



Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory

Discussion paper

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Deloitte
Access Economics

Overview

The Northern Territory (NT) Department of Education ('the Department') has engaged Deloitte Access Economics, in partnership with the Northern Institute at Charles Darwin University, to undertake a Strategic Review of Secondary Education in the Northern Territory ('the Review').

The Review is intended to support the Department's goal to be the most improving education system in Australia.

The Review has already engaged with stakeholders across the Department of Education and other NT agencies, interviewed several Australian and international experts, and engaged with over 25 school communities across all regions of the NT. The Review includes a 'have your say' process (this document) and continued stakeholder engagement in its next steps.

Purpose of the discussion paper

Deloitte Access Economics is seeking views from students, parents, families, educators, school staff, communities, and non-government organisations on how the Northern Territory government system can meaningfully expand access and delivery models for students in secondary education.

This discussion paper provides an overview of emerging key themes from the Review to date. Insights from these themes are summarised as strengths, barriers and opportunities for change, and include questions to guide your responses for each theme.



Have your say

You can respond via a short questionnaire, and/or attach a written response via haveyoursay.nt.gov.au.

Responses will shape the way that the Review team understands the needs and aspirations of communities for secondary education, what the system needs to achieve (outcomes), and potential opportunities for delivery. Submissions, along with research and stakeholder consultations, will inform the final report to the Department.

The submissions will be published online through the NT Government's 'Have your Say' website and will feed into Deloitte Access Economics' review process. If you choose to not make your submission publicly available, please ensure each page of the submission is marked as confidential.

If you have any enquiries, please contact policyreview@education.nt.gov.au.

Overview of Secondary Education in the NT

The NT Government has committed to become the most improving education system in Australia. This is underpinned by the national vision and commitment of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration to improve educational outcomes for all young Australians. The Declaration has two distinct and interconnected goals: to promote excellence and equity of outcomes, and to enable all Australians to become confident and creative individuals, successful learners, and active and informed community members.¹

The NT Department of Education, in support of achieving these education goals and ensuring that all children can grow and achieve, has committed to strengthening delivery of education provision in its *Education NT Strategy (2021-25)*.

Context

Delivery of secondary education in the Northern Territory education system occurs in a unique context. To meet its goal to become the most improving education system in Australia, schooling delivery needs to cater for:

High levels of geographic dispersion

The distance to school differs significantly for families, and there are small schools in very remote areas.

- 88% of Northern Territory Government schools with secondary students are located in **remote and very remote areas**, catering to 36% of students in the Territory
- 969 students currently access **online distance education** services

Significant social, economic and educational disadvantage

There is significant disadvantage in some communities, influencing the extent to which students can engage, or are prepared and supported to engage with education.

- Australian Early Development Census notes that high proportions of students are **starting school developmentally vulnerable**
- The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage reveals a significant proportion of students and families have **lower levels of educational advantage**

Cultural diversity

There are diverse values, attitudes, beliefs and norms within communities, that shape how families and their children engage in education.

- **38%** of secondary students identify as **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander**
- **51%** of students have a language background **other than English**

Educational gap

The educational gap between Aboriginal and other students is wider in the NT than anywhere else in Australia.

- In 2022, the Northern Territory Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET) attainment rate in government schools was **82%** for non-Aboriginal students, and **34%** for Aboriginal students.

Source: Deloitte Access Economics using NT Department of Education data

The unique cultural, demographic, and geographic attributes of the Northern Territory and its learners is a strength, and there is an opportunity to ensure that secondary education delivery recognises and builds on this. Nonetheless, they pose challenges and complexities for delivery that are more pronounced in the NT than other jurisdictions in Australia. For example, they can impact students' access to schooling, including their ability to engage in inclusive and high-quality learning experiences that meet their needs, and consequently, the trajectory of outcomes and transitions into further study, training, or work.

The aim of this Review is to inform the design of a secondary education system that is responsive to the diverse delivery contexts in the NT, reflects the rich cultural diversity among learners, and provides a pathway for all students to achieve success. The Review has a focus on secondary education in remote and very remote areas, however it considers delivery of secondary education in all contexts across the NT.

Previous reviews

The last review of secondary education in the NT was the *Report on future directions for secondary education in the Northern Territory (Ramsey, 2003)*.² The Ramsey report analysed the issues associated with secondary education in the NT and made several recommendations, including transforming the structure of secondary schooling. This led to the establishment of middle schooling from Year 7 to Year 9, and senior secondary from Year 10 to Year 12.

The 2014 Wilson Review - *A share in the future - Review of Indigenous Education in the NT (Wilson, 2014)*³ underpins the Indigenous Education Strategy (2015-24) currently implemented by the Department of Education. The Wilson Review supported

an explicit focus on improving outcomes for Indigenous students with several recommendations for future policy settings. The major structural reform from the Wilson Review was a shift away from the provision of senior secondary education in very remote areas to a preference for delivery in urban areas for remote students (facilitated through boarding). These policy settings currently remain in place.

Additionally, recent Commonwealth Government reviews into secondary education have focused on regional, rural, and remote education (Halsey, 2018; Napthine, 2019), and senior secondary pathways (Shergold, 2020).

Independent review into regional, rural and remote education: Final Report (Halsey, 2018)⁴:

The Halsey Review made several recommendations, including a national approach to enhance access to regional, rural and remote education, building resource capability, and improving the availability of Information and Communication Technology to open up new opportunities to address challenges experienced by regional, rural and remote educators and students.

National regional, rural and remote tertiary education strategy final report (Napthine Review, 2019)⁵:

The Review responded to and built on the work of the Halsey Review. The Review made several recommendations to support equal opportunity and access for students in regional, rural and remote areas, and to improve participation and outcomes for students from equity groups. The Review recommended improving access to tertiary study options, financial support for students, and improving the quality and range of student support services. The Review also suggested several actions to improve career advice and the support available to schools to better prepare students for success.

Looking to the future – Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training (Shergold, 2020)⁶:

The Review responded to the complexities of senior secondary education, specifically challenges of delivery, globalisation and increasingly complex range of options and pathways into further education and training. The Review suggested that the historically academic focus of secondary education is not well suited to ensuring all students succeed post-schooling. The Review recommended identifying avenues to certify students' strengths, capabilities and achievements (i.e. through Learner Profiles) and supporting a range of pathways for students.



The Review of Secondary Education

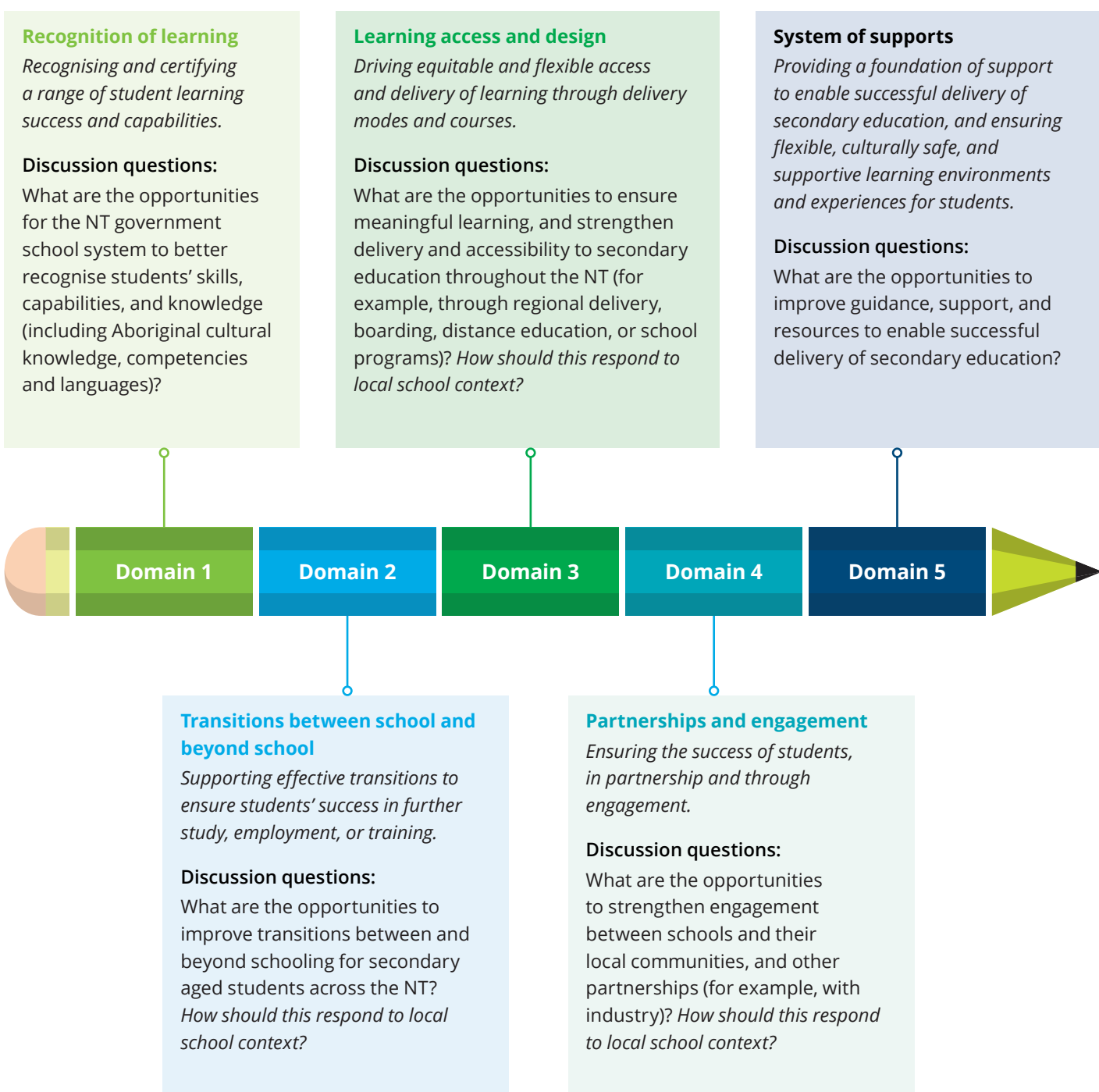
The Review of Secondary Education is geared towards understanding the current strengths and challenges of delivery, and opportunities to meaningfully expanding access and delivery models for all students in secondary education in the NT. This Review seeks to build on the significant depth of insight provided through consultation to develop the Education Engagement Strategy.⁷

Focus of the Review

The purpose of the Review is to assess and develop reform options for secondary education delivery, that meaningfully expand access and delivery models for all secondary students in the NT.

Five Review domains have been developed to reflect the key mechanisms for improved engagement and outcomes.⁸ These domains include questions to prompt your responses and serve as the key areas for input.

The domains are further outlined in following sections.



Discussion questions

Recognition of learning

Recognition of learning relates to how the government school system can recognise and certify a broad range of student skills, capabilities, and knowledge, that are needed for students to take their next steps beyond schooling. This may be related to students' academic and personal achievements, and cultural competencies and experiences. Specifically, the Review considers **what success looks like** for students throughout secondary schooling, and how this should **contribute towards school completion**.



Strengths and barriers of current delivery

The Review has heard several strengths of the system and barriers in this domain, including:

- **Flexibility of senior years certificate:** The NT Certificate of Education and Training (NTCET) – delivered through the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) – allows students to complete schooling through various pathway options and can be flexibly tailored to school context.
- **Aboriginal cultural and language pilots:** Current pilots for credentialling Aboriginal cultural knowledge, competencies and languages are viewed as promising, but are not yet widespread across the NT.
- **Australian Curriculum:** This forms the basis of teaching and learning in the middle years. Some school stakeholders stated that they experience challenges with local curriculum implementation, including adapting to local context and student needs. This is especially challenging when middle and senior years are combined in a single class. Additionally, stakeholders felt that greater flexibility in teaching and learning could be achieved with permission to focus on certain aspects of the curriculum, and when version 9 of the Australian Curriculum (which is seen to provide more flexibility) is fully implemented.



Opportunities

The Review has heard several opportunities relating to the recognition of learning, which could support the system to better recognise and celebrate a wide range of student capabilities and success:

- **Widening the learning that can contribute towards completing year 12:** Greater recognition of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and languages has been particularly emphasised, with current pilots (for example, at Shepherdson College) viewed as a positive development.
- **Increasing recognition of achievements:** Development of more opportunities to showcase students' skills, knowledge and capabilities in smaller chunks, and to demonstrate progress towards achievement of the NTCET (sometimes referred to as 'micro-credentialling'). This could also include certification of achievements before completion of school (i.e. at Year 9 or Year 10).
- **Learner Profiles:** Recognising students' attributes and abilities through Learner Profiles may help to represent achievements in a more rounded way than current year school certificates and reports. Learner Profiles could include students' broader capabilities and experiences (for example, cultural and caring responsibilities, sporting achievements, and Duke of Edinburgh awards) in addition to traditional 'academic' reporting.



Discussion: Recognition of learning

What are the opportunities for the NT government school system to better recognise students' skills, capabilities, and knowledge (including Aboriginal cultural knowledge, competencies and languages)?

Transitions between and beyond school

This domain relates to supporting effective transitions of students throughout the stages of secondary schooling, and beyond schooling into further study, employment, or training.

This relates to the design of options that align with the strengths and aspirations of all students for their schooling and beyond. This includes **academic pathways** (where students work towards further tertiary studies), vocational pathways (including completion of a Certificate II or higher, and/or employment outcomes), and **cultural pathways** (for example, contributing to local community through cultural leadership roles and responsibilities).

This domain also explores how **middle** (Years 7-9) and **senior secondary** (Years 10-12) **stages of schooling** can work in partnership, and optimally support effective transitions and outcomes for students.



Strengths and barriers of current delivery

The Review has heard several strengths and barriers to successful transitions and pathways, including:

- **Clarity on post-school pathways:** There are mixed perspectives on whether students are aware of their pathway options from school, receive sufficient support and guidance to pursue these (i.e., careers advice), and can move flexibly between pathways (for example, combining academic and vocational subjects if this best meets their aspirations for life beyond school. The Review has heard that deliberate planning and support for students is important for ensuring successful transitions and empowering students to understand where their education can take them after school. However, in some settings there is limited guidance provided to students (e.g., through career advisors).
- **Relationships to support effective transitions:** Throughout the NT, there are examples of effective relationships and initiatives that support students to effectively transition from primary into secondary schooling, and post-schooling. This includes relationships between 'feeder' primary schools and secondary schools and established partnerships between schools and local industry. However, ensuring effective transitions also needs to consider the complexity of student mobility in the NT.
- **Middle and senior secondary:** While middle schools can provide supportive environments for students through an emphasis on pastoral care and wellbeing support, the Review heard that students can experience a disconnect when transitioning from middle and senior secondary schooling.



Opportunities

The Review has heard several opportunities that could contribute towards effective transitions between and beyond schooling for all students:

- **Identifying and providing meaningful post-school pathways, that are tailored to local context:** Guidance and support from the system on contextually relevant pathways would be valued (e.g tailored to employment opportunities and local skills needs).
- **Strengthening transitions between middle and senior school:** Additional support to enable students to effectively transition between middle and senior secondary years of schooling could improve student learning, engagement, and wellbeing.

Discussion: Transitions between and beyond school

What are the opportunities to improve transitions between and beyond schooling for secondary aged students across the NT? How should this respond to local school context?



Learning access and design

This domain relates to delivery modes and programs that enable equitable and flexible access to secondary education in the NT, regardless of students' context or location. This includes **local provision, distance education, regional delivery, boarding school,** and **flexible and specialised learning** options. This also relates to the **design of learning** that is meaningful, culturally responsive, and caters to the diverse needs and motivations of all students.



Strengths and barriers of current delivery

The Review has heard several strengths and barriers of current learning access and design, including:

- **Local provision:** In many remote contexts, secondary education is not available (particularly in senior secondary years) due to the policy position implemented as part of the Indigenous Education Review which saw the creation of the Transition Support Unit and greater investment in supporting students to access boarding. These policy settings are currently being reviewed, and many stakeholders shared their aspirations for future reform to ensure viable and high-quality provision of secondary education for students in their local communities.
- **Regional service delivery models:** Several existing innovative approaches currently exist that provide access to learning opportunities for students in remote and very remote areas (for example, short-term 'residential boarding' options, hubs that deliver vocational education and training, and training centres). However, these are not consistently available across the NT.
- **Distance education:** In some contexts, distance education (delivered through NT School of Distance Education, Katherine and Alice Springs Schools of the Air) caters for geographically isolated and disengaged students and is used to provide access to learning and strengthen local delivery (for example, in specialised subject areas). Stakeholders note the growing possibilities and strengths of this model, and opportunities to scale this in some contexts, but also emphasise that it is not a solution for all students and all contexts (e.g. where access to the internet is limited).
- **Boarding school:** Boarding options are viewed as an important part of the system, as they give students and families the ability to engage in aspects of secondary education that may not be viable to provide in every community (including specific pathways to further tertiary study). However, boarding has not worked for many students in remote and urban communities.

Discussion: Learning access and design

What are the opportunities to ensure meaningful learning, and strengthen delivery and accessibility to secondary education throughout the NT (for example, through regional delivery, boarding, distance education, or school programs)?
How should this respond to local school context?



Opportunities

The Review has heard several opportunities relating to learning access and design, including:

- **Strengthening the design of learning:** Strengthening the design of learning to provide flexibility, maximise student engagement, ensure responsiveness to culture and local school context, and cater to the diverse needs of students. Examples include Palmerston Youth Skills Centre, which provides flexible delivery of practical life skills and work-readiness training⁹, and the Learning on Country program, which integrates 'both ways' learning into the curriculum and delivers culturally appropriate education.¹⁰
- **Strengthening local and regional delivery:** Strengthening and expanding approaches to local and regional delivery (particularly in remote and very remote locations), for example through students from a cluster of schools coming together for blocks of learning in a regional centre (for example, the hub at Ti Tree).
- **Improving and expanding access through distance education:** The opportunity to improve or expand access to distance education has been highlighted, including providing access to specialist learning, and support that cannot be provided locally in some communities.
- **Ensuring quality boarding experiences and outcomes:** Stakeholders note that the system could undertake quality assurance of boarding schools and improve accountability – ensuring that boarding schools provide culturally appropriate and safe environments, and meet the educational, cultural and health needs of students.



Partnerships and engagement

This domain relates to partnerships and engagement that underpin secondary education delivery, address student needs and ensure their success. This includes **school and community engagement**, and partnerships with **local industry, community organisations, government**, and **non-government** organisations to support student outcomes.



Strengths and barriers of current delivery

The Review has heard several strengths and barriers of partnerships and engagement, including:

- **School and community engagement:** Across the NT, there are examples of strong school and community engagement (through Local Engagement and Decision-Making committees and school councils), which are seen to provide a strong foundation for delivering contextually relevant and appropriate secondary education, and supporting meaningful pathways for students.
- **Partnerships with local industry:** Across the NT, some schools have developed partnerships with local industry, which has assisted in identifying and ensuring meaningful opportunities for students through work placements and/or apprenticeships, and through vocational education and training (VET) offerings that are tailored to local contexts and aspirations of students,
- **Varied presence and strength of partnerships and engagement:** While there are examples of effective partnerships and engagement across the NT, they are not widespread. The strength of these partnerships and engagement is varied across and is often dependent on the capacity and longevity of local school leadership (e.g. a school principal who has worked to develop and maintain effective relationships over several years).



Opportunities

Through consultations, several opportunities relating to partnerships and engagement have been highlighted, including:

- **Providing a model of expectations:** Partnerships and engagement can be more systematically embedded across schools in the system, in support of secondary education outcomes. The system could provide a model of expectations for schools in this area.
- **Facilitating partnerships:** The system could support schools through facilitating partnerships and engagement, for example with local industry and community organisations. This would enable schools to identify, and support students to pursue meaningful pathways (through VET offerings, work placements and/or apprenticeships).
- **Structures for school and community engagement:** Strengthening structures would support schools to engage, and work in partnership with local communities to deliver culturally relevant secondary education, and design meaningful pathways that are aligned with local aspirations of students, families, and communities.

Discussion: Partnerships and engagement

What are the opportunities to strengthen engagement between schools and their local communities, and other partnerships (for example, with industry)?
How should this respond to local school context?



System of supports

This domain relates to the foundation of supports that underpin the delivery of secondary education. This includes the **people and processes** (including regional and central teams and supports), **technology and infrastructure, system-wide guidance, and funding and resources** that support culturally safe and supportive learning environments and experiences for students, and the overall delivery of secondary education.



Strengths and barriers of current delivery

The Review has heard several strengths and barriers of the existing system of supports, including:

- **Central and regional support:** Schools value the support provided by central and regional Departmental offices, for example in relation to curriculum design and delivery, and brokering options for students.
- **Workforce development:** Teachers, school leaders and secondary students note the importance of a workforce that can provide culturally safe, supportive and engaging learning environments for students, as well as guidance on their next steps post-schooling (this includes teachers, support staff, liaison officers, career advisors, and more). However, school stakeholders also note that in some contexts, there are limited opportunities for professional learning, leadership development, and collaboration and sharing of expertise. Furthermore, staff shortages and turnover present challenges for delivery, and impact on the stability of learning for students.
- **Cultural, social and wellbeing support:** Stakeholders noted that more could be done to provide culturally safe and supportive learning environments for students, and ensure student wellbeing. For example, this includes building expertise in trauma-informed practices, and increased access to school counsellors, allied health staff, Aboriginal support workers, and support services. Developing supportive relationships between school staff and students is key to achieving this outcome, however, this is impacted by factors such as teacher turnover and transitions from middle schooling to senior secondary.
- **Infrastructure and technology:** In some contexts, access to technology (internet, laptops and computers, smartboards) and infrastructure (buses, buildings, desks, school facilities and grounds) pose challenges to delivery. Some schools have delayed upgrading facilities and technology due to resourcing constraints.

Discussion: System of supports

What are the opportunities to improve guidance, support, and resources to enable successful delivery of secondary education?



Opportunities

Several opportunities relating to the system of supports have been discussed, including:

- **A systematic approach to delivery, that is tailored to local context:** A systematic approach to secondary education would set out expectations in delivery, responsibilities across schools, regions and the system, and governance. There would be an overarching approach across the NT that is also tailored to local context.
- **Guidance and support:** There could be more expert guidance and support provided to schools on a range of matters including careers advice on post-school pathways for students, curriculum delivery, trauma-informed practice, and partnerships and engagement, that are aligned with local needs and contexts. This could include the development of flexible learning programs that, among other things, support students to build literacy and numeracy skills.
- **Longevity and sustainability of initiatives:** A long-term commitment to implementing programs and initiatives, sustaining innovative practice, and supporting leadership development and succession planning.



Endnotes

- 1 'The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration', Education Council (2019). <<https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>>
- 2 Ramsey, Report on future directions for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory (2003). <https://web.archive.org/au/awa/20070829224307mp_/http://www.betterschools.nt.gov.au/history/docs/report/report.pdf>
- 3 Wilson, A Share in the Future - Review of Indigenous Education in the NT (2014). <<https://education.nt.gov.au/reviews-and-consultations/indigenous-education-review>>
- 4 Halsey, Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (2018). <<https://www.education.gov.au/quality-schools-package/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>>
- 5 Commonwealth of Australia, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (2019). <<https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation/resources/national-regional-rural-and-remote-tertiary-education-strategy-final-report>>
- 6 Shergold, Looking to the Future: Report of the Review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training (2020). <<https://www.education.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/looking-future-report-review-senior-secondary-pathways-work-further-education-and-training>>
- 7 The development of the Engagement Strategy was informed by 72 consultations with over 950 people across urban, regional, and remote communities. The Engagement Strategy highlights four foundations to lead to improve engagement: relationships with peers and educators, wellbeing and inclusion that is fostered through a safe, supportive, and welcoming learning environment, culture and identity that is valued, celebrated, and embedded in learning, and placing students' beliefs and motivations at the centre of learning.
- 8 The Review domains have been informed by engagement with stakeholders to date and capture the scope of the Review, and align to the strategic documents of the Northern Territory (Education NT Strategy) and the key outcomes it seeks to achieve for students.
- 9 NT Government, n.d., Palmerston Youth Skills Centre. <<https://youthskillscentre.nt.gov.au>>
- 10 Learning on Country (2023). <<https://learningoncountry.com/>>



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