More than 41,000 students will return to classrooms this week for the start of the 2003 school year.

Employment, Education and Training Minister Syd Stirling said around 31,000 students across the Top End and 10,000 students throughout Central Australia were expected to enroll in the Territory’s 182 Government and non-Government schools.

This includes about 9,000 at Government secondary schools, 20,000 at Government primary schools, and more than 3,000 at Government preschools.

Mr Stirling was on hand at Stuart Park Primary School today to welcome Transition Year students to their first day of school.

"I wish students and teachers a happy and productive 2003," he said.

Mr Stirling said the Government was undertaking a $14 million program of upgrading school facilities across the Northern Territory this financial year.

Territory schools will also benefit from an $860,000 funding boost for essential supplies, such as stationery, text books and computer equipment – the first in many years – taking total funding from $3.8 million to $4.6 million.

"These initiatives are part of the Government’s commitment to improving public schools and ensuring Territory students have access to the best education possible," Mr Stirling said.

Hector the Road Safety Cat was also on hand at Stuart Park Primary School today to remind students about road safety and to give students bike riding tips.

Meanwhile, Mr Stirling urged motorists to slow down and pay special attention when driving near schools.

"Expect the unexpected around school yards and crossings. For some children it will be their first time at school and they have few road survival skills, so it’s important that motorists slow down and drive with care," he said.

"Let’s retain an accident free record at school crossings this year. Motorists should remember that the speed limit for school zones is 40km/hr between 7am and 5pm on school days."

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