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'Four hours of English' strategy doomed to fail, say academics

By Anna Patty Education Editor

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A NEW strategy to improve the literacy of Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory is doomed to fail and will threaten the survival of indigenous languages and culture, leading academic researchers have warned.

The NT Government has directed schools to teach English for the first four hours of the day in communities where English is not a first language.

Critics say the strategy, supported by the Rudd Government, will dismantle

bilingual education and lead to assimilation in remote communities. They also warn it could lead to lower attendance and school retention rates.

A former NT education minister, Marion Scrymgour, introduced the controversial policy last year amid intense lobbying from critics of the bilingual approach to teaching literacy.

Helen Hughes, an economist at the Centre for Independent Studies, has been a vocal critic of the bilingual education policy and advocates the four hours of English policy.

"It is absolute nonsense they don't have enough time to spend on their own language," she said. "Aborigines, like other Australians, have to speak fluent English, and the way to do that is to start very early."

Scrymgour's policy retains the support of her successor in the portfolio, the Chief Minister, Paul Henderson.

The Yirrkala School in Arnhem Land is one of nine schools that teach children in their Aboriginal language before English. Staff at the school say the community is strongly opposed to being pressured to teach four hours of English each day. They fear it will undermine community support, school attendance and Aboriginal language teaching.

An indigenous education expert, Professor Peter Buckskin from the University of South Australia, is close to completing a review of Aboriginal literacy, commissioned by the council of national education ministers.

Buckskin is dean of the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research at the university and says he was unable to find any evidence to support the NT's approach to bilingual education.

"I don't understand why the minister made that determination and why the current minister is continuing to push it. There was more evidence to support bilingual education than there was against it. There is a national trend around the world to retain indigenous languages. This is a real step backwards."

A spokesman for Henderson said the English policy was adopted in response to poor literacy results among Aboriginal students in the NT. Asked if the Government had evidence to support this approach, the spokesman said the previous approach had not worked, as demonstrated in poor results for literacy and numeracy in the National Assessment Program (NAPLAN).

"A lot of indigenous families are saying they want their kids to read and write in English in order to get jobs. The Government's first four hours of English policy is part of our effort to improve education outcomes for indigenous children," the spokesman said.

"Children can still speak their first language at home in their community and at school where teachers and assistant teachers can continue to use their first

language to help learning."

The spokesman said bilingual schools received 25 per cent more funding than other schools in the NT.

But Buckskin said the programs were under-resourced. He said there was evidence from schools in New Zealand and Hawaii that attendance and retention improved and students gained a stronger sense of identity and culture through such programs.

"What we have to instil in our Aboriginal children is a sense of place," he said. "These communities are some of the strongest in terms of having their language intact. We need to ensure we are giving them the capacity to maintain the strong language and that we don't erode that. Western schooling knocks that out of Aboriginal children."

Bilingual education is based on helping children become proficient in their first tongue before learning English. "There is no proof that English only will result in better literacy results," Buckskin said.

"To have a good bilingual program you need to have good resources. You need people that are good at English and good at their own tongue. If you take away the opportunity to immerse children in their own tongue you are contributing to assimilation."

Patrick McConvell, an expert on Aboriginal languages who has spent five years living in remote Aboriginal communities, co-wrote a discussion paper for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies that reviews the NT's approach to dismantling bilingual education.

He said children in communities like Yirrkala needed to be taught literacy in a language they could understand before it was taught to them in English. "I don't think saying 'teach them English from day one' will make things better. My prediction is that it will make them worse," he said.

McConvell, now at the Australian National University, said poor NAPLAN results in the NT should not be blamed on bilingual education, and bilingual schools were not performing worse than other schools.

"They should think more about proper teaching English as a second language programs delivered by people who know what they are doing. To put all the blame on bilingual education is missing the target."