resulted in a significant rise in attendance at Woorabinda in central Queensland and Cherbourg, where Dr Sarra was principal, in southeast Queensland. However, Mr Pearson said the FRC and welfare reform were yielding "desperately hoped for" results.

He said the aim was to create an atmosphere in each of the communities where it was accepted by all that children must attend school. "The problem with Chris' thinking is he thinks it (truancy) is all a question of child choice," he said. "Many children want to be in school, but their parents haven't fulfilled their part of the bargain, which is a good night's sleep for the kid, a safe house for the kid, breakfast and uniforms for the kid. "Those parents need a bit of push."

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