

The Hon. Syd Stirling,
Minister for Education.

8th November 2005,

Re: Funding of the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre.

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Public Health Association of Australia (NT) I write to express our grave disappointment in the NT Department of Education's decision to discontinue funding to the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre. The PHAA believes that the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre deserves government support as it provides a valuable and uniquely designed niche service to Aboriginal families from within central Australia. Our arguments in favour of your Department's continued support for this service are as follows.

Firstly the school operates within a highly challenging context of providing a safe learning environment to children from extremely marginalised families that daily suffer from the worst aspects of poverty and disadvantage that characterise many Aboriginal people within the central Australian region. In order for these children to excel at English and mathematics, first the foundation must be laid that schooling itself is a valued social interaction. For many of these children and their families prior to the advent of the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre this has not been their experience. Upon building this trust and confidence a range of skills may develop given adequate teaching support in most students. However at this stage it may well be the case that expecting outcomes comparable to national benchmarks for these students are overly severe. Indeed the common response within the debate on this current issue is that many other schools would fail to meet this standard if it was the only one being applied to test for ongoing funding and government support.

Secondly the PHAA would raise with you the importance of exposing children to stimulating and supportive learning environments to support their physical and emotional health development. The evidence from early childhood health and education research is that it is vital within the early years to provide such environments to children and their parents to assist in the development of physically and emotionally healthy adults. This provides a further important rationale for the continued support of the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre both in an immediate sense and for the long-term health of these community members. The more that can be invested now in these children's development the greater the contribution that can be expected from them in the future and the healthier they are likely to be as adults. There is also the risk that more immediate negative consequences may come about such these children reacting to this seeming rejection by taking up actions that lead them to turn up as clients of the Department of Health and Community Services or in the juvenile justice system.

We believe that the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre has been successful in developing an ethos of regular attendance amongst its clients. The development of routines such as these will greatly assist students in continuing in education settings and being able to hold down regular and stable employment in the future.

Finally the PHAA (NT) views the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre as a unique model for involving parents within a school setting that provides a sense of cultural and family pride assisting to bridge cross generational divides that can cause further alienation for you people. Given the sad history within recent times of youth suicide, petrol sniffing and various other destructive behaviours that have beset central Australian Aboriginal communities, we believe that this model of education provision should be strongly supported by the NT government as we believe it has already made a valuable contribution to our community and its potential value has hardly been recognised.

We believe that the decision to discontinue government funding to the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre will be highly detrimental to the families involved and will lay a greater long term cost both upon these individuals and the broader community than can be rationalised by the justifications made public by the Department.

We therefore strongly urge you to reconsider the decision to discontinue funding the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre, and rather strongly recommends its continued and enhanced support by your government.

Yours sincerely,

Clive Rosewarne.

NT Branch President.
Public Health Association of Australia.
Cc Debra Maidment.