

Statement re: Urgent action needed on systemic failure of leadership and outcomes at Walgett Community College high school.

25 February 2021.

We, the Elders Council of the Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG), are writing to express our significant concern and distress at the latest instance of disrespect and disregard for the students of Walgett Community College (WCC) high school and their parents, carers and our community.

Walgett high school students returned to school this term to discover their principal of 24 months has left the school, with no notice, reason or information provided to the community about his replacement.

This follows the high school having six different principals or interim principals in the past six years, along with countless instances of community concerns and data highlighting the unacceptable outcomes and practices at WCC without adequate action by the NSW Department of Education.

Yesterday, the teachers of the high school walked off the job.

We know from publicly available data that at Walgett high school:¹

- Attendance rates for Year 7 to 10 students was 68% in 2019, 10 percentage points below the Indigenous average and 21 percentage points below the NSW average for all Year 7 to 10 students in government schools. In 2015 it was 61%.
- Walgett senior students (Years 11 and 12) attend school less than 60 percent of the time.
- From 2012 to 2017, the proportion of high school students receiving long suspensions increased from 24.2% to 42.9% and short suspensions increased from 41.4% to 54.9%
- In 2016 and 2017 two out of three students with a disability and one in three students without a disability received long suspensions.
- NAPLAN participation is lower than the national average and has fallen from 83% in 2014 and 2015 to 77% in 2019
- The number of students completing Year 12 at Walgett Community College are small, peaking at 8 in 2015 and falling to 2 students in 2018.
- Senior students participate in a wide range of VET courses at school. However, relatively few students complete VET qualifications at school.

Almost all students at the high school are Aboriginal. A significant proportion have a disability and unmet health and wellbeing needs.²

For years, the **Walgett Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and School Reference Group (SRG) along with DEG and other Aboriginal community controlled organisations** have been raising serious OCHRE concerns about poor outcomes at the school, and seeking to work constructively and collaboratively with WCC principals, Department of Education directors and executives, and successive Ministers of Education to find systemic, long-term solutions. In just one example, on 25 May 2018 DEG wrote to Chris Shaw, Director Educational Leadership Western Plains, and cc-ing the NSW Ombudsman stating:

¹ Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) data <https://www.myschool.edu.au/>; National Report of Schooling Data Portal <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-data-portal>; NSW Ombudsman OCHRE Review Report https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/74183/OCHRE-Report_October-2019.pdf; Walgett Community College annual reports <https://walgett-h.schools.nsw.gov.au/about-our-school/school-planning-and-reporting.html>

² NSW Ombudsman OCHRE Review Report https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/74183/OCHRE-Report_October-2019.pdf

DEG is very concerned about the unacceptable education outcomes of the Walgett Community College, and appeal to you and your department to intervene urgently. We will no longer tolerate the alarming impacts of the school's outcomes on the lives of our young people - many condemned to lives of poverty unless the current situation is addressed. The Walgett Community College's deteriorating outcomes also impact on our organisation's ability to recruit locally and our community's economic development and wellbeing. Recent concerns include:

- *Reports of over 50% of enrolled students regularly not attending the high school*
- *Poor communication and protocols between students and staff, and with parents*
- *Teachers feeling under-supported and traumatised, poor selection, induction of staff suitable to the task*
- *The interface of police and PCYC with the school*
- *The interface of TAFE and short-term externally delivered programs with the school*
- *Urgent need for staff trained (and mentored) in working with difficult behaviours, cognitive impairment and other health challenges of students, and difficulties of health services accessing students who need their help*
- *Low expectations of our students*
- *Disruption to classes by troubled children*
- *Poor school attendance and students falling behind in their school work*
- *Under-development of Aboriginal support staff*
- *The Department not receiving a true picture of what is happening in the school*
- *Instability of school leadership increased by poor handover and briefing by predecessors*

We would like to impress upon you our willingness to assist with recruiting the new Executive Principal, and their briefing. We want to join together with other Walgett Aboriginal organisations and key agencies, to pro-actively seek leaders who can make a positive contribution to our community, who will understand and benefit from the experience, and hopefully work together long term with us to implement shared visions for our community.

Dharriwaa Elders Group, in its "Yuwaya Ngarra-li" (vision) cross-faculty partnership with University of NSW, and with Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service ("WAMS") is suggesting:

- *Professional development for teachers, including for Aboriginal Language teaching, managing difficult behaviours, and generally improving standards*
- *Alternative education on country for children who have missed too much school and/or are at risk of expulsion*
- *Programs for strengthening identity and community belonging for students, including incorporating links to further education and employment*
- *The introduction of School Nurse positions clinically supervised by WAMS*
- *Community-led solutions for students needing boarding accommodation*
- *Proposals for parental engagement campaigns*

On numerous other occasions over recent years we have proposed constructive, evidence-based programs and initiatives that could better support and engage students and families and better equip teachers and the school as a whole to improve outcomes.

None of these suggestions have been genuinely progressed at the high school, and we can no longer continue to believe promises from the Department of Education that they are committed to change for the children and young people in our community. Too much is at stake.

The Connected Communities strategy which was rolled out in 15 rural and remote NSW schools including Walgett in 2013 was aimed at improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. It required schools to build genuine partnerships with local communities, and gave Executive Principals unprecedented authority to tailor education and health responses to local needs. A review of the Connected Communities strategy by the NSW Ombudsman published in 2019 highlighted the lack of improvement in Walgett schools in particular, and recommended that more needed to be done by government agencies and other services.³

While we support the intentions of the Connected Communities strategy, it is clear that it has not been implemented in Walgett as it was intended. The data on Walgett students such as that highlighted above shows a picture of ongoing neglect and unacceptable practices and outcomes. Despite this, we hear that the Connected Communities model is being implemented more widely.

In the meantime the school must be staffed to engage students who are in attendance and give them an education and the health and wellbeing services they need to receive that education. There is an urgent need for suitably skilled and committed teachers in Walgett.

We and others in our community place the highest value on education and the opportunities and choices that it enables. We also care about the health and welfare of our young people. We cannot sit by and watch the education system fail another generation of our children and young people. The AECG has requested a Royal Commission into Education in Walgett in the past and the situation is now even more dire and urgent.

We believe that a radical overhaul of the Walgett High School is urgently needed. This is not just a matter for the Department of Education, but also for Health, Communities and Justice, and Disability agencies. All those leaders with responsibilities for and interests in the future of our children and young people need to come together with Walgett Aboriginal Community Controlled organisations on the ground, their peaks and partners, to develop and implement a new Plan for Walgett High School and to rebuild trust and hope in the education system amongst a community who have been let down time and time again. This Plan will ensure a focus on the health and social determinants of health of children so they can be receptive to learning. It will also provide clear guidelines for implementation to the Department and principals of community expectations.

We ask that you work with us to forge a new future.

Yours sincerely

Virginia Robinson, Secretary for and on behalf of the Dharriwaa Elders Group.

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³ NSW Ombudsman OCHRE Review Report https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/74183/OCHRE-Report_October-2019.pdf