

Making Queensland Safer Bill 2024

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The Honourable David Crisafulli MP
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Dear Premier

Submission to The Making Queensland Safer Bill

Queenslanders are united in wanting real, lasting solutions to the youth justice crisis gripping our state. However, the strategy for Making Queensland Safer will miss the mark unless we directly address the entrenched disadvantage that drives youth crime.

The cost of just increasing incarceration far exceeds the investment needed to provide quality education earlier in life, an essential step in breaking the cycle and preventing youth crime. The community expects safety—but that safety cannot be achieved through punishment alone.

This submission urges your government to adopt a transformative approach, by partnering with Indigenous reform leaders who want to take responsibility to tackle disengagement and offending—let's work together to build on their successes.

The Youth Justice Crisis is a Crisis of Entrenched Disadvantage

The youth justice crisis is driven by a small cohort of young people from Queensland's most disadvantaged families and communities. These kids are not "innately criminal"; they are the victims of systems that have failed to offer them a way out of the cycles of poverty, neglect, and disconnection.

- **Youth Detention Rates:** Two-thirds of young people in detention are Indigenous. This stark overrepresentation reflects systemic failures—especially in Education—to support the families and communities that need it the most to break the cycle of disadvantage.
- **Educational Disadvantage:** In remote Cape York, fewer than 5% of Indigenous students complete Year 12 with an ATAR or VET qualification, compared to 47% of Indigenous students nationally, and 77% of non-Indigenous students. State schools in remote Cape York consistently fail to provide even the basic foundations needed to set these children on a different path—this is a key opportunity, and choice, in life denied.
- **700+ Disengaged Youth:** More than 700 young people across remote Cape York have disengaged entirely from education and work. In Cape York communities the usual entry points into the workforce do not exist. There are no fast food or retail chain jobs, and no

family connections to provide that critical first opportunity in a workplace. Without new solutions, to create work pathways, these 700+ young people today are left only with the well-worn pathway of welfare dependency, juvenile detention, and eventual adult incarceration.

If nothing changes, we will continue to see the lack of opportunity in Cape York communities continue to condemn young Queenslanders to the same bleak outcomes as their parents and grandparents.

State Primary Schools in Cape York are Failing Children

In Queensland's most disadvantaged communities, particularly in Cape York, the state Education system not only fails to address entrenched disadvantage but often exacerbates it:

- **Attendance Issues:** Chronic absenteeism is widespread, with state schools unable to ensure regular attendance. Teachers report severe understaffing in these schools, with some actively discouraging attendance due to lack of resources.
- **Academic Outcomes:** In communities like Aurukun, only a very small number of students achieve basic literacy and numeracy milestones. Without the foundations for further learning, these children fall further behind, fuelling disengagement and troublesome anti-social behaviour.

The state's failure to provide good Education opportunities in communities like Cape York, essential for leveling the playing field for its most disadvantaged children, lies at the core of the youth justice crisis.

Regional State High Schools Fail Cape York Kids

State high schools in Cape York have consistently failed to provide the pathways needed for students to succeed, particularly for Indigenous students from remote communities. Key issues relate to the culture of low expectations embedded in the system, reflected in:

- **Regional High Schools are Underperforming:** Regional high schools available to Cape York Students in Cooktown and Weipa have consistently failed to bridge the significant literacy and numeracy gaps Cape York students carry from substandard primary schools. Under resourced teachers cannot provide the intensive support needed, and students are left floundering without the skills required for further study or employment.
- **Ineffective Local 'High-Tops':** No local 'high-top' secondary provision in Cape York communities can provide the infrastructure, quality teaching, and curriculum breadth needed to prepare students for Year 12 or vocational qualifications. This kind of in-community secondary provision cannot provide a decent alternative to attending a good high school for any Cape York student—it is bad policy to pretend that they can.
- **Dropout and Disengagement:** Without adequate support or high-quality educational opportunities, many Cape York students disengage entirely, joining the ranks of the **700+** youth in the region who lack pathways to work or further study.

The state school system's inability to address these barriers leaves Cape York kids without the opportunities they need to break cycles of disadvantage and leads many toward disengagement, welfare dependency, or worse – youth justice involvement.

Indigenous-Led, Home-Grown Solutions Have Succeeded

Indigenous communities must be supported to take responsibility for the challenges related to youth disengagement. Willing reform leadership exists, and the best examples of success can be seen when Indigenous-led processes have been supported, to harness the agency of reform minded individuals, families and communities to develop innovative, home-grown solutions to increase responsibility and opportunity.

Queensland has models of success that demonstrate the power of combining opportunity and responsibility to lift young people out of disadvantage. The Cape York Girl Academy, Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC) and other Cape York Indigenous-led initiatives provide critical lessons:

- **Cape York Leaders Program:** Over 15 years, 450 students from remote Indigenous communities have completed Year 12 with an extraordinary 94% success rate, far outstripping the 5% completion rate in the local state system. These graduates have broken the cycle and now contribute positively to society and the economy. They will provide the same expectations of their children. This is the key to Closing the Gap quickly and efficiently.
- **Pre-Prep Interventions:** In Aurukun, evidence-based literacy programs helped 85% of participating students achieve reading benchmarks by Year 2, compared to just 4% under traditional approaches. These are no longer funded.
- **Evidence-Based Interventions:** the Good to Great Schools Australia (GGSA) model in Hope Vale and Coen have demonstrated that educational success is possible, even in the most disadvantaged communities. GGSA applies proven, research-backed methods to improve foundational literacy and numeracy. In Coen and Hope Vale, these methods helped 85% of Year 2 students achieve national literacy benchmarks, compared to just 4% under the standard state curriculum
- **Education as a Family Priority:** Families across Cape York have collectively saved over \$4 million for education-related expenses through Student Education Trusts (SETs), demonstrating the willingness of even the poorest families to take responsibility and to prioritise their children's futures when the right opportunity infrastructure is in place.
- **Work Solutions: Learning to Earning Pathways:** Orbiting Programs can successfully chaperone youth who have disengaged from school into regional and urban job markets equipping them with skills and independence, to break the cycles of poverty. This is currently a huge policy gap and an area that requires urgent action.

The Cape York Girl Academy: A Life-Changing Initiative

The Cape York Girl Academy, an initiative of the Cape York Partnership, provides a transformative solution for disengaged young women, particularly those who face significant barriers such as motherhood, trauma, or disconnection from traditional schooling. It provides:

- **Boarding for Young Mothers and Disengaged Girls:** The Girl Academy is Australia's first boarding school specifically designed for young mothers and girls who have disengaged from mainstream education. It provides a safe, nurturing environment where students can focus on their education while raising their children.
- **Holistic Support:** The Girl Academy integrates academic programs with parenting support, trauma-informed care, and cultural connection, ensuring that students' educational, emotional, and practical needs are met.
- **Empowering Outcomes:** Students at the Girl Academy achieve educational qualifications and life skills that enable them to re-engage with society, pursue further education or employment, and break cycles of disadvantage for themselves and their children.

Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC): Empower Indigenous People to Take Responsibility

The **Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC)** can be a transformative mechanism to enable Cape York communities address youth disengagement.

- **Parental Responsibility and Accountability:** The FRC's Youth Justice trigger is the only mechanisms that exists in Queensland to facilitate greater parental/carer responsibility and support when a young person offends.

It is a travesty that, despite communities successfully advocating for an FRC Youth Justice trigger to empower panels of local Elders and respected persons appointed as Local FRC Commissioners to intervene in Youth Justice matters, the trigger was inactive and unusable for a long period under the previous Labor Government.

From 2014 to 2024, local Elders and respected persons serving as FRC Local Commissioners were unable to act on Youth Justice matters contrary to the intention of the communities involved. The Labor government only moved to fix the situation shortly before the election.

The FRC's youth justice trigger:

- means the FRC can ensure parents or carers are conferenced and supported in response to a youth justice notice
- allows income management orders, mandatory referrals and/or case plans to be made for parents where appropriate
- means the FRC can mandate supports to assist the family and divert the child from a future of court interactions and juvenile detention.

Indigenous reform leaders want to take responsibility. The FRC Act is one rare example of the Queensland Government empowering them to do so. Expanding the FRC model to other disadvantaged regions could provide a powerful framework for addressing youth disengagement at its roots.

The Failed Coalition of Peak's National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The failed Coalition of Peaks' National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CTG) holds no prospect of addressing this crisis for Indigenous young people and making Queensland safe.

Top-down solutions will continue to comprehensively fail. All the evidence to date shows external actors cannot devise and implement effective 'solutions' to the serious challenges that are manifested in the Indigenous youth crisis. On-the-ground Indigenous agency is needed to drive change and Close the Gap. This cannot be 'outsourced' or provided by external and non-Indigenous NGOs, government agencies, or at the national level without any connection to on-the-ground Indigenous agency.

Partnering with Indigenous Reform Leadership

The youth justice crisis will not be solved through government doubling down on punitive measures and continuing ineffective approaches and programs of the past. In Cape York and other areas of entrenched disadvantage, government action alone is insufficient to address the root causes.

For success, it is vital that government partner and activate a broad on-the-ground Indigenous reform leadership in these challenging areas of policy development and implementation.

The primary focus on Cape York Partnership (CYP) is enabling Indigenous reform leaders across Cape York, including at the individual, family and organisational level, who want to take responsibility and seize opportunity for change. We have a proven track record in working with Indigenous reformers to tackle the structural disadvantages that drive disengagement and youth crime. Through initiatives like the Cape York Leaders Program, Student Education Trusts (SETs), and the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC), CYP has demonstrated what can be achieved when Indigenous agency, opportunity and responsibility are combined. There is great potential for collaboration with the Queensland Government to build on and scale such Indigenous-led successes.

We invite the Queensland Government to work with us to build the new and innovative partnership that is required, so Indigenous people themselves can take responsibility for arresting and then reversing the youth crisis in our region.

Recommendations for Action

Orbiting and Work Solutions Needed for 700+ Disengaged Young People

- An urgent focus is needed on increasing work opportunities by supporting young people to orbit from remote communities where there is no labour market, into entry level work and supporting them to succeed

Reform Education in Disadvantaged Communities:

- School improvement is essential to ensure state's primary schools in Cape York communities level the playing field for Queensland children who start behind, rather than deepening their disadvantage.
- Implement proven early intervention programs, such as pre-prep literacy initiatives, to ensure children in Queensland's most disadvantaged places do not start school already behind.
- Guarantee access to high quality secondary education for every child from remote communities, by expanding access to good schools that is currently only available through boarding school scholarships.

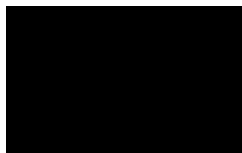
Expand the Family Responsibilities Commission (FRC):

- Partner to ensure the Youth Justice Trigger continues to be supported and use this novel intervention as a mechanism to learn and build on success.
- Scale up this proven model to other disadvantaged communities across Queensland, ensuring a focus on school attendance and parental accountability.

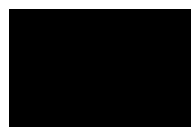
Partner with Indigenous Reform Leaders:

- Government cannot fix these challenging problems alone. Government must enable and activate on-the-ground Indigenous agency needed to Close the Gap on youth justice.

Yours sincerely



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