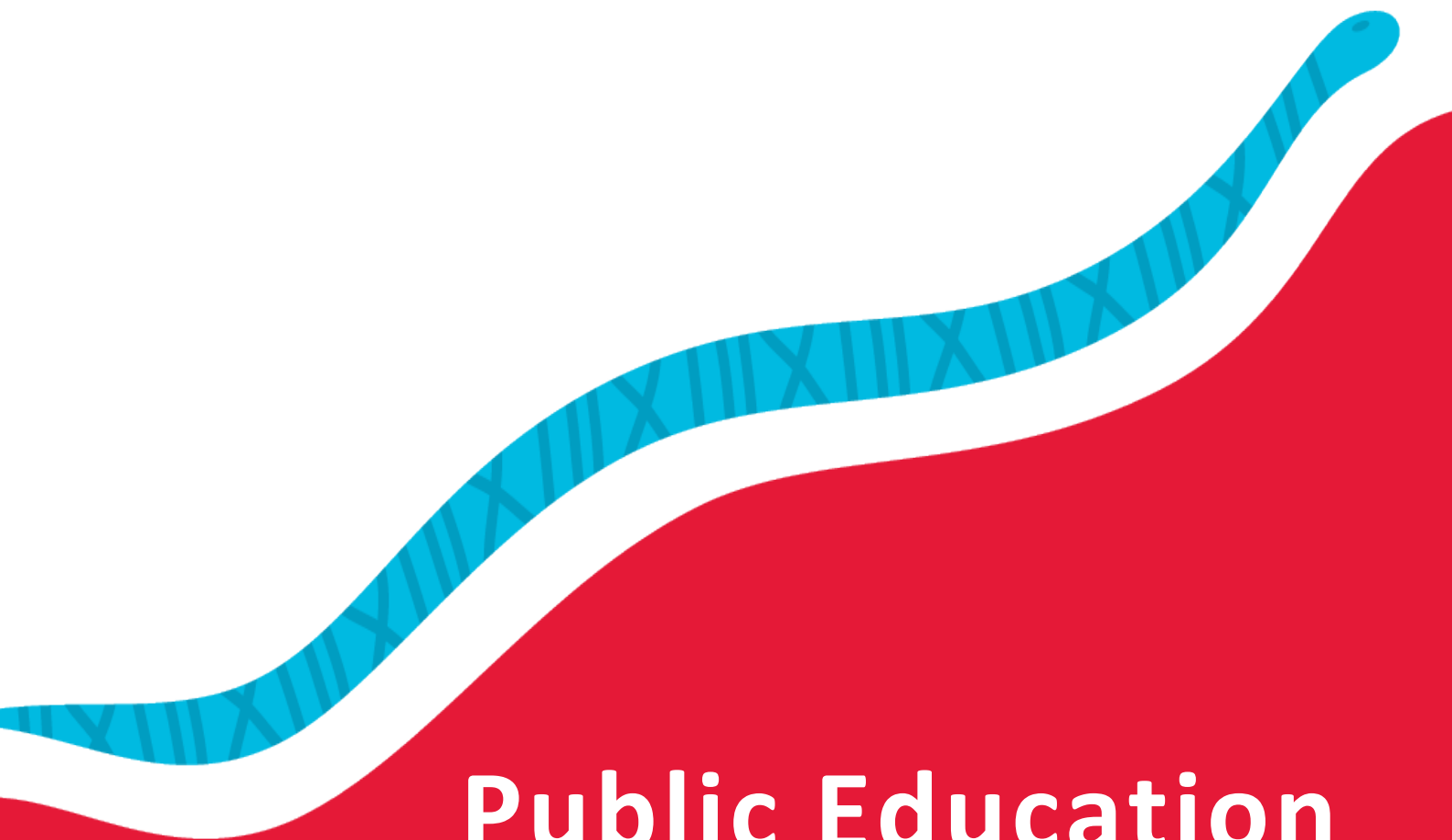




strong schools • strong communities

COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS



**Public Education
Federal Budget Submission
March 2017**

“Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.”

- Nelson Mandela

The Northern Territory Council of Government School Organisations (COGSO) was founded in 1971 to represent the interests of the families and school communities of children attending Northern Territory public schools.

While we are funded by the NT Government, COGSO is a community-based, not-for-profit association that is governed by a Constitution. Our objectives are to ensure the interests of government-funded schools are represented at the local school, Northern Territory and Federal government levels.

COGSO Mission

COGSO’s mission is to encourage continual improvement in the provision of quality education outcomes for all students in public education.

To support this mission, we actively work towards the advancement of public education by encouraging the fullest co-operation and engagement between home and school, education authorities, the Territory government and all other interested parties and bodies.

COGSO Vision

COGSO’s vision is to continuously improve our position as the peak Parent/School Representative body in the Northern Territory, focusing on contemporary educational and social issues through the defined strengths of our volunteer membership. We seek to make a significant contribution to the support of young people and their parents by being actively engaged in the public education system.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NT COGSO believes that to improve the wellbeing and education of Northern Territory children the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments need to work in partnership with the non-government sector, school communities and parents to support existing programs and increase funding to address unmet need in:

- Student-needs based funding
- Early years of education
- Hearing in Education for Learning Project (HELP)
- Students with a disability – timely access to specialists
- Investing in Wellbeing

The increasing delays to crucial assessments of children with a disability or challenging behaviours has been heartbreaking and has resulted in the children being denied the necessary tools and learning plans to achieve their potential.

Budget 17/18 provides a clear opportunity to restore trust in our public education system through a partnership relationship in identifying innovative means to deliver education across our vast Northern Territory with an equitable, honest and transparent approach to resource allocation.

We commit to working with the Commonwealth Government to identify an appropriate student needs-based funding model that recognises the significant challenges that public education delivery in the Territory faces.

In delivery of its Governance and Mentor Training, in the past year NT COGSO has visited 42 schools across the Northern Territory and worked with a total of 225 participants (*COGSO Annual Report 2015-2016 page 15*). These parents have been forthcoming with their concerns and aspirations in regard to the education of their children and it is this feedback that forms the basis of our 17/18 Federal Budget submission.

Parents want to know that when they take their sons and daughters to school they will be in an environment that recognises that each child has their own learning needs and are provided with the support to reach their potential. Parents want the tools to be kept informed of their child's progress or challenges and be positively engaged in action that can be taken to enhance their learning outcomes.



Tabby Fudge

President

March 2017

NT COGSO 17/18 Federal Budget recommendations:

STUDENT NEEDS-BASED FUNDING MODEL

COGSO has consistently advocated for a Student Needs-Based Funding Model on the principle that every child should have the same opportunity to receive a high-quality education.

This would ensure that additional resources go directly to the schools with the greatest needs. We need to close the gap of disadvantage which shows that in the regional and remote areas of the Northern Territory children of the same age are achieving education outcomes below those of the same age in urban areas.

In 2014 a per-student needs-based funding model was developed based on research by expert education consultant, Professor Stephen Lamb. While this model was developed the former Northern Territory Government, education funding was not enough to meet students' needs.

2017/18 Federal Budget requests:

- **Reinvest in National Partnership funding to ensure enrolment-based funding for Public Education.**
- **Ensure any National Partnership funding model includes the weightings provided for students with a disability; remote schools and challenging and/or extreme behaviour students.**
- **Establish an Indigenous Education Expert Panel to oversight regional and remote education funding delivery across Australia, ensuring that each jurisdiction is represented by their Department of Education and an Independent expert nominated by the relevant Council of Government Schools or Parents and Friends.**
- **Assess the opportunity of Remote Schools being eligible for grant funding from the Aboriginal Benefits Account.**

EARLY YEARS OF EDUCATION

COGSO welcomes the Federal Government's investment in Early Learning Centres and mobile pre-school funding to deliver services across remote communities.

This investment needs to be maintained and strengthened and the Federal and Northern Territory Governments need to strengthen collaboration in service delivery expansion of programs such as Families as First Teachers.

To truly make a meaningful difference in ensuring every child receives the bedrock foundation to learning that is established within early childhood we ask that the Federal Government increase the access to specialist assessments for children attending Early Learning Centres and the mobile Pre-School program.

This would require a collaborative approach between the Health and Education departments of the Northern Territory and Commonwealth.

NT COSGO is keen to see the establishment of an Interdepartmental Committee between Commonwealth and Northern Territory departments that have non-government organisation representatives.

We propose that the Interdepartmental and NGO committee assess waiting lists for referral to allied health professionals and implement strategies to ensure more timely assessments.

At meetings with the previous Chief Executive in 2016, COGSO was advised that schools were able to fund these positions from their Global School Budget; Stuart Park Primary was highlighted as an example. Discussions with the school council have identified that in fact additional funds are raised for this purpose from the canteen and OSHC funds.

2017/18 BUDGET REQUEST:

- **Establish a Commonwealth and Northern Territory Health and Education Interdepartmental Committee with health and education non-government organisation representatives.**

HEARING in EDUCATION for LEARNING PROJECT (HELP)

Without addressing the incidence of hearing loss among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) children and providing them with the classroom design, acoustics and ongoing maintenance of amplification systems we will continue to fail to provide equitable access to education to thousands of our children.

In a longer term analysis, from July 2012 to June 2015, it was reported that from the **4,371 ATSI children** and young people who received audiology services in the Northern Territory, **45% had hearing loss**.

In any year, at any time, almost half of the children tested have a hearing loss.

Studies also show that the prevalence of Otitis Media, conductive hearing loss, is as high as 90% in remote Aboriginal communities.

Reports show that for students with even mild hearing loss, listening in the classroom and learning in a group environment becomes more challenging.

This would have an impact on behaviour and learning outcomes. Persistent and ongoing hearing loss in children impacts on literacy, learning, behaviour and communication schools.

Audiology Australia highlights the importance of good classroom design and acoustics as well as supporting school staff to be aware of ear/hearing health issues and management practices in the classroom.

A systemic approach is required to assess schools across the Northern Territory for the introduction of Sound field amplification systems and a roll-out program needs to be designed and funded according to data that identifies priority based on student's hearing capacity. Each system costs \$2000 and this should be provided to schools through a grants program rather than within existing school budgets.

We are in dire need of additional hearing specialists to support schools as there are only three based in Darwin to service the entire Northern Territory.

The Federal Government provides funding to Hearing Australia to support the delivery of audiological services and a far greater investment is required to address the existing backlog.

Menzies School of Health research shows that Audiology assessment waiting times for Aboriginal children continue to be at unacceptable levels. For example, of a cohort of 63 babies some 54% have had no hearing test to date, and of those, some 68% have waited 12 months to date.

2017/18 FEDERAL BUDGET REQUEST:

- **Establish a National Partnership funding agreement to deliver acoustic upgrades to remote school classrooms.**
- **Within the National Partnership, provide a dedicated Grant to deliver the roll-out of audio assessments and sound amplification systems across at least 10 remote and regional Northern Territory schools in year 2017/18 as priorities.**
- **Fund Aboriginal Medical Services and Hearing Australia to employ audiologists to assess Aboriginal babies and children currently awaiting assessments.**

TIMELY ACCESS TO SPECIALISTS

One of the greatest unmet needs in Education is the timely access to specialists to ensure that our children receive the professional diagnosis they need to provide them with the appropriate support and personal learning plan to help them reach their learning potential.

It is accepted wisdom that early intervention is the greatest tool to deliver improved education outcomes but despairingly with **waiting periods now in excess of 12 months** for access to specialists such as paediatricians, speech pathologists, psychologists and occupational therapists our children suffer, families endure tremendous stress and our classrooms are disrupted on a daily basis.

While the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provides a brokerage model for individualised support, the reality is that many of our children attending early learning centres, pre-schools and schools remain waiting for assessment and are not able to access the NDIS.

In the early learning and pre-school years access to specialists is crucial for early intervention and this is a Federal Government funding responsibility.

We have suggested the establishment of a Health and Education Interdepartmental Committee with non-government representatives to assess the outstanding unmet need for assessment and deliver strategies to address that unmet need.

We believe that collaboration between the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments is crucial to establish a remote education model that delivers education opportunities for students with a special need.

We submit that the remote community of Maningrida would be an ideal location for the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments to work in partnership to establish a Special Needs Unit at both the Early Learning Centre and School to deliver specialist support to children with a disability.

2017/18 BUDGET REQUESTS:

- **Fund additional paediatrician, speech pathologists, psychologists, and occupational therapist positions in the Northern Territory to provide regional and remote assessments, care plans and intervention therapy.**
- **With the Northern Territory Government fund a Special Needs Unit at the Maningrida early learning centre and Maningrida School.**

INVESTING IN WELLBEING

All students deserve access to an effective and culturally appropriate wellbeing curriculum, behaviour management program and interventions to ensure their personal wellbeing, the wellbeing of their classmates and the wellbeing of school teachers and staff.

NT COGSO is working closely with Principals Australia Institute to support the expansion and use of KidsMatter and MindMatters across the Northern Territory. We also acknowledge and commend the NT Government for trialling a culturally-appropriate mental health and wellbeing student curriculum at NT schools that would complement the KidsMatter framework.

We acknowledge that the Federal Government has been funding these worthy mental health prevention programs through *beyondblue* and believe that the ongoing funding of KidsMatter and MindMatters is crucial to strengthening the work undertaken to improve overall student wellbeing, address poor mental health among susceptible students, and reduce the alarming rates of suicide across our communities.

The 2015 Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that almost 1 in 7 (14%) of children aged 4–17 years across Australia were assessed as having mental health disorders in the previous 12 months. The most recent and detailed source of information relating to the mental health and wellbeing of indigenous students was provided by the Western Australian Aboriginal child health survey in 2001-2002. This survey found that nearly 1 in 4 (24%) of WA Aboriginal children aged 4-17 years were rated by their carers as being at high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties (compared with 15% of the general population).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that in recent years (2011 to 2015), the state based age-standardised suicide rates were highest in the Northern Territory (18.7 per 100,000). This compares to Tasmania (14.2% per 100,000), Queensland (14.1% per 100,000), Western Australia (13.0 per 100,000), South Australia (12.8 per 100,000), New South Wales and Victoria (9.7% per 100,000) and ACT (9.3% per 100,000). Given that the NT has the highest rate of suicide and a greater proportion of indigenous students, we extrapolate that the number of NT students aged 4 - 17 years experiencing a mental health disorder would exceed the 14% national average and range upward toward the 24% rate of prevalence recorded in WA indigenous students.

Efforts to identify and support our children who are at risk are extremely worthy of ongoing federal funding and we acknowledge that this requires a multi-faceted approach in supporting the children, schools staff, teachers, parents and carers.

NT COGSO believes that KidsMatter and MindMatters funding needs to be provided ongoing, and we note that these programs are funded through to June this year. We recognised that the Federal Government's Mental Health Strategy recognises the value of these programs and we look forward to their continued funding. In view of the statistics suggesting a higher than average rate of mental health disorders among NT students and the Federal Government's commitment to Close the Gap, we request that there is an increase in spending address the issue of student mental health and wellbeing in the NT.

We note that KidsMatter and MindMatters are optional programs in which schools can choose to participate and to an extent, that suits them. Yet post-intervention suicide programs are universally

mandated. We think that the non-consistent implementation of prevention, early intervention and post-intervention programs is at odds with the universally accepted view that prevention and early intervention is the most effective approach to mental health.

NT COGSO would like the Federal Government to increase support for schools in the NT to take a proactive approach in fully implementing the KidsMatter and Mind Matters frameworks. Furthermore, we would like to see every school in the NT implement a culturally-appropriate curriculum specifically addressing mental health and wellbeing.

NT COGSO submits that increased funding and resources in the area of early intervention would decrease the need for post-intervention programs when broad scale tragedies such as a student suicide occur, which impact entire communities.

NT COGSO also recognises the importance of supporting the parents and carers of our at-risk students through the continued funding of organisations such as Carers NT who provide a Mental Health Carers Program. This program provides parents and other carers with mental health education to help them recognise and address mental health issues in their children. Other organisations including Headspace, the Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia, NT and the TeamHealth Carer program also have education and support programs available to carers in the area of mental health.

Another program of particular importance is the TeamHealth Youth Suicide Prevention and Education Program which provides education and training to young people and adults who work with young people around wellbeing, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention. This program is available in Darwin, Palmerston, Batchelor, Belyuen, Daly River (Naiyu) and Gunbalanya. Under this program school staff can access for free education that includes how to recognize and respond to a young person developing a mental health issue or in a mental health crisis, as well as how to connect families to appropriate professional support.

Various other organisations in the NT work directly with young people experiencing issues affecting their mental health and wellbeing, which may or may not be affecting their participation in school. Of particular note among these programs are the Grow - Get Growing program, which received private funding to run 10 term-based programs at Darwin schools for cohorts of at risk young people in 2017. Other programs worthy of mention, which run outside of the school setting, include the Headspace suite of programs, the Drug and Alcohol Intensive Support Program for Youth (DAISY) run by CatholicCare NT, the Reconnect program run by Anglicare NT and the Spin 180 program run by Mission Australia.

2017/18 BUDGET REQUESTS:

- **Continue funding and increased support in the NT for the implementation of the KidsMatter and MindMatters programs under Federal Mental Health initiatives funding.**
- **Ongoing funding for NT Carers Mental Health Carers Program and TeamHealth Youth Suicide and Prevention and Education Program which provide mental health education free to carers and professionals working with young people experiencing mental illness.**
- **Ongoing funding for programs that deliver support to directly to youth with a mental illness such as: Grow – the Get Growing Program; TeamHealth – Youth Suicide and Education Program, Headspace, DAISY, Reconnect and Spin 180.**

CONCLUSION

NT COGSO is dedicated to working with the Commonwealth Government to promote positive learning outcomes for our children.

Throughout this submission we take a constructive yet practical approach to improving the health and wellbeing of children in our public education system through placing a priority on the equitable access to services that our children need.

We sincerely believe that with constructive and collaborative partnerships we will be better placed to achieving focussed Federal Budget 17/18 outcomes that not only invest in our children but change their world for the better.