



OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER AGAINST CORRUPTION (NT)

## Investigation into the former principal of Milingimbi School

5 July 2021

### Corrupt conduct by former principal at disadvantaged remote school

The Independent Commissioner Against Corruption, Ken Fleming QC, has made findings of corrupt conduct against a former principal of Milingimbi School in Central Arnhem Land and has made a series of recommendations relating to oversight and governance of remote schools.

The ICAC report found that Ms Jennifer Lea Sherrington benefited from her position as principal of Milingimbi School by misapplying Department of Education and Milingimbi School Council funds, misusing debit cards and exploiting the lack of guidelines and department oversight for the Principal's Initiative cost code.

Over the course of four years, Ms Sherrington spent over \$507,796 on travel for 'other school business' by charging it to the Principal's Initiative cost code, a code to cover emergency and unforeseen expenses.

In years when Ms Sherrington spent \$0 on book room supplies for one of the most remote and disadvantaged schools in Australia, she travelled over 18 times, chartering flights, staying in hotels and dining out with family and friends.

"Funds were diverted from educational resources intended for the poorest cohort of students in the country for Ms Sherrington's personal enrichment," Commissioner Fleming said.

"Ms Sherrington derived benefits including extended travel to and accommodation in Darwin, motor vehicle hire for personal shopping, quality dining and fast food purchases for herself, family members and friends," he said.

"On numerous occasions Ms Sherrington chartered flights instead of travelling on commercial flights, which affected the school's operational budget."

Ms Sherrington also falsified student attendance figures in an attempt to secure an additional \$1.4 million for Milingimbi School in a single school year.

“Ms Sherrington was not in the business of education; she was in the business of manipulating data and herding children to be at school on ‘census’ days to maximise funding from both the Northern Territory and Australian governments,” Commissioner Fleming said.

Ms Sherrington employed four family members at various times on generous contract rates without the necessary permission and without declaring conflicts of interest. This included her partner and her nephew, who was paid to boost attendance during census weeks. She allocated one family member a government employee house while he was not employed by the Northern Territory Government (NTG). Over \$270,000 was spent on salaries for her family members.

Ms Sherrington also failed to comply with Department of Education and COGSO guidelines in respect of the school council and its governance by manufacturing minutes for policy compliance rather than maintaining records of meetings, including input from school council members.

The ICAC report questioned whether such conduct was confined to one school or whether the problem may be replicated elsewhere across any other of the 136 NTG schools.

“Given both the disadvantage of the school and the community, and the requirement for budget repair across NT Government agencies, it is critical that the Department of Education determine whether this is a singular incident or whether it is systemic,” Commissioner Fleming said.

“Lack of adequate oversight of regional and remote operations could lead to corruption running unchecked, diverting funds from some of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia and impacting on efforts to close the gap.”

The Department of Education fully cooperated throughout the investigation.

The Office of the ICAC has made a series of recommendations to strengthen oversight and monitoring of schools.

ENDS

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