

Ngurawaana Remote Community School — Adjournment Debate

HON HELEN BULLOCK (Mining and Pastoral) [10.25 pm]: On the first day of the winter recess I was advised by the voluntary liaison person for the Ngurawaana community that the government had decided to keep the school open. It is wonderful news. I think that the government deserves to be commended for finally coming to this decision. I have long held the view that education is a vital pathway towards improving the condition of Indigenous Australians. Governments at all levels need to commit to providing this opportunity.

During the winter recess I had a chance to visit the Ngurawaana Remote Community School and its community. The school was established in 2005 and far exceeded my expectations in terms of facilities, resources and equipment. It is exactly what the community needs. Regrettably, just eight months into its term of office, the government had earmarked this fine school for closure. It was not the only school that the government planned to close, but it was the first. I do not know what analysis the government had undertaken in its short life to have decided which community school should be closed; but having visited this school I know that any analysis leading to such a decision in this case was flawed and certainly failed to consider the broad social impact of the proposed school closure.

The Ngurawaana community is very remote, not in the sense of distance because it is only 170 kays from Karratha, but in terms of its accessibility. Even in the dry season some of the roads are submerged by overflowing waters from nearby streams. In the wet season I was told that roads were routinely washed away and the community was inaccessible. The community's population fluctuates depending on the season and the condition of the roads. The remoteness of the community functions as a protection for the community against alcohol and serves effectively as an alcohol ban. This leads to reduced violence and antisocial behaviour resulting in the community being seen as a peaceful sanctuary in which families can bring up their next generation and a place where people can live in a crime-free environment.

In this desirable setting the Ngurawaana community, like any other community, participates in community court order arrangements with the justice department. Under these agreements young offenders may be ordered to live in communities with their extended families. Instead of going to prison the offenders attend the school compulsorily. The Ngurawaana community is ideal for this purpose and the school plays an important role. Without the school, families with offending children would be pressured to move to towns like Roebourne with the likelihood that the rehabilitation program would collapse. Any such moves would undermine the viability of the whole community and force people to move on to large towns complete with their own array of social problems. While community school closures may save some costs in the short term, in the longer term the cost of social dysfunction would need to be borne by the community as a whole.

The pathway to Indigenous improvement starts with education. It starts with a school like Ngurawaana Remote Community School and the community which is indirectly dependent on the school. I am delighted that the government has turned away from the disastrous decision to close the Ngurawaana school. I hope that this small step down the education pathway for the Ngurawaana community will be a first step in closing the gap of Indigenous disadvantage.