



No school, no worries plan fails the test

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The principal of the Kimberley high school which ran the no-school, no-welfare trial has joined WA Federal politicians in expressing surprise and disappointment that the scheme has been dumped and replaced with a watered-down version.

Halls Creek District High School principal Garry Smith said he had not received any information from the Federal Government about the new trial, due to start as early as next week, and he would have been happy to continue with last year's trial.

"I was fairly optimistic that the no-school, no-welfare scheme was going ahead (this year)," he said.

"It probably made a difference in some cases. The more leverage that we have or pressure we can put on parents is welcome."

Under the new trial, parents of truant schoolchildren will not lose their welfare payments but instead will be asked to do voluntary work at the school.

WA senators Ross Lightfoot and Alan Eggleston, Kalgoorlie MHR Barry Haase and new Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop yesterday threw their support behind the no-school, no-welfare program.

"Not only did the trial have considerable local support from the

school and the parents, the improvements were immediate and considerable," Ms Bishop said. "Evidence from the 2005 Halls Creek trial shows initiatives like this can work."

Senator Lightfoot stopped short of calling the new scheme a waste of time, but said it was clearly less effective. He said he would speak to Employment and Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews to see if the decision could be reversed.

"Absolutely, without equivocation, the old trial should be reinstated," he said. "The old trial had good substance, good support. There were some vocal critics but they by far were a vocal minority."

"In this case the ministers, or the public servants responsible for the initial trial, have gone to water."

Senator Eggleston said the old scheme was working. "I do think it is very regrettable and it shows that there are solutions to Aboriginal truancy," he said.

The Federal Government said yesterday it did not bow to pressure from indigenous groups on the program, claiming an 11th hour legal hitch caused it to be watered down.

Just last week, Mr Andrews had planned to implement the scheme but received late legal advice that welfare payments could not be tied to school attendance rates.