

STATEMENT 21 March 2022

Urgent action needed on systemic failure of leadership and outcomes at Walgett Community College High School.

NSW Education continues to fail to provide what's needed for Walgett students to succeed at school. We feel like we are in a one step forward and two steps back situation in Walgett with the NSW Dept. of Education.

One bright spot has been that the high school now shares with at least 3 other schools a NSW Health *Wellbeing Health In-reach Nurse*. This person is highly competent but we have received no data as to how well this position is being used in the limited times she is present at the school and believe that a well-designed team is needed around her.

DEG's Secretary Virginia Robinson: "*Walgett needs this nurse position to be permanent and supported by a team of health professionals including Aboriginal Healthworkers. The nurse would be a central role within a Wellbeing Unit that is well understood by all teachers so that its role is fully functional.*"

Our questions in School Reference Group meetings have revealed that no significant wellbeing unit has been installed nor responses introduced to improve the wellbeing and safety of the students.

Our persistent requests since 2020 for up-to-date data re Suspensions by Aboriginality and Disability Status at Walgett Community College from CESE have been denied. **We can only conclude that NSW Education wants to hide the direct link between school suspensions and lack of supports for disability and trauma in Walgett.**

Police are still being used by the school as their first response to behavior incidents. In 2021 Dharriwaa Elders Group brought police and school leaders together to see what could be done to prevent armed police regularly entering school grounds. DEG wanted to keep kids safe from guns, and wanted the schools to initiate a protocol to calm and prevent incidents using considered wellbeing supports.

There was a period in late 2021 where we thought the schools stopped calling police and the community welcomed this but this hiatus didn't seem to lead to any significant change and recently there was an escalation when 5 police cars attended the high school to arrest a young teenage girl. Armed police continue to be used by the Education Department as a first response to wellbeing concerns. There is no need for police responses. Police responses criminalize our children.

DEG's Secretary Virginia Robinson: "*This is a significant problem because it introduces students – our children – to the criminal world and that is completely unnecessary*".

We conclude that Walgett schools are not culturally or physically safe.

DEG organized a concert last week in Walgett that was not heavily policed and everyone behaved really well. This was a community-run event. While some of the Elders were concerned about the

swearing of the performers, the Walgett young people involved both as performers and audience seemed to have a great time. A single police officer from the Youth Command attended, was really supportive of the day and could see what a benefit it was.

Another bright spot has been the planning process undertaken by consultant Red Earth Advisory after DEG engaged them to prepare a proposal for the high school to embed Vocational Education and Training opportunities as prioritized by the Connected Community School Reference Group. Work has begun to embed VET in the high school so there is now something to build on to at least ensure Walgett school students will have improved job opportunities while necessary long-term radical changes occur.

DEG gave the NSW Government one year to bring the radical change called for in its statement 25 February 2021¹:

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.

Much-needed radical change has not yet occurred.

DEG's Virginia Robinson: "*This is our community. This is our school. We care. Why won't ministers and those responsible in government departments do what it takes to support Walgett principals until they get it right?*"

Dharriwaa Elders Group in its Yuwaya Ngarrali partnership brings together police, justice, welfare, education and health agencies in a forum to hear community perspectives and nut out solutions holistically to improve the futures of Walgett children and young people. As far as we know, this community-led initiative is the only initiative bringing together agencies for whole of government approaches to solve problems impacting Walgett children and young people. While this is necessary, we see that change must occur from the top and directed to subordinates we work with on the ground.

We require:

- A senior decision-making group in NSW Government to work together to prevent the failing education outcomes of Walgett High School reflected in high suspensions and consequent proven pathways to the criminal justice system. They must direct their agencies on the ground to improve their outcomes and implement solutions we have identified on the ground.**

¹ https://www.dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au/images/downloads/DEG_Education_Letter_25_Feb_2021lowres.pdf

- **Walgett school leadership must train their staff to de-escalate behaviors in our young people and decommission their hotline to police. The criminalizing of our young people when they aren't well has to stop.**
- **Guns must be banned from Walgett schools. The risks to our children are unacceptable.**
- **A functioning wellbeing unit must be co-designed and installed in Walgett schools to promote student social and emotional wellbeing and identify and support children with disabilities.**

DEG's Virginia Robinson: "*I ask those responsible to consider and observe Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights² which states that everyone has a right to education and Articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child³ relating to children's education, health, welfare and disability*".

Further information: info@dharriwaaeldersgroup.org.au

Dharriwaa Elders Group (DEG) releases this statement in anticipation of stories that we hear are being prepared for release this week in the Sydney Morning Herald. This week DEG is busy conducting food and water security community surveys, embedding our new Youth Program and starting up our Walgett River Rangers team while battling the Covid19 emergency. We hope journalists will find information they need from DEG here.

² <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

³ <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>