NORTHERN TERRITORY
***of* AUSTRALIA**

Dr TANZIL RAHMAN MLA

Member for Fong Lim

HANSARD EXTRACT

TEACHER REGISTRATION

TUESDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2025

This extract is taken from the Official Hansard of the Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory

PARLIAMENT HOUSE, DARWIN NT 0800

English proficiency, there were many other things we did not cover. These include there being no early childhood specialist registration category; concerns about conditional registration; the risks in lowering qualification standards; the need for flexibility in the transition period; alternative pathways for Aboriginal language and VET teachers; there being no requirement for Aboriginal community consultation; there being no formal Indigenous language proficiency framework; questions about the independence of the board; the need for an implementation plan; and concerns about the rushed consultation overall. These points came directly from people working on the ground, and we owe it to them to take their views seriously.

One issue raised by several witnesses was the need for flexibility in the 12-month transitional exemption period. Some witnesses said that would not be an issue for them, but they understood it may be for others. What works in an urban school does not always work in a remote one. Many teachers in remote communities rely on bridging or equivalency pathways, and for some of them 12 months will not be long enough. People suggested a targeted extension option used only when needed so that we could support those teachers without slowing down the reform for everyone else.

Another issue raised was the lack of a formal framework for assessing Aboriginal language proficiency. This Bill recognises Aboriginal languages as specialist subjects, which is welcome; however, recognition is not enough if there is no clear pathway for Aboriginal language educators to become registered. We do not have a Territory-wide culturally informed accreditation process. The department recognised this when it gave evidence. Stakeholders who gave evidence supported creating one. A formal framework for assessing Aboriginal language proficiency is essential for bilingual education, creating local employment pathways and protecting Aboriginal languages and culture. It is crucial work.

We also heard from many stakeholders that consultation was too rushed. If we want these reforms to work effectively in all communities, including remote and Aboriginal communities, we need to involve them properly in the Bill's design. Hopefully, that will happen as part of the implementation and rollout of this legislation.

Most of the witnesses raised concerns about the independence of the Teacher Registration Board and the director, given that the director is employed and performance managed by the CEO of the department, the largest employer of teachers in the Territory. Things may be working well now—we talked about this during the inquiry—but that does not mean they always will. We need to make sure that independence is protected and visible.

We need more transparent guidelines on how conflicts are managed and how concerns can be raised. That is not a complicated issue; it is good governance.

Some stakeholders told us that they struggled to participate in the inquiry because the consultation period was too short. We heard about this in the Chamber already. It is great that this Bill was referred to the scrutiny committee. It is the committee's job to hear from people to inform the Assembly about how a Bill may work. It is important for all of us that we have the proper scope to do that well. It is something to serve us, not undermine our work.

Despite these concerns, I support this Bill. These are necessary reforms and they will work to modernise our teacher registration framework. However, the issues raised in my additional report and by people who gave us evidence should not be left behind now that we are passing the Bill. They are practical, reasonable issues that are grounded in real experience. At the end of the day teachers are at the heart of our education system and we need to make sure that the reforms we make will support them as strongly and well as possible. I trust that when this Bill passes and is implemented that the government will take all these matters seriously as that implementation gets underway.

Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, the focus areas of this legislation are child safety, regulatory integrity, efficiencies and alignment with national frameworks. Some of those matters are set to be addressed upon commencement. Other matters will be delayed, like clauses 29 to 38. My colleague the Member for Fannie Bay already neatly summarised a lot of the strengths of the legislation. The Part 2 matters that will come into effect after assent—information sharing, strengthening integrity and national consistency—are broadly agreed upon by everyone as a good step forward. The Part 3—clauses 29 to 38—measures for mandatory registration for early childhood teachers, likewise, are agreed upon as useful, albeit matters that will be addressed in a year or so from now.

I am grateful to the Legislative Scrutiny Committee for its work. I read the majority report and the two additional—as the Member for Johnston would have it—reports. It is great that there was an expansion of the scope for looking forward to what we might do in this space to be constructive.

This Bill in isolation is not particularly controversial—there are small things that can be refined, one-percentile improvements and perhaps some five-percentile improvements—but I have chosen to speak tonight because it is important to recognise that this is a piece of the broader puzzle to improve public education and education outcomes in the Northern Territory. At the risk of being contrary on a Bill where there is broad consensus that we will support it, I speak not to just extend platitudes and recognise our schools and wonderful educators—wonderful though they might be—but also to have a bit of a stocktake and see where this fits in the broader picture.

The fact is that our public education system is not tracking as well as we would like. We are on the verge of significant changes. Next year will be a major year in education reform. It is important for us to put these matters in context to understand where we are at and where we go from here. This government is trying hard to strengthen the teacher workforce. It is committed to attracting and keeping teachers through all the work it is doing, fixing education and directly getting kids back in school.

Honestly speaking, all the gnashing of teeth about the one percentile stuff that I hear from some about the Bill are no longer of concern to me in the broader equation. I am now more interested in how we start turning around public education. We can keep on saying, 'This one percentile will improve things', but there are broader structural forces that we need to address. We need to have an eye to history in what has been happening in education for the best part of a decade.

Streamlining processes and reducing administrative obstacles are important. The Member for Fannie Bay outlined how some of that will happen, with the strengthening of regulatory integrity, mandating registration of early childhood educators, creating national consistency and improving information sharing, all of which I applaud. I am all for doing things that bring us into accord with the national standard.

Child safety with be strengthened by mandating professional registration for qualified teachers and improving information sharing with other jurisdictions. That will prevent harm in the long run.

The Bill will strengthen regulatory integrity by tightening things to do with the TRB (Teacher Registration Board), albeit there are concerns about the centralisation of power and decision-making. Here is a reality check for everyone: the centralisation of power is happening the world over and in parliaments across Australia in actual fact. To some extent I am now less about fighting it the whole time and am starting to think that if we are centralising power and mechanisms, how do we still ensure we get good outcomes or, quite frankly, better outcomes than we have been getting?

We have tried a number of mechanisms to create all of the rigour in the world. I am not just concerned with respect to failing our educators, as it was put by one of my colleagues, or the one-teacher, one-profession model; I am thinking more generally about concerns with the education system writ large.

Alignment with the national Framework for Teacher Registration is a great thing. The amendment in the Bill to ensure Aboriginal languages are captured as specialist subjects is a great matter. The amendment recognises the importance of Aboriginal teachers in the teaching of students in their first language and it supports flexible employment options for remote schools.

There is interaction with flexibility in the labour market for us. In a place of small population and limited options we must start thinking about how we create regulatory efficiency by reducing administrative burden. There is a number of interactions. This is not just a bureaucratic piece about registration and child safety; it is part of the broader ecosystem of understanding where our public education system is at. This Bill will streamline registration processes and thereby create flexibility for employers to seek authority—for example, to employ an unregistered person to teach specialist subjects, which is important in the VET space and for individuals working towards gaining teaching qualifications.

All of that said, the question might be: why is this of such interest to me? It is not because my electorate is replete with schools. My electorate has few schools, but they represent the polarities of our system and illustrate neatly some of the systemic problems we have.

On one end of the spectrum I have Haileybury Rendall School, a high-performance private school with fantastic opportunities for its kids. In addition to delivering highly on the core curriculum, it has all manner of extracurricular options available to people there. It has been my great pleasure to be involved with that school and to do high value-adding tasks there to be part of its community and contribute where possible. The extent of my interaction—or our interaction—with it, to some extent, is about preventing things like the Berrimah Road duplication to ensure that the school is not disrupted.

On the other end of the continuum I have a great investment in public education. I am the product of five public schools in the Northern Territory. The equality of opportunity that I had going through schools historically, like Anula, Karama, Sanderson and Casuarina, gave me a fair go to realise my potential. That was the case for generations past, and I am not convinced it is the case for generations going forward and there is ample evidence to suggest that.

This is why we have to be making these kind of moves in these kinds of spaces to try to think in a more agile way about how we attract and retain teachers. How do we integrate better with our labour market? How do we deliver for not just educators but also kids? The numbers do not make for great reading based on 15 months of what this government has been doing and the last 10 years of governance in this place. In that regard I have to be honest that I am getting frustrated with the platitudes treating the Labor government of the past as though it had a monopoly on being able to provide solid educational outcomes. In fact the parlous state of the public education system is a product of the last eight years of Labor governance. It is time to start facing up to that reality.

Stuart Park Primary School is one of my schools. It is an excellent school that is regarded—I say this tongue in cheek and slightly in jest but also semi-seriously—as something of a Labor fortress. That school has been socially progressive in many ways. It is wonderfully led by Maria Albion. The school has invested in continuous professional development. It is a place of significant longstanding with experienced and dedicated staff, stable enrolment numbers and consistent attendance in advance of 90%. It even has a great school band which I very much look forward to playing with tomorrow at the music assembly. The fact is that it is increasingly an aberration in our public schooling system.

When you look at the numbers and the metrics you start to realise just how much damage has been done to our public education system and why there is growth in independent and private schools. I am not anti-private schools; arguably I represent the elite private school in the Northern Territory, Haileybury Rendall School. It is a fantastic school with fantastic opportunities. It is well run. The other day it had surplus capacity to take Year 9 students for wellbeing week to clean up trash in Charles Darwin National Park. That is a great activity to be part of. It also has fantastic scores in test results across the board. That school is not failing our kids educationally.

It is not just about infrastructure or the registration of teachers; it is about the end result—the outcome—for kids. I do not believe we are facing up to the reality of that situation. Speaking about this today is an opportunity to face that reality as we move forward into the next phase of education reform that has been necessitated by the fact that in the Northern Territory we have dropped the ball on public education over a long time, and certainly over the best part of the last decade.

What are examples of that? At a basic level, I will talk about that primary school I was at. For all its successes, at the beginning of the year it did not have working locks, keys and doors for basic security in its upper primary school. I thank the minister for her responsiveness as it resulted in me being able to resolve these minor capital works. I am grateful for her swift resolution. These are not the kind of issues that schools should have to be wrestling with. Basic infrastructure deficits is the tip of the iceberg.

I read committee members' additional reports which pointed to extra things we could do for teacher registration, but we have a bigger problem that is a function of educational failures by the previous government over the best part of a decade.

The truth is that the numbers speak for themselves. When Labor came to power in 2016 school attendance rates were on the other side of 80%. By the time it had finished two terms of government and was voted out, attendance had fallen to almost 70%. That is a significant metric. We are worried about one-percentile teacher registration stuff and, yes, it matters, but look at the bigger picture of what needs to be done to create the architecture of opportunity in the Northern Territory; otherwise, you are missing the wood for the trees.

After years of inaction by the former Labor government the CLP government is progressing important secondary school reform, which is long overdue. Half of us in this House are beneficiaries of the old education system which provided that architecture of opportunity before we had the middle school rollback. I do not want to hear that we are rushing it, it is too fast and people cannot keep up with it. I do not want to hear people asking how we will implement this. It is already overdue. We will not compromise educational outcomes, but at the same time a lot of this stuff is happening quickly and with a higher risk tolerance because we recognise that this reform is necessary to create opportunity in the Northern Territory. That is the reality. To create opportunity you must invest in the things that work and take chances. So far no great mistakes or missteps have been made, particularly in the education space.

In the last parliament the Member for Katherine presented a petition from 940 people calling for a dedicated special needs school for residents in Palmerston and the rural area. It was not a bad idea then and it is not a bad idea now. I will have plenty to say at budget time about how we spend our money, but that is a good investment. However, it was not a suitable investment for political expediency purposes at the time. Now we are investing in something that makes sense in that regard.

I do not even want to talk about the intensive support roll, but the numbers speak for themselves. They were clearly used to make attendance figures look better than they were. We are being transparent about those figures. It is important that we face up to what those numbers say. It is pleasing that in Term 3 of 2025 we have seen 300-plus fewer kids on the ISR compared with a year ago, in Term 3 of 2024.

We are increasing accountability mechanisms for parents whose children consistently fail to attend school. Will all the policy levers that we pull work? No. I do not believe they will, but will more of them work than if we sit around twiddling our thumbs? I believe that is the case, which is why I am backing the totality of the package of education reform being driven by the minister.

The CLP government committed $1.9m to employ school counsellors based in schools. Proportionate to our population we have more public servants than anywhere else. We know that education is one space where it makes the least sense to have a concentration of people in the Mitchell Centre because you need a bunch of people on the ground in schools. School counsellors is an example of a good initiative in that regard.

The worst of it all in my mind is that under Labor Territory kids lagged behind the rest of the country in literacy and numeracy. I do not want to be harsh, but that is why we cannot continue to all dance around those figures and talk about the one percentiles. One-third of all NT students are categorised as needing additional support in literacy and numeracy compared with one in 10 nationally. When the Leader of the Opposition and I went to school here the schools were proportionately, per capita, funded better than anywhere else in the country. We essentially had a public schooling system that was the envy of the rest of the country. We made prudent use of the money that we were gifted by the federal government in our education sector.

This is the great irony. It is true that the former Labor government secured money from the federal government—its fair share of the pie—but what did it do with that to result in the standard of literacy and numeracy falling? Our NAPLAN results under Labor showed 58% of all NT students, including 85% of Indigenous students, did not meet basic literacy and numeracy standards.

That is why we are focused on getting kids back to school, via the $14m Boosting Literacy and Numeracy plan, including embracing a consistent evidence-based approach centred on explicit teaching. It has not been pulled out of nowhere; it works elsewhere. The data and the evidence was out there. If the former government wanted to do something about that it could have, but it did not. The bottom line is that the days of viewing public education as the remit of Labor are over. I am done with hearing about it. Whilst getting our cut of the national education accord, Labor oversaw the decline of public education in the Northern Territory.

There are innumerable fronts on which I could detail the argument, but one of the most compelling is the aggregate enrolment data in the last eight years of government. In 2016—Labor's first term data—there were 33,300 kids in schools. In 2017 it went up to 34,400; in 2018 it was 34,300; in 2019 it was 34,200; and in 2020 it was 34,500. It stayed roughly consistent, but in real terms that means it was declining. In that period whilst Labor was failing our public education sector, the private sector was having to pick up the slack.

The real telling data is what happened in the second term of the Gunner government. If you look at that period you will see a persistent decline in enrolment numbers. It went from 34,600 in 2021 to 34,400 in the following year, to 33,000, to 32,000 and to 32,500. Why did that happen? It is not proportionate to or commensurate with our population growth; it is to do with falling standards in our public education system overseen by the last Labor government and its failure to manage the money it was given to produce better educational outcomes for our kids.

All of this tinkering and additional reports do not mean anything when there has been a decline in standards, numbers and the architecture of opportunity. That is what I am interested in.

The architecture of opportunity in the Northern Territory since the set-up of this place has comprised public health, housing, infrastructure and education. If you fail on those things you will fail to grow the Territory. I am done with the historic romanticisation and revisionism. Make no mistake, the erosion of that architecture is the product of Labor's poor choices over a decade. It is the reason that there are 17 of us on this side and four left on the other side. That is the reality.

I am not trying to say that the Teacher Registration (Northern Territory) Legislation Amendment Bill will correct all the failures in the education system, let alone all the structural failures created by the Labor government over the last eight years, but it is a step in the right direction. It is one of many that this government will have to take in order to bring that architecture of opportunity back into accord and to bring public education standards up to scratch at the junior and secondary levels.

It is an important time to take these steps because 2026 will be a significant year in education reform, with the long overdue rectification of the middle school transition, the necessary moves in child safety improvements and the strengthening of regulatory integrity.

This government is acting to improve public education, not just dealing in platitudes and feel-good stories and talking about the virtues of education in the abstract or our wonderful teachers. Yes, our teachers are wonderful. My teachers were wonderful and my father is a wonderful teacher, but I am done with hearing the stories about wonderful teachers being the be-all and end-all of our system. There are systemic failures that have made it impossible for our education to succeed. Those systemic and structural failures must be addressed, and I believe this government will do that.

I wrote down this quote because I thought it was a good. In the ministerial report in the last parliamentary sitting, the minister said:

> *… departments have had to be agile over the last year to set things in place. We have not just talked about it; we acted on it.*

That is what it will take. The gnashing of teeth over the one-percentile stuff, whilst virtuous is the enemy of the good at this point, as far as I am concerned.

The prevarication and bureaucratisation of public education in particular but also the education sector writ large is a significant problem in the Northern Territory. We may end up having the same conversation in regard to what Labor did with health or public infrastructure. We can keep talking about it or we can do things about it, and that is what the government is getting on with and actually doing. I support the moves being made by the Minister for Education and Training in this space. We are taking calculated positive chances to move things forward at the pace needed because, quite frankly, we are watching otherwise a slow-motion spiral and public education will not remedy itself. The education sector in general will only get back on its feet if we intervene and stimulate the sector at this point. On that basis, I look forward to continuing the process of righting the wrongs done to public education over the last decade.

I commend this Bill to the Assembly.

Mr EDGINGTON (Aboriginal Affairs): Madam Speaker, I support the Teacher Registration (Northern Territory) Legislation Amendment Bill 2025. The Bill introduces many important reforms that I am confident will have a positive impact on the next generation of Territorians.

As the Member for Barkly and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, I am excited about the amendments that recognise the important of Aboriginal teachers and the teaching of students in language, as well as amendments that will support many flexible employment options for local people in remote schools.

Prior to these amendments, regulation 5(3) of the Teacher Registration (Northern Territory) Regulations provides an exemption for a person to teach without meeting English language proficiency requirements if that person is only teaching a foreign language. This government understands that in the Territory's remote communities English is often not the primary language spoken and it therefore does not make sense for English language proficiency to be a barrier to teaching first languages in community. The proposed amendment rewords the legislation to replace the term 'foreign language' with 'language other than English'. This amendment clarifies that Aboriginal languages are included for the purpose of the exemption.

In practice this amendment ensures that Aboriginal teachers who hold deep cultural and linguistic knowledge are not excluded from the classroom simply because English is not their first language. It removes unnecessary barriers to employment in remote schools and strengthens a pipeline of local educators who can teach children in their own language. The impact will be profound. Students will learn in ways that reflect their identity, culture and community, while schools benefit from teachers who bring lived experience and connection. Over time, this reform will help preserve Aboriginal languages, improve educational outcomes and build stronger bridges between communities and the education system.