The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

THE RESTLESS YEARS

An Inquiry into Year 12 Retention Rates

Report of the House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Training

October 1989

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The Report Title

During the Inquiry the Committee met with many high school students. At one such meeting at St Mary's Senior High School in the western suburbs of Sydney a Year 11 student described the experience of a friend of hers who left school part way through Year 11: 'She was unhappy at school and felt that she would be better off leaving. School wasn't offering her anything – it made her restless for something else'.

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PREFACE

THE FOCUS OF THE REPORT

Every Australian is entitled to a secondary education to Year 12.

While an increasing number of young people are taking up this entitlement and achieving the goal of a successfully completed secondary education, a significant proportion of young Australians – from readily identifiable groups and backgrounds – do not complete 12 years of schooling.

This Report considers the reasons why young Australians from these particular groups and backgrounds do not stay on at school to Year 12, and looks at ways of enabling and encouraging greater participation in secondary education.

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MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training was established by sessional order on 24 September 1987.

Chairman	Mr John Brumby, MP
Deputy Chairman	Dr Bob Woods, MP
Members	Mr Bruce Cowan, MP Ms Wendy Fatin, MP Mr George Gear, MP Mrs Carolyn Jakobsen, MP Mr Gary Johns, MP Mr Chris Miles, MP[1] Mr Roger Price, MP Mr Geoff Prosser, MP Hon Ian Robinson, MP Mr Rod Sawford, MP[2]
Secretary to the Committee	Ms Lindy Smith

MEMBERSHIP OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE

Chairman	Mr Roger Price, MP
Members	Mrs Carolyn Jakobsen, MP Mr Rod Sawford, MP Dr Bob Woods, MP
Secretary to the Sub-committee	Mr Grant Harrison
Inquiry Staff	Mr Bob Dapre Miss Louise Carney Miss Laura Gillies

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[1]Mr Chris Miles, MP, replaced Mrs Kathy Sullivan, MP, from 5 October 1989. Mrs Sullivan was the Deputy Chairman of the Committee and a member of the Sub-committee.

[2]Mr Rod Sawford replaced Mr Ross Free, MP, on both the Committee and the Sub-committee from 24 May 1989

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Committee has been asked by the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, the Hon J S Dawkins, MP, to inquire into and report on:

The factors affecting student participation in post-compulsory education and training, including:

- the influence of factors such as gender, socio-economic status, ethnic background and peers on students' subject choice, attitudes to schooling, and transfer rates to further education and training.
- the role of school curriculum in encouraging students to complete post-compulsory schooling.
- the effect of student financial assistance schemes in encouraging students to stay at school and enter further education in the post-compulsory years.

EXPLANATION OF TERMS

Curriculum	The courses, or a particular group of courses, available at school.
Post-compulsory schooling	Schooling after the minimum school leaving age (that is, age 15 years except in Tasmania where the leaving age is 16 years). Years 11 and 12 are generally considered to be the post-compulsory years of schooling.

Throughout the Report references to 'State' and 'States' include the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.

ABBREVIATIONS

AEC	Australian Education Council – the council of *Commonwealth and State Ministers for Education*
CAE	College of Advanced Education
DEET	Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training
FECCA	Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia Inc.
NBEET	National Board of Employment, Education and Training – an independent body that provides advice to the Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training
NESB	Non-English speaking background
TAFE	*Technical and Further Education*

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

Schools must adapt so that all young people can realise their entitlement to a secondary education to Year 12. The Committee acknowledges however that, at least in the short term, there will continue to be a number of young people who leave school early. It is essential that those who do leave school early have access to either jobs or structured vocational training opportunities. Governments have it within their power to achieve this outcome and the Committee recommends that:

1. **the Commonwealth and State Governments adopt the principal of a Youth Guarantee in which every young person of senior secondary age be *guaranteed* the opportunity of participation in secondary education, an apprenticeship, traineeship, other education or training activity or employment.** *(Paragraph 2.30)*

Financial Assistance

No young person should have to leave school because they or their family are unable to meet the costs of schooling. The Commonwealth Government's AUSTUDY scheme can provide valuable, sometimes crucial, financial assistance to young people and families for whom staying on poses financial problems. Students under the age of 16 are not eligible under the existing AUSTUDY arrangements. In some States this provision excludes a significant number of senior secondary students. The Committee recommends that:

2. (a) **the Commonwealth revise its youth income support measures so that senior secondary school students under the age of 16 years are eligible to apply for AUSTUDY allowances payable to their parents but not be eligible for the living away-from-home component; and**

   (b) **that, subject to the implementation of the previous recommendation, senior secondary students under the age of 16 should not continue to qualify for Family Allowance and Family Allowance Supplement.** *(Paragraph 3.29)*

To varying degrees, the States also provide financial assistance to students. The Committee recommends that:

3. **the States be urged to implement a nation-wide education allowance payable for young people from low-income families in the primary and junior secondary years and which is calculated and paid on the same basis as the Victorian Education Maintenance and Education Expense Allowances.** *(Paragraph 3.40)*

The Role of Parents and the Community

A key to breaking the cycle of educational disadvantage experienced by some in the community is to change attitudes toward education, and to encourage parents and young people to appreciate the educational and career advantages of staying on to Year 12. Community outreach by schools and public awareness campaigns can play a valuable role in this process. In developing public awareness campaigns the Committee recommends that the Commonwealth:

4. (a) **ensures that, within a broad common framework, individual schools are able to tailor elements of the campaign to target particular disadvantaged groups within their local communities; and**

   (b) **ensures that the campaign focuses on the importantrole that parents play in influencing their children's attitudes toward education.** *(Paragraph 4.14)*

Some States and schools have made significant progress towards involving parents and the wider community in the activities of schools. The Committee endorses this trend and believes that such involvement can improve the learning environment for students and ensure that schools are relevant and accountable to the community they serve. However, not all States have developed open and democratic school decision making structures and the Committee recommends that:

5. **those States which have not already done so be urged to review their formal education decision making processes with the aim of devolving more responsibility and resources to individual schools and their regions, and ensuring that schools develop democratic decision making structures involving parents and community representatives.** *(Paragraph 4.29)*

To improve the availability and flow of information about successful parent participation strategies the Committee recommends that:

6. (a) **using the South Australian Parent Participation Centre as a model, the Commonwealth and the States should establish Parent Participation Centres in each State on a cost-shared basis; and**

(b) **the Centres should be located in regions where participation rates are low, and be subject to review at an appropriate time.** *(Paragraph 4.39)*

To further assist in the process of empowering parents, the Committee recommends that:

7. **the States be urged to develop and adopt a 'Charter of Parents' Rights and Responsibilities in the Schooling of their Children'.** *(Paragraph 4.44)*

Aboriginal Education

Aboriginal people are the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia. It is essential that the educational opportunities for young Aboriginal people are improved if the widespread economic and social disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people is to be overcome. This is not an easy task but the recently announced National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy is a step in the right direction. To assist in the provision of secondary education to Aboriginal people from traditional communities the Committee recommends that:

8. **the Commonwealth examine ways of assisting residential colleges to meet the costs of boarding for young Aboriginal people; for example, by making provision to meet all or part of the difference between the cost of boarding and the ABSTUDY away-from-home rate.** *(Paragraph 5.20)*

Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds

There is great variation in the retention rates between different ethnic groups. Students from some groups participate at rates equal to or higher than the community average, while other groups participate at lower rates. To enable the scope of problems experienced by young people from non-English speaking backgrounds to be considered in more detail, the Committee recommends that:

9. (a) **school systems routinely collect country of birth and language data using the guidelines developed by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and State Ethnic Affairs Commissions; and**

(b) **the Commonwealth conduct or sponsor further research into the significance of factors such as family value orientations, the importance of English literacy, and other related cultural and socio-economic factors, on the participation and educational aspirations of young people from non-English speaking backgrounds.** *(Paragraph 5.41)*

In addition, the Committee recommends that:

10. (a) **in developing the community information and education campaigns referred to in recommendation 4 education authorities and schools consider the needs of non-English speaking background communities in their districts;**

(b) **schools develop culture and language sensitive means of communicating with parents and involving them in the school activities and decision making processes (refer to recommendations 4, 5, 6 and 7); and**

(c) **teacher training programs emphasise the need to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences (refer to recommendation 19).** *(Paragraph 5.42)*

Students in Country Areas

Students in country areas can face additional costs in staying at school. There may, for example, be costs associated with daily travel to school, or where daily travel is not possible, costs associated with living away from home. Valuable Commonwealth assistance is provided to country students under the AUSTUDY and Assistance for Isolated Children schemes. Some States also provide *assistance to help meet travel and accommodation costs. The Committee* recommends that:

11. **in the context of consultations currently taking place in relation to State education allowances, the States consider the adequacy of financial assistance they provide to country students and consider introducing uniformity in the provision of such assistance.** *(Paragraph 5.64)*

The establishment of clusters of schools and the use of new technology in learning have the potential to increase the range of courses, resources and expertise available in small country schools. The Committee gave detailed consideration to these issues in its report *An apple for the teacher? Choice and*

technology in learning. The Committee recommends that:

12. **the Commonwealth report to the Parliament on progress toward the implementation of recommendations contained in its earlier report, *An apple for the teacher?*.** *(Paragraph 5.73)*

Learning and Achievement

Primary schools have a vital role to play in imparting basic skills and capturing the interest and imagination of students from an early age. If primary schools do not succeed in these tasks the educational future of young people thus affected will be severely limited. To help primary schools in this task and to allow students the greatest opportunity to achieve success in learning, the Committee recommends that, as 1990 is the International Year of Literacy:

13. **the Commonwealth Government, in partnership with the States, develop systems of diagnostic testing, like the Tasmanian Education Department Diagnostic Information Service (TEDDIS), for widespread use within primary and secondary schools.** *(Paragraph 6.18)*

Further, the Committee recommends that:

14. **the Commonwealth develop and fund a national strategy to ensure that all young people achieve proficiency in mathematical, reading and writing skills in the primary school years and that this strategy incorporate –**

    (i) appropriate systems of diagnostic testing as recommended above;

    (ii) a program along the lines of the former Basic Learning in Primary Schools program;

    (iii) specific commitments to professional development for teachers and the involvement of parents in the provision of learning support; and

    (iv) the accreditation of, and provision of financial assistance to, community based literacy and numeracy centres. *(Paragraph 6.35)*

Courses Available

The type of courses available in Years 11 and 12 must change to be more relevant to the needs of the large number of students who want to complete a full secondary education but who are not aiming for higher education. The Committee recommends that:

15. **the States encourage the development of a broader range of courses to provide more appropriately for the majority of students, who are not bound for higher education, and as a way of encouraging more young people to stay on to Year 12. In particular, the States should –**

   (i) encourage school-based course development;

   (ii) ensure that school-TAFE link policies provide adequate support and assistance to schools and TAFE colleges so that link programs can be more widely implemented; and

   (iii) establish, if they have not done so already, regional consultative councils with business and industry representatives to facilitate the development of integrated school and industry link programs. *(Paragraph 7.38)*

Courses which contribute toward a tertiary entrance score are often perceived to be of higher status than non-tertiary entrance courses. This perception can result in students choosing tertiary entrance courses when non-tertiary courses may be more appropriate to their interests and abilities. As a means of overcoming the status differences between tertiary and non-tertiary entrance courses, the Committee recommends that:

16. **the States be urged to monitor developments in the Victorian Certificate of Education, which provides a diverse range of courses within a common framework, with a view to implementing a similar structure in their own senior secondary courses.** *(Paragraph 7.52)*

In addition, the Committee recommends that:

17. **higher education institutions accept a greater range of school-designed courses as contributing toward tertiary entrance scores.** *(Paragraph 7.61)*

Career Counselling and Tertiary Awareness

The advice presently available to young people in schools about career options and opportunities for further study is generally inadequate and not available early enough to effect real changes in young people's attitudes and expectations. The Committee recommends that:

18. (a) **in the evaluation of career education services currently being sponsored by the Commonwealth, the following issues be addressed –**

   (i) the need for more trained careers counsellors in schools;

(ii) **the need for information and advice to be provided to young people in the early secondary years;**

(iii) **the need to ensure every young person has access to a regional careers market; and**

(iv) **the potential role the Commonwealth Employment Service could play in providing careers information and counselling services in schools.**

(b) **the Commonwealth negotiate cost-sharing arrangements with each of the States for the implementation of –**

(i) **a computer based information and access system (like the Victorian Job and Course Explorer system) to provide advice on education, training and work options; and**

(ii) **a targeted program aimed at increasing awareness of the options for further study (like the Tertiary Awareness Program operating in New South Wales); and**

(c) **the Commonwealth establish a national database of all Australian tertiary education courses, as was recommended in the Committee's earlier report '*An apple for the teacher? Choice and technology in learning*'.** *(Paragraph 8.30)*

Teachers and Teaching

Improving Australia's teaching force is a pre-requisite to strengthening its schools and the Committee recommends that:

19. (a) **following the completion of current studies in the area, the Commonwealth and the States negotiate a co-ordinated, national approach to teacher retraining as a matter of priority and that programs arising out of this strategy be implemented on a cost-share basis;**

(b) **effective principals and teachers should be involved in these teacher retraining programs wherever possible;**

(c) **as an integral part of this national strategy, genuine opportunities be provided to teachers for industry linked workforce exchange programs.** *(Paragraph 9.23)*

Measuring Success

The use of external examinations as the sole form of assessment impedes the development of a diverse range of courses, restrict the type of teaching methods employed by teachers and impose obstacles to learning and achievement. The Committee endorses the moves being made in all States to introduce or

strengthen school-based assessment as a fundamental part of the education system and recommends that:

20. **the States continue to strengthen the place of school-based assessment in the education system and actively encourage community debate and public confidence in these approaches.** *(Paragraph 10.23)*

Certificates of Achievement

Senior secondary certificates have traditionally played a major role in selection for tertiary entrance. This focus is no longer entirely appropriate, and certificates should concentrate on providing each student with a comprehensive record of their achievement. The Committee recommends that:

21. (a) **those States which have not already done so should review, in consultation with the wider community, the form and content of the senior secondary certificates they award; and**

(b) **the senior secondary certificates should more adequately recognise the diversity of young people's achievements in schools and record a more complete assessment of their abilities, achievements and personal attributes, and be part of a comprehensive student portfolio.** *(Paragraph 11.34)*

The Learning Environment, School Organisation and Re-entry Students

Senior secondary colleges, which provide only for Year 11 and 12 students, are able to generate a more adult and constructive learning environment than traditional secondary schools, and have the potential to dramatically lift retention rates in areas that are educationally disadvantaged. The Committee recommends that:

22. (a) **the States be urged to introduce senior secondary colleges in metropolitan areas and in non-metropolitan areas where the population density is such that students will not have to travel excessive distances to attend;**

(b) **entry to these colleges be open and not based on selection tests; and**

(c) **to enhance the career and professional development opportunities for teachers, methods of encouraging the rotation and exchange of teachers between colleges and their feeder schools be investigated.** *(Paragraph 12.26)*

Senior secondary colleges are also well able to cater for the educational needs of re-entry students of all ages. The Committee therefore recommends that:

23. (a) **existing senior secondary colleges advertise more widely their ability and preparedness to cater for re-entry students;**

(b) **the Commonwealth conduct or sponsor a study of the number of people who want a second chance at senior secondary education; and**

(c) **with the establishment of senior secondary colleges, the study should also clarify the potential for overlap by providers of senior secondary education.** *(Paragraph 12.42)*

Resource Implications

Determining the precise resource implications of increasing retention is a task of vital importance. Government's can not, with credibility, continue to encourage more young people to stay on at school unless they give careful and detailed consideration to the resource implications of such policies. The Committee recommends that:

24. **the Commonwealth, through its Projects of National Significance Program and in co-operation with the States, sponsor a study into the cost implications of increasing Year 12 retention rates and the nature and extent of additional resources required to provide for increased retention.** *(Paragraph 13.26)*

The National Objective

The Committee re-affirms its belief that, for reasons of social equity, national economic well-being and personal development, governments should work towards the achievement of Year 12 for all young people. It recommends, however, that:

25. **the Commonwealth, through its Projects of National Significance Program and in co-operation with the States, sponsor a major study into the social and economic implications of achieving universal retention to Year 12.** *(Paragraph 14.4)*

PART ONE

Background

CHAPTER 1

THE INQUIRY

Conduct of the Inquiry

1.1 This Report is the culmination of an inquiry referred to the Committee by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training on 28 September 1988. The Committee was asked to inquire into and report on the factors affecting participation of young people of senior secondary age in education and training, particularly those factors affecting Year 12 retention rates.[1] The terms of reference for the Inquiry are set out on page xi.

1.2 The Inquiry was advertised widely in major metropolitan and regional newspapers and interested individuals and organisations were invited to make written submissions to the Committee.

1.3 Submissions were also sought from a large number of educational institutions, teacher and staff associations and parent organisations. In addition, all members of the House of Representatives were invited to draw the Inquiry to the attention of their constituents.

1.4 A total of 141 submissions were received and they are listed at Appendix A. A list of exhibits provided to the Inquiry is at Appendix B.

1.5 The Committee conducted a series of public hearings and inspections to seek further information from many of those who made submissions to the Inquiry. A list of hearings and witnesses is at Appendix C.

1.6 While the formal public hearing process is a central part of most parliamentary committee inquiries, the Committee was keen on this occasion to benefit from the experience and expertise of people who would prefer to contribute in a less formal way. For this reason the Committee travelled widely to meet with students, parents and teachers to discuss the factors that affect the number of young people staying on to Year 12. A list of the high schools visited and informal discussions held by the Committee is at Appendix D.

1.7 These visits and discussions were a very valuable part of the Inquiry and many of the contributions made by participants are reflected in the Report.

1.8 The submissions authorised for publication and the transcripts of evidence given at public hearings are available from the House of Representatives, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library and the National Library of Australia.

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[1]NOTE: By 'Year 12 retention rates', the Committee means the ratio of students who are in Year 12 at any time, compared to the number who enrolled in the first year of secondary school five or six years earlier.

Parameters of the Inquiry

1.9 In Australia, primary and secondary education is delivered by the State Governments and non-government school authorities.

1.10 The Committee considers, however, that the Commonwealth Government has and should continue to have a crucial role in focussing attention on issues of national importance in education. One such issue is the importance of increasing the number of young people staying on to Year 12.

1.11 In conducting this Inquiry the Committee has examined various policies and programs of the Commonwealth and State Governments which influence Year 12 retention rates. The aim has not been to make comparisons between the States on the basis of rates of retention or educational performance, but rather to examine particular structures, policies and programs that appear to be successful in encouraging increased retention and to consider whether their success can be replicated on a broader, national level.

1.12 The minimum school leaving age is 15 years, except in Tasmania where compulsory schooling ends at 16 years of age.[2] This means that for some students in some States all or part of Year 10 could be considered to be post-compulsory schooling. However, in almost all submissions to the Inquiry, and in the wider community, post-compulsory schooling is generally understood to mean Years 11 and 12. It is on these senior secondary years that this Report focusses.

Structure of the Report

1.13 Chapter 2 commences with a statement of why it is important to aim for an increase in the number of young Australians who achieve a secondary education to Year 12. Recent trends in Year 12 retention rates are then considered and those areas and groups that are experiencing comparatively low retention to Year 12 are identified.

1.14 Next, the importance of providing those young people who do stay on with a relevant and worthwhile experience that satisfies both personal needs and national objectives is discussed. Chapter 2, and Part 1 of the Report, concludes with a view of the place that secondary education should occupy within the broader context of youth initiatives and employment, education and training policies.

1.15 In Part 2, the various economic and social factors that influence the decisions of students about staying on at school are considered. Commonwealth and State Government programs that have been implemented to counteract or complement these factors are highlighted. Particular attention is focussed on young people from backgrounds and regions with comparatively low retention rates.

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[2]Young people may not leave school in Western Australia until the end of the school year in which they turn 15 and, in the Northern Territory, until the end of the appropriate school term (from DEET, Statistical Monograph No.3, p.8).

1.16 Part 3 turns to the school related factors that can influence students' decisions about staying on or leaving early. As in Part 2, various strategies and structures that encourage young people to take up their entitlement to a relevant, worthwhile and full secondary education are identified and assessed.

1.17 In Part 4, the Committee looks at the costs of increasing the number of young people staying on to Year 12 and considers generally the resource needs of schools.

1.18 The Report concludes with an outline of the action and approaches that are needed to enable all young Australians, irrespective of their ethnic background, social or economic circumstances or geographic location, to take up their entitlement to a secondary education to Year 12.

1.19 While many of the Report's recommendations call for government action, the issues addressed are not just matters for the attention of governments. They are relevant to school principals, teachers, parents and students – in fact, to the whole community. The Committee hopes that this Report will focus public attention and help stimulate public debate on the need to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes of young people from educationally disadvantaged groups. To assist this process, the key findings of the Report have been reproduced in a brochure which will be made available to secondary schools and relevant organisations.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW AND OBSERVATIONS

Why Increase Retention?

2.1 A sound educational base is critical if individuals are to fulfil their aspirations and society is to satisfy its objectives. A key component of a sound educational base is the completion of a full secondary education. The more young people who complete a full secondary education the more flexible, diverse, productive and knowledgeable a society we are likely to have – both economically and culturally.

2.2 The argument for seeking to increase the number of young people staying on to Year 12 is well put in a recent report from the Commonwealth Schools Commission titled *In the National Interest:*

- ... there are good grounds for believing that the levels of education and training in a population are important factors in international competitiveness amongst developed economies. Recent OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] figures show that, in the early 1980s, Australia ranked 14th out of 18 OECD countries in the population of 17 year-olds enrolled in either full or part-time education which includes apprentices. The gap at that time was substantial between Australia with only 59% of 17 year olds enrolled, and the top six OECD countries (Japan, West Germany, US, Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland) all of whom exceeded 80% enrolled. For 19 year olds the comparison was not nearly as disadvantageous to Australia indicating that sharp drops in enrolment in education occur in Australia at a much earlier age than in other developed economies;
- the mainstream of employment in advanced economies requires a strong base of general education in the population. Completion of a full secondary education provides the foundation for multi-skilling and the social skills which contribute to decision-making, productivity improvement and technological change. Conversely, the labour market for early school leavers has sharply contracted and this is likely to continue;
- the completion of a good general education makes an important contribution to personal development, provides lifelong benefits for the individual and is a foundation for further learning, recreation and participation in the arts and community life;

- *early school leaving and the disadvantages which flow from it are* not randomly distributed. They fall most heavily on families of low socio-economic status. Gains in school retention are gains for equity;
- Australian democracy will be strengthened by a better-educated population. The institutions, practices and conventions of a democracy need a generally well-educated population for their preservation and development whereas intolerance, prejudice and irrationality thrive on ignorance.[1]

2.3 The objective of aiming to increase Year 12 retention rates is supported in almost all submissions to the Inquiry and is strongly endorsed by the Committee.

Trends in Retention

2.4 Since the early 1980s Australian governments have recognised that increasing the proportion of young people completing secondary school is a key element in the national education effort and all governments are currently working towards achieving a Year 12 retention rate of 65% by 1992.

2.5 As indicated in Table 1, young people are increasingly taking up their entitlement to a full secondary education and in recent years great progress has been made toward this goal.

2.6 A number of submissions referred to the difficulties in measuring retention accurately.[2] The figures in Table 1 are 'apparent' retention rates only and do not take into account:

(a) population shifts between States;

(b) transfers between school sectors – for example, from a government to a private school;

(c) *students who repeat grades; or*

(d) enrolments in senior secondary equivalent courses in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges.

2.7 Despite these limitations, apparent retention rates are used by education authorities in all States. Furthermore, as the Schools Commission notes, they clearly show trends over time and:

> ... point to differences in retention between States and systems which are of sufficient magnitude not to be fully explained by the limitations in the [type of] measurement used.[3]

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[1]Commonwealth Schools Commission, *In the National Interest: Secondary Education and Youth Policy in Australia* , Canberra, 1987, p.64.
[2]For example, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), Submission, pp.4-5 and p.11.
[3]Commonwealth Schools Commission, op. cit., p.60.

TABLE 1

YEAR 12 APPARENT RETENTION RATES, AUSTRALIA, 1967-1988
(Percent)

YEAR	APPARENT RETENTION RATES TO FINAL YEAR, ALL SCHOOLS		
	MALES	FEMALES	PERSONS
1967	26.5	18.7	22.7
1968	28.5	21.2	25.0
1969	31.1	23.7	27.5
1970	33.0	25.5	29.3
1971	34.1	26.9	30.6
1972	35.7	28.9	32.4
1973	35.2	30.8	33.1
1974	34.1	31.6	32.9
1975	34.6	33.6	34.1
1976	34.6	35.3	34.9
1977	34.0	36.6	35.3
1978	33.1	37.3	35.1
1979	32.4	37.2	34.7
1980	31.9	37.3	34.5
1981	32.0	37.8	34.8
1982	32.9	39.9	36.3
1983	37.5	43.9	40.6
1984	42.1	48.0	45.0
1985	43.5	49.5	46.4
1986	45.6	52.1	48.7
1987	49.4	57.0	53.1
1988	53.4	61.8	57.6

Source: Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Statistical Monograph No. 3*

2.8 If the general pattern of increases in retention rates is maintained, and current social and economic circumstances prevail, it is expected that the goal of 65% of students remaining to Year 12 by 1992 will be achieved.

2.9 While the Committee is encouraged by the general pattern of increasing *retention, neither this positive pattern, nor the expected achievement of the* national goal, should be grounds for complacency. As demonstrated in the following section, substantial inequalities exist in the rates at which young people proceed to senior secondary school.

Equity in Retention

2.10 At present there are substantial variations in retention rates between different groups in the community. For example, the proportion of young people staying on to Year 12 varies considerably from State to State.

2.11 In 1988 retention rates varied between 37.6% in Tasmania and 81.4% in the ACT.

TABLE 2

YEAR 12 APPARENT RETENTION RATES, STATES, 1988
(Percent)

STATE	RETENTION RATES
NSW	51.3
VIC	56.9
QLD	66.9
SA	66.6
WA	59.2
TAS	37.6
NT	45.0
ACT	81.4
AUST	57.6

Source: DEET, *Statistical Monograph No. 3*

2.12 Of more concern, however, are the figures that show that a young person's chances of a full secondary education can be critically affected by: their socio-economic background; whether they attend a government or a private school; whether they live in a city or in the country; their ethnic background; and whether or not they are Aboriginal.

2.13 Much research has been conducted into the effects of social background and economic status on the completion of secondary school to Year 12. The research has consistently found that young people from families with a high

socio-economic status stay on at greater rates than those from low socio-economic backgrounds.[4] As illustrated in Table 3, only 43% of male students from the most disadvantaged socio-economic grouping completed Year 12 in 1987, compared to 76% of those from the highest socio-economic group.

TABLE 3

ESTIMATED YEAR 12 COMPLETION RATES BY GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUPING, AUSTRALIA, 1987 (Percent)

GENDER	SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUPING										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	TOTAL
MALES	43.2	40.0	43.9	47.1	48.6	46.8	51.0	55.2	63.3	76.3	51.5
FEMALES	53.3	49.6	57.6	58.2	61.2	56.7	61.0	67.2	75.0	84.0	62.4

NOTE 1: Completion rates differ from apparent retention rates in that they measure the proportion of students who have completed Year 12 rather than the proportion that have stayed on to Year 12.
NOTE 2: In this table socio-economic groupings are represented in groups (or deciles) of approximately equal population size which are ranked in increasing order of socio-economic status. For example, Group 1 represents that one-tenth of the senior secondary age population living in the most socially and economically depressed areas of Australia. Group 10, on the other hand, represents that one-tenth living in the most socially and economically advantaged areas.

Source: DEET, Exhibit No. 29

2.14 As well as showing that young people from the most advantaged socio-economic groups complete Year 12 at considerably higher rates than those from less advantaged backgrounds, these figures also reveal that a minority of the Year 12 age population – those in the highest socio-economic groups – complete Year 12 at above average rates. The remainder, about 70% of the Year 12 age population, complete Year 12 at below average rates.

[4]NOTE: Socio-economic status is most often regarded as a measure of attainment and prestige within the community – it is not exclusively a measure of wealth but also of occupational and social status. (See DEET, *Completing Secondary School in Australia: a socio-economic and regional analysis*, 1987, p.3 and p.16).

2.15 *The type of school a young person attends influences his or her chances* of staying on to Year 12, as shown in Table 4. In 1988 only 51.3% of those young people who had started high school at a government school stayed on to Year 12. In the same year over 98% of young people in independent schools stayed on. The figure for students in Catholic schools is roughly between these two. The relationship between retention rates in government, Catholic and independent schools has not altered significantly in recent years.

TABLE 4

YEAR 12 APPARENT RETENTION RATES BY SCHOOL SECTOR, AUSTRALIA, 1988 (Percent)

	GOVERNMENT	CATHOLIC	INDEPENDENT	ALL SCHOOLS
1988	51.3	64.2	98.5	57.6

Source: DEET, *Statistical Monograph No.3.*

2.16 Young people who live in cities or other urban areas are more likely to complete Year 12 than those who live in country areas. As the following table demonstrates, this is true in all States.

TABLE 5

YEAR 12 COMPLETION RATES BY URBAN/RURAL AREA AND STATE, 1987 (Percent)

STATE	AREA	COMPLETION RATES
NSW	Urban	49.8
	Rural	41.9
VIC	Urban	61.7
	Rural	56.6
QLD	Urban	77.2
	Rural	58.3
WA	Urban	59.8
	Rural	45.3
SA	Urban	72.4
	Rural	67.3
TAS	Urban	51.2
	Rural	29.2
NT	Urban	52.6
	Rural	13.6
AUSTRALIA	Urban	61.3
	Rural	49.5

Source: DEET, Exhibit No. 29

2.17 DEET notes in its submission that a recent study has found that it is no longer adequate to generalise about a simple urban/rural dichotomy and that variations can exist within these general localities.[5] Table 6, which analyses Year 12 completion rates in the 10 administrative regions created by the New South Wales Department of Education, reveals considerable variations within the general areas of metropolitan and non-metropolitan location. For example, in the Metropolitan South-West and West Regions (which cover Sydney's western and south-western suburbs), the completion rates are noticeably lower than those for the eastern and northern suburbs. Another interesting feature is that in some non-metropolitan (or country) regions, completion rates are equal to or higher

[5]DEET, Submission, p.6.

than those recorded in the west and south-west areas of Sydney. It is worth noting that similar patterns and variations are apparent within Australia's second largest city, Melbourne.[6]

TABLE 6

ESTIMATED YEAR 12 COMPLETIONS, BY GENDER AND NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATION DEPARTMENT ADMINISTRATIVE REGION, 1988 (Percent)

GENDER	ADMINISTRATIVE REGIONS										
	METROPOLITAN				NON-METROPOLITAN						
	ME	MN	MSW	MW	H	R	NC	SC	W	NW	NSW
MALES	56	66	42	46	38	40	50	42	43	48	49
FEMALES	61	74	52	54	48	51	56	48	55	56	57

Metropolitan East, North, South West, West; Hunter, Riverina, North Coast, South Coast, Western, North Western.

Source: DEET, *Completing Seconday School in Australia*, p.30; updated information provided by DEET

2.18 There is little data available on the effect of ethnic background on retention rates. That which is available seems to indicate considerable diversity of experience within and between different ethnic groups. DEET, in referring to the studies in this area, notes that:

> Some researchers have found very little evidence of disadvantage ... whilst others ... have found that some ethnic groups are disadvantaged and that females are often more disadvantaged than males.[7]

[6]NOTE: *The Westernport, Tullamarine and Metropolitan West regions of the City of Melbourne* exhibit Year 12 completion rates which are well below those of other metropolitan regions in Melbourne (DEET, *Completing Secondary School in Australia*, p.45).
[7]DEET, Submission, p.9.

2.19 It seems that young people from the older ethnic communities such as the Greek and Italian communities complete senior secondary school at rates equal to or higher than Australian-born students of English speaking backgrounds, whereas it would appear that young people in the newer, less established ethnic communities, like the Turkish, Lebanese, South American and some Indo-Chinese communities, may experience retention rates lower than the national average.[8]

2.20 Finally, the statistics dramatically demonstrate that the most educationally disadvantaged group in the community is young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Fewer than 20% of young Aboriginal people stay on at school until Year 12. While Aboriginal retention has more than doubled between 1979 and 1988 – from 8.5% to 29% – it is still far below the national average (57.6% in 1988).[9]

A National Priority

2.21 These variations highlight areas of inequality of opportunity in the Australian education system. Such inequalities should not be allowed to persist and must, as matters of equity and social justice, be urgently addressed. Unless community attention is directed to improving participation in these areas of educational underperformance, the achievement of the national goal of 65% retention by 1992 will be a hollow victory.

2.22 The aims of achieving a more knowledgeable, skilful and creative society in which individual aspirations and national objectives are fulfilled will only be met if all young people are able to participate in a full secondary education. If large and significant sections of the community continue to be excluded from the senior secondary years, the relative positions of those in the community who, by virtue of their family background or where they live, have access to a full secondary education and those who do not will be reinforced and entrenched.

2.23 The main aim of this Report is to identify measures to improve the educational opportunities and outcomes for young people who are currently educationally disadvantaged. To this end the various factors that inhibit or discourage young people from staying on at school are considered at length later in the Report.

Quality of Retention

2.24 The Committee does not view retention as an end in itself.

2.25 There is little point in encouraging young people to stay on at schools that are unable to offer an interesting and fulfilling experience which allows students to maximise the benefits of a complete secondary education.

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[8]ibid.
[9]ibid., pp.9-10 (updated figures provided by DEET).

2.26 Schools must be prepared to adapt so as to provide an increasing number of young people with an extended and successful secondary education. In many cases old policies, practices and solutions can no longer be expected to meet these new demands.

2.27 Schools must also ensure that the knowledge, skills and experiences they provide widen the perspectives and options of students. Many submissions argue, for example, that while girls have, since the mid-1970s, completed Year 12 in greater numbers than boys, staying on does not widen either their perspectives or their options as much as it could. On leaving school, girls still tend to proceed to stereotypical job or study paths and generally have limited career opportunities.

2.28 It is important, therefore, that schools offer relevant, worthwhile and demanding experiences and a positive learning environment if young people are to gain the maximum benefit from staying on.

Alternatives to School Retention

2.29 While the Committee believes that all young people should benefit from a complete secondary education it is acknowledged that, at least in the short term, there will continue to be a number of students who leave school before completing Year 12.

2.30 It is important that those young people who do leave school early, leave to take up jobs or have access to structured vocational training opportunities. All young people should have the opportunity to be actively engaged in education, employment, training or a combination of these activities. Governments have it within their power to achieve this outcome and the Committee recommends that:

> **the Commonwealth and State Governments adopt the principle of a Youth Guarantee in which every young person of senior secondary age be *guaranteed* the opportunity of participation in secondary education, an apprenticeship, traineeship, other education or training activity or employment.** *(Recommendation 1)*

2.31 The development of strategies to fulfil the diverse education and training needs of senior secondary age young people has placed new demands on the existing systems of secondary education and vocational training and raises fundamental questions about the relative importance and priority given to each. In the words of the Commonwealth Schools Commission:

> The key policy issue is whether to develop a variety of post-compulsory education and training alternatives or whether the completion of secondary education should be seen as the common foundation preceding entry to further education and training for the workforce. If this latter is the preferred
>
> policy, the associated question is whether secondary education has the flexibility to meet the needs of the full range of young people in the immediate post-compulsory years.[10]

[10]Commonwealth Schools Commission, *An Overview of In the National Interest*, 1987, p.18.

2.32 The Committee's view, like that of the Schools Commission, is that the systems of education and training for senior secondary age young people should develop to allow all young people to complete their secondary education in a more flexible and accessible secondary school, whether government or non-government, before proceeding to further education and training. The recommendations in this Report, while aimed at alleviating the disadvantage currently experienced by some groups in the community, also lay the foundations for a more flexible and accessible system of secondary schooling.

PART TWO

Socio–Economic Factors

CHAPTER 3

ECONOMIC FACTORS

Youth Job Market

3.1 It is said, in some submissions received by the Committee, that there is a close correlation between the number of jobs available for senior secondary age young people and Year 12 retention rates. For example, in a period where there is high demand for young people of this age in the workforce, young people will be tempted to leave school and take up a job. On the other hand, in a period where there are few jobs available for young people and youth unemployment is high, staying at school will be a more attractive option.

3.2 It is generally accepted that there is a relationship between the size and buoyancy of the youth job market and retention to Year 12. DEET warns in its submission, however, that:

> There is a need for caution in assuming too direct a causal relationship between changes in retention and changes in the availability of jobs. Whilst the two are clearly linked, the nature of their relationship is by no means straightforward. For example, the significant declines in male retention to Year 12 during the 1970s coincided with the onset of economic recession in Australia and a substantial decline in full-time employment opportunities for young people.[1]

3.3 What can be said with certainty is that young people are keenly aware of the competitiveness of the job market. There was a strong feeling among the students with whom the Committee met that it was important for them to stay on at school to improve their chances of getting a job or going on to further study. Young people felt that employers, especially those offering better job and career prospects, were now requiring young people to have completed Year 12.[2]

3.4 While schools and education authorities can do little to influence the youth job market, they can ensure that young people will be able to enhance their job prospects and opportunities for further study by staying on.

3.5 If schools can demonstrate to young people and the wider community that staying on can be of benefit in this way, the temptation to leave school early to look for a job may diminish.

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[1]DEET, Submission, p.15.

[2]These responses are consistent with a survey of students reported in a recent and major research study on retention in 35 secondary schools: B C Low and others, *The Challenge of Retention*, DEET, Canberra, 1989, p.88.

3.6 The various ways in which schools can ensure that staying on in the secondary years is a valuable and relevant experience are considered in later Chapters.

The Cost of Schooling

3.7 For many families with limited financial resources the cost of keeping a child at school can be a considerable constraint.

3.8 A number of submissions argue that the expense of having to buy uniforms and books, pay fees and contribute to study trips and excursions can influence decisions about staying on at school. An additional pressure on young people from low-income families is the knowledge that if they leave school they may be able to get a job and contribute to the family income.[3]

3.9 The difficulties faced by low-income families are highlighted in a submission from The Brotherhood of St Laurence. A study of low-income families in Melbourne conducted by The Brotherhood found that, for the parents, there is the constant struggle of having to make ends meet on inadequate finances, while, for the children, going to school can be a major source of stress:

> ... It is at school that children from low-income families become conscious of being different from other children. They perceive that their families' lifestyle is different from those of other children ... They lack adequate or proper school clothing and often miss out on developmental experiences such as camps and excursions.[4]

3.10 The Brotherhood concludes that young people from low-income families have an experience of the education system that is substantially different from that of young people from more affluent backgrounds. It is an experience that does nothing to encourage a desire to stay on at school and:

> It is hardly surprising that poor children often drop out of school at the earliest possible opportunity. [5]

3.11 The Committee does not disagree with the conclusions drawn by the Brotherhood but notes that other factors also influence the educational experience of young people from low-income families. Issues such as parental experiences, attitudes and expectations can play a significant role (see Chapter 4).

3.12 *It is of fundamental importance that those young people and families who* find the cost of schooling a burden should be provided with financial assistance. No young person should have to leave school because they or their family are unable to meet the costs of schooling.

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[3]NOTE: Young people from families that operate a small business can face similar pressures to contribute to the family income by being expected to help out in the family business.
[4]V Sheen, 'Improving Participation Rates of Disadvantaged Young People in Education', 1988, pp.7-8, (an attachment to a submission from The Brotherhood of St Laurence).
[5]ibid., p.9.

3.13 At present financial assistance to help meet the costs of schooling is provided by both the Commonwealth and State Governments.

Commonwealth Financial Assistance - AUSTUDY

3.14 AUSTUDY is an allowance paid every fortnight to help meet the costs of full-time students aged 16 years and over. It is for food, clothes and rent as well as for books and other study costs. AUSTUDY can be paid at a higher rate if young people have to live away from home to study. The allowance is intended to help low-income families and it is therefore subject to income and assets testing. The standard rate of AUSTUDY for a 16 year old student whose parents' combined income is $16,950 or less is $53.55 per week. Further information about AUSTUDY rates and eligibility criteria can be found at Appendix E.

3.15 AUSTUDY was introduced in January 1987 as part of a package of youth income measures which aimed to remove the financial disincentive that existed for senior secondary age young people to stay on at school. This disincentive existed because unemployment benefits for young people had been set at a higher rate than assistance provided under the former Secondary Allowances Scheme. Under the Government's youth income package, student financial assistance was increased and junior unemployment benefits were replaced with a Job Search Allowance.[6] From January 1988 the rates of payment under AUSTUDY and Job Search were aligned and there is now parity between the benefits available to senior secondary age young people from low-income families.[7]

3.16 DEET has argued that these changes to student allowance and income support measures for young people have been a significant factor in the recent strong improvement in retention rates.[8] This view is generally supported in submissions to the Inquiry.

3.17 Recent research on the value and influence of financial assistance schemes has drawn similar conclusions. While it is difficult to determine the actual proportion of young people whose attendance is due exclusively to AUSTUDY, studies have found that:

(a) financial assistance schemes, such as AUSTUDY, relieve some of the financial pressures faced by low income families; and

(b) AUSTUDY provides valuable, sometimes critical, assistance to young people and families for whom staying on at school poses financial problems.[9]

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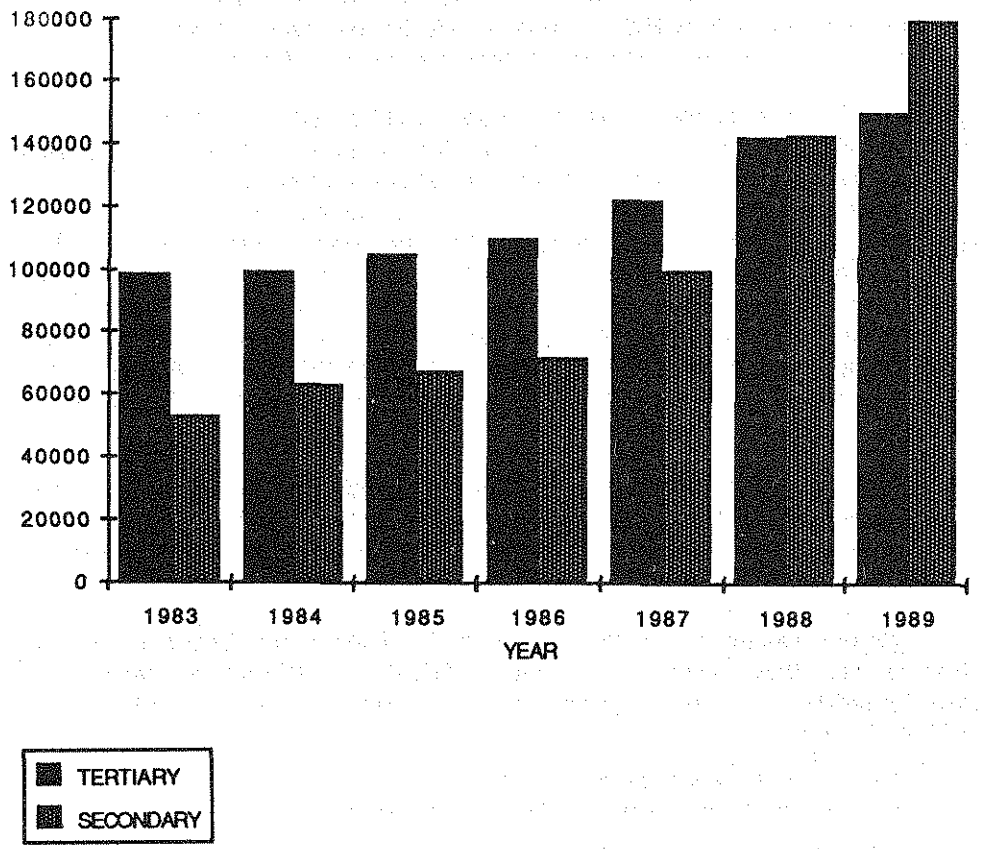
[6]DEET, *Report of the Operation of the Student Assistance Act: 1987*, AGPS, Canberra, 1988, p.5.
[7]Commonwealth Government, *Budget Statements: 1989-90, Budget Paper No. 1*, p.3.136.
[8]DEET, Submission, p.30.
[9]J Braithwaite, *Factors Affecting the Staying/Leaving Decisions of Intending Leavers and Undecided Students in the Junior Secondary School*, Macquarie University, 1988, p.113; and *The Challenge of Retention* , p.100.

3.18 The number of young people assisted under AUSTUDY, and its predecessor, the Secondary Allowance Scheme, has increased dramatically in the last five years. In 1983, 52 700 secondary students received financial assistance, while in 1989 almost 180 000 students are expected to be assisted.

FIGURE 1

STUDENTS ASSISTED BY AUSTUDY*



1983-87 Actual
1988-89 Estimated
*Before 1987, eligible students received either Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme (TEAS) or Secondary Allowances Scheme (SAS) payments.

Source: Information provided to the Committee by DEET.

3.19 Notwithstanding the dramatic increase in the number of senior secondary age students receiving AUSTUDY, it seems that many young people who may be eligible for financial assistance are unaware of the existence of AUSTUDY. A number of the students with whom the Committee met were unaware of, or had only a limited understanding of, the scheme. Of even more concern was the widespread misunderstanding of the scheme among parents and teachers. The view was frequently put to the Committee that young people could receive higher payments under AUSTUDY than were available under the Job Search Allowance Scheme. Accordingly, it was thought that young people with little interest in learning what schools teach were being induced to stay on with higher payments than would be available if they were seeking a job. As noted earlier, the rates of payment under AUSTUDY and Job Search are the same and the Commonwealth's intention is not to provide financial inducements to students who would not otherwise stay at school, but to remove any financial disincentive that may discourage young people from staying on.

3.20 A number of recent surveys also have found considerable confusion and misunderstanding about AUSTUDY. Survey evidence presented to the Committee shows that between 30 to 40% of those young people potentially eligible for AUSTUDY know nothing about the scheme.[10]

3.21 It is important that those young people and families who are in need of financial assistance are made aware of the existence of AUSTUDY and are encouraged to take up their entitlements. The Committee has been advised that the Commonwealth is addressing this issue in two ways. First, to encourage greater awareness of AUSTUDY:

> The Government will be developing public awareness campaigns so that people are aware of all avenues of economic assistance available to them.[11]

3.22 Second, both to encourage awareness and to facilitate take up of AUSTUDY, the administration of the scheme is being decentralised. Wider use will be made of the network of Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) Offices and regional AUSTUDY Offices to provide information and to process claims for student assistance.[12]

3.23 Both strategies have the potential to generate greater awareness of and access to AUSTUDY benefits and the Committee supports these developments. The Committee is particularly pleased to see changes in the administration and benefit delivery aspects of the scheme. Following the introduction of AUSTUDY

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[10]J Braithwaite, Evidence, pp.1457-9. See also ANOP, *A Survey of Community Attitudes to Commonwealth Employment, Education and Training Policies and Programs*, DEET, Canberra, 1988, pp.60-2; *Factors Affecting the Staying/Leaving Decisions of Students*, pp.111-2; and *The Challenge of Retention*, p.66 and pp.99-101.
[11]DEET, Submission, p.30.
[12]DEET, Supplementary Submission, p.11.

many beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries have experienced inconvenience and delays. The Committee looks to these new arrangements for continuing improvements in this area.

3.24 During the course of the Inquiry a number of shortcomings in the existing AUSTUDY arrangements were identified, two of which warrant close consideration:

(a) the fact that in some States students are not eligible to receive AUSTUDY until they are part way through, or have completed, Year 11;

(b) difficulties associated with the school attendance requirements for AUSTUDY recipients.

3.25 AUSTUDY is paid to students aged 16 years and over. While this requirement is satisfied by most students by the time they commence Year 11, it creates an anomalous situation for young people in South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia where a significant proportion of students in Year 11 are 15 years of age. For example, a survey of Year 11 students in South Australia revealed that:

> ...on 30 June 1986, 8,594 (56.9%) of the 15,349 Years 11 students were under 16 years.[13]

3.26 This situation undermines one of the central purposes of AUSTUDY: to ensure that young people from low and middle income families are able to meet the costs of schooling and stay on at school in the senior secondary years.

3.27 The decision to make AUSTUDY payable from age 16 was a component of the Commonwealth Government's restructuring of youth income measures described earlier. Financial assistance to young people under the age of 16 is provided under the Government's social security scheme by way of Family Allowance and the Family Allowance Supplement (both allowances are subject to income tests and, in addition, the Family Allowance Supplement is assets tested). Age 16 is considered by these arrangements to mark the boundary between fully dependent 'childhood' and partially dependent 'youth'. As noted in a submission from the South Australian Department of Education:

> The problem is that this age criterion becomes arbitrary and insensitive when 15 year olds are no longer participating in the activities of 'children' but have begun to participate in the activities of 'youth', such as post-compulsory schooling ... or leaving school to find work.[14]

3.28 The maximum amount payable in respect of a 15 year old senior secondary student under the Family Allowance/Family Allowance Supplement arrangements is $43.10 per week. A senior secondary student eligible for

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[13]South Australian Youth Incomes Task Force, *Report*, p.67 (an attachment to the supplementary submission from the Education Department of South Australia).

[14]Education Department of South Australia, Supplementary Submission, p.67. See also Queensland Department of Education (West Moreton Region), Submission, pp.7-8.

AUSTUDY and living at home would receive $53.55 per week.[15]

3.29 The Committee acknowledges there are anomalies in the existing arrangements and recommends that:

> (a) **the Commonwealth revise its youth income support measures so that senior secondary school students under the age of 16 years be eligible to apply for AUSTUDY allowances payable to their parents but not be eligible for the living away-from-home component; and**
>
> (b) **that, subject to the implementation of the previous recommendation, senior secondary students under the age of 16 should not continue to qualify for Family Allowance and Family Allowance Supplement.** *(Recommendation 2)*

3.30 There has also been some criticism that the present AUSTUDY rules allow students to be absent from school without school endorsement for 15 days a term and still retain the allowance. As explained in one submission, the rules are open to abuse:

> ... in a four term year there are often irregular patterns of attendance by students and they can 'legally' be absent for over one-third of the term ... Such students, may not only be frequently absent from school or lessons, but contribute little to learning activities and often do not submit assignment work. This attitude is seen to impact negatively on students and teachers.[16]

3.31 It seems that the unexplained absence provision needs tightening and the Committee is pleased to have been advised by DEET that the 15 day limit will be reviewed.[17]

3.32 Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some cases, young people are using AUSTUDY as an alternative to the Job Search Allowance and may have little commitment to their school work. The Committee opposes the view that there should be a measured requirement for students to progress in their studies in order to receive AUSTUDY. Apart from the complexities of measuring 'satisfactory progress', the Committee believes that many schools should strive harder to capture the interest and imagination of struggling students rather than admitting that they have failed to meet the needs of these students and withdrawing their means of staying on at school.

State Financial Assistance - Education Allowances

3.33 Most States have developed bursary and education allowance schemes to help young people and their families meet the financial costs of schooling. Although some States provide assistance to senior secondary students, in most

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[15]See Commonwealth government, *Budget Statements: 1989-90, Budget Paper No.1*, pp.3.79 and 3.131-3.132.

[16]South Australian Government, Submission, p.30.

[17]Additional information provided to the Committee by DEET in a letter dated 5 May 1989.

cases, the allowances are payable to students in primary and junior secondary schools. Details of the rates of payment and eligibility requirements are listed at Appendix F.

3.34 As discussed later, the chances of a young person completing secondary school are considerably improved if he or she experiences success in learning in their early school years. Education allowances can help young people from low-income families achieve success in the primary and junior secondary school years by allowing their families:

- to purchase necessities like school clothing, text books and sundry items of equipment and to help pay for school camps, excursions and other day-to-day incidental costs of education; [and]
- to provide the quality of life that is necessary for educational success, such as adequate nutrition and heating, and a reduction of family stress through financial worries ...[18]

3.35 Education allowances play an important role in ensuring that young people from low-income families have the opportunity to participate fully in the education system and in helping families to establish a supportive environment in which to learn. It is of concern to the Committee, therefore, that there are variations between the States in the types of allowances available, the rates of payment, and the eligibility requirements. It has also been said to the Committee that some States have in recent years reduced the type and amount of assistance available to low-income families.

3.36 It is inequitable that the extent of a young person's entitlement to financial assistance is determined by where he or she lives. For example, a young person in Tasmania may be eligible for a range of grants, bursaries and income tested allowances, yet a student in Queensland may be eligible for only a text book allowance.

3.37 The Brotherhood of St Laurence recommends that to overcome these inequalities:

> State education allowances should be standardised across Australia ... [and that] standard eligibility criteria should be adopted ... for [these] ... allowances.[19]

3.38 The Brotherhood considers that a new standard education allowance should be calculated and paid on the same basis as those currently provided by the Victorian Government. The Victorian Education Maintenance Allowance is paid to low-income families at the rate of $254 per year for junior secondary students and $127 per year for primary school students. An additional Education Expense Allowance of $100 per student per year is paid to families in receipt of the Commonwealth's Family Allowance.[20]

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[18]V Sheen, *A Fair Chance in Education: Education Allowances for Low-Income Families*, The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne, 1988, pp.19-20.
[19]ibid., pp.2-3.
[20]ibid., p.3; and Victorian State Board of Education, *Barriers to Access and Participation in Education*, 1989, p.4.

3.39 The Committee supports the Brotherhood's proposals and is encouraged by advice that the implementation of an Australia-wide education allowance is currently being considered by the Commonwealth and State Ministers for Education.[21]

3.40 The Committee recommends that:

> **the States be urged to implement a nation-wide education allowance payable for young people from low-income families in the primary and junior secondary years and which is calculated and paid on the same basis as the Victorian Education Maintenance and Education Expense Allowances.** *(Recommendation 3)*

Summary

3.41 Of the economic factors considered in this Chapter, the cost of schooling is the only area in which direct and immediate action can be taken by governments.

3.42 It is clear from evidence presented to the Committee that the financial assistance provided by AUSTUDY and State education allowances is greatly valued by recipients. It also apparent that the provision of financial support helps to remove some of the barriers to participation experienced by low-income families.

3.43 It is important, therefore, that financial assistance schemes be maintained or improved.

3.44 The recommendations made in this Chapter will ensure greater equity and fairness in the provision of financial assistance while maintaining the fundamental integrity of schemes that target scarce resources to those most in need.

3.45 Economic factors, while important, form only part of the general context in which decisions about staying on at school or leaving early are made. In many cases social factors such as family values, expectations and attitudes exert a greater influence on decisions about staying or leaving. These issues are taken up in the next Chapter.

[21]DEET, Evidence, pp.1636-7.

CHAPTER 4

COMMUNITY AND PARENTAL FACTORS

Attitudes to Education

4.1 The opinions that young people hold about the value to be gained from a full secondary education clearly play a significant role in determining whether they will stay on to Years 11 and 12. If the senior secondary years are perceived to offer a broad, practical and enriching experience, then young people will be inclined to stay on. If, however, Years 11 and 12 are seen to be narrowly academic, a significant number of young people will see schools as irrelevant and may be discouraged from staying on.

4.2 These opinions are influenced by many factors such as the subjects taught at school, the success that young people experience in their learning, teachers' attitudes toward students and the presence and attitudes of role models with whom young people identify. While many submissions argue that these factors can exert considerable influence over young people, an overwhelming number of submissions support the view that:

> The fact is well established that parents' attitudes and expectations are a strong motivating factor in children's education ... [and are] a major influence on their children's attitude to education and training beyond the compulsory years of schooling.[1]

4.3 If parents value education highly and are aware of the importance of completing a full secondary education they are likely to provide their children with learning support which, in turn, means that their children are more likely to stay on to Year 12. If, on the other hand, parents place a low value on education at school, or have limited educational and work expectations of their children, they are unlikely to encourage their children to study or to stay on to Year 12.[2]

4.4 Several studies have found that the attitudes and expectations held by parents are closely related to their social status and background:

> ... children whose fathers are unskilled have about a 30 per cent chance of completing Year 12 whilst children whose fathers are in professional occupations are twice as likely to do so.[3]

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[1]Australian Parents Council, Submission, p.6.

[2]NOTE: It is often the mother's attitude toward education which has most influence on the staying or leaving decisions of her children. For example, a child can be inspired to stay on if his or her mother has, herself, returned to study.

[3]DEET, Submission, p.17, referring to T Williams, *Participation in Education: ACER Research Monograph No. 3*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn, VIC, 1987, p.44.

4.5 A number of submissions note that those parents who do not value education highly may themselves have had negative experiences at school:

> Perhaps they were early school leavers or they did not perceive themselves as having been successful at school. These attitudes, which are often subconscious, can frequently be transmitted to their own children.[4]

4.6 These findings are of great concern as they point to a continuing and self-fulfilling cycle of low educational expectations and under-achievement at school for some families and young people.

4.7 This is, however, not to say that parents are to blame if their children leave school early. Ultimately, the education system and schools must accept responsibility for the educational outcomes of students. It is clear that most parents would like to see their children achieve success at school. Most often, however, their aspirations are moderated by experience. As the experience of those from the lower socio-economic groups in the community is most often of early school leaving, that too is the expectation they have of their children.

4.8 A key to breaking this cycle of educational disadvantage is to change the attitudes that some parents have about education and raise their expectations of their children. If more parents can be made aware of the value of education, and of the educational and career advantages to their children of staying on to Year 12, then a significant barrier to increased retention will have been overcome.

Changing Attitudes

Publicity Campaigns

4.9 The importance of encouraging positive attitudes towards education is increasingly being recognised by governments. As noted in submissions from the DEET and the Tasmanian Government, attempts have been made to change parent and general community attitudes towards education by developing advertising campaigns to publicise the benefits of staying on at school.[5]

4.10 Despite these efforts it is apparent that there are many in the community whose attitudes remain unchanged. *The Challenge of Retention* notes that changing deep-seated and long-held community attitudes is a slow and complex process, requiring a commitment from governments to the:

> ... development of **long-term** publicity efforts about the value of education and staying on to Year 12.[6]

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[4]Catholic Education Office (Diocese of Parramatta), Evidence, p.76.
[5]DEET, Supplementary Submission, p.11; and Government of Tasmania, Submission, p.11.
[6]*The Challenge of Retention*, p.150.

4.11 The need for continued effort was also commented upon in a survey of student attitudes commissioned by DEET in 1988. A significant proportion of those students surveyed thought that the Commonwealth Government should communicate better the advantages of completing secondary school.[7]

4.12 The Committee agrees that continuing publicity efforts are required and considers that such campaigns would be most effective if they focussed on changing the attitudes of those in the community who, at present, place a relatively low value on completing secondary school. One way of ensuring that these groups are targeted effectively is to involve schools in the development and delivery of the publicity campaign. Within a broad and common framework, schools could identify and provide information to particular disadvantaged groups within their local region. For example, schools in country areas, in socially and economically disadvantaged areas or in areas that have high proportions of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, would be able to focus their campaigns on parents and students from these particular backgrounds.

4.13 In its submission to the Inquiry the Australian Parents Council argues that, given that parents are a major influence on their children's attitudes to education, publicity campaigns should focus more than they have in the past on parents. In particular the Council suggests that publicity campaigns should seek to:

(a) raise parents' perceptions about the importance of education and continuing education beyond the compulsory years of schooling;

(b) raise parents' awareness of their influence on their children's decision to stay at school or continue their education beyond the post-compulsory years of schooling;

(c) encourage parents to exercise their unique ability to influence their children to remain at school and to continue their education; and

(d) make available for parents programs showing how to encourage their children to continue their schooling and education.[8]

4.14 The Committee has been advised that the Commonwealth Government plans to implement, in the near future, a major public awareness campaign to communicate the advantages of staying on to Year 12.[9] The Committee commends the Government for this initiative and recommends that in developing the campaign the Government:

(a) ensures that, within a broad common framework, individual schools are able to tailor elements of the campaign to target particular disadvantaged groups within their local communities; and

(b) ensures that the campaign focuses on the important role that parents play in influencing their children's attitudes toward education. *(Recommendation 4)*

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[7]ANOP, *A Survey of Community Attitudes to Commonwealth Employment, Education and Training Policies and Programs*, p.55.
[8]Australian Parents Council, op. cit., p.7.
[9]DEET, Submission, p.35.

School Marketing and Outreach

4.15 The Committee was impressed by the initiative taken by some schools to develop their own marketing and publicity campaigns. Year 11 and 12 secondary colleges in the ACT and Tasmania have developed particularly effective marketing strategies to advertise their presence in the community and to convince potential students and parents of the benefits of an education at their college. As well as providing a prospectus or information booklet, outlining the courses and activities available, each college has actively sought to develop close links with the community. In the ACT these links are fostered through the governing boards of the colleges, each of which includes parent and student representatives. In Tasmania:

> Every college has its own marketing committee. These are very strong committees which involve parents, students and staff members as well as members of the council of the college ... The model varies among the colleges, but the idea is that [these] groups ... [are] responsible for links with the community, not only downwards to the feeder schools, but also upwards to the university ... For example, one college may say that a particular area has a low retention rate and as a result it will target that [area] ... It may set aside two weeks at the end of the year when all year 10 students in that area will come into the college and have a taster program in which they will do a whole range of HSC courses to get an idea of what is being offered, as well as [to] become familiar with that college.[10]

4.16 Promoting the value of education is not only a government responsibility. Schools can and should take a leading role in this task. By developing marketing and community outreach programs, of the type described above, schools can make a valuable contribution to raising the profile of their school in particular and education in general.

Parents and Schools

Informal Involvement

4.17 Traditionally there has been little contact between parents and schools. Schools have tended to be isolated from the community, answerable to a central administrative body and providing centrally determined, academically inclined courses.

4.18 What little contact there has been between parents and schools has tended not to intrude on the professional role of teachers. Mothers' Clubs and Parents' and Citizens' Associations have organised fund raising activities, operated school canteens and contributed to school working bees. Parents' involvement in the central activity of schools – that is, imparting knowledge and developing skills – has most often been limited to parent-teacher interviews. On such occasions parents enter the school by invitation rather than by right. Further, the information given to parents at parent-teacher interviews is

[10]Government of Tasmania, Evidence, p.1502.

> ... usually limited and often edited; frequently other parents are queueing for their turn and there is little privacy; in many cases parents are discouraged from asking questions which are too probing, the teacher having control of the information flow.[11]

Trend Toward Participation

4.19 In the last ten years, schools have attempted to find new ways of involving parents in their activities. This has developed out of recognition that:

- parents are the first educators of children and they continue to educate;
- learning is not a discrete activity which occurs only in the school but it is influenced by the home, the wider community and society;
- parents, as citizens, have the right to participate in shaping social institutions like schools, particularly when they will have a significant influence on their children's life chances;
- democratic societies require participation beyond the ballot box; and
- research has shown that parent participation in children's learning increases children's chances of success. This suggests that effective links between professionals and parents are a pre-requisite for teaching/learning success.[12]

4.20 It is apparent that some States and schools are making significant efforts to build a strong relationship between parents and schools with the fundamental aim of improving the learning environment. The parent-school relationship can involve parents as teacher aides, as positive partners in the learning process and as active participants in educational decision making.

Volunteer Teacher Aides

4.21 Some schools encourage parents to become volunteer teacher aides to help teachers in the planning and conduct of classroom activities and excursions. In this role parents:

> ... prepare teaching materials and work sheets (of which there is now a huge volume as teachers endeavour to cater individually for each pupil); they help maintain student records; they hear children read; they help them to research subjects in the library; they may just sit in a corner and talk to children about a variety of topics – current affairs, local happenings [and] life experiences ...[13]

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[11]G Ochiltree, *Changing Families, Changing Schools: Parent Involvement in Schools*, Discussion Paper No. 17, Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 1984, pp.12-13.

[12]Ministry of Education (Victoria), *Parents – One of Our Most Valuable Resources: A Report on Parent Participation in Victorian Government Schools*, 1987, p.3.

[13]Professor H Beare, 'Community/Parent Involvement and Participation in Education', p.3 in Ministry of Education (Victoria), *Parent Participation in Victorian Schools*, 1987.

Partners in Education

4.22 Developing strategies to involve parents as partners in education is an acknowledgement that parents are the first and often the most influential teachers of their children. Their influence can be the most long lasting as it is based on ongoing contact with and knowledge of their children. One program involving parent-teacher collaboration that was drawn to the Committee's attention is the South Australian based Learning Assistance Program (LAP). LAP is a school-based program which has been developed to provide individual support and learning assistance for students. Parents or volunteers from the community work, with guidance from teaching staff, on a one-to-one basis with students who are behind with their school studies, causing disruption in the classroom or who have emotional or personal problems.[14] The program aims to assist and support students by:

(a) developing a positive, secure relationship with the student;

(b) *developing the student's confidence and building self-esteem;*

(c) providing opportunities for developing problem solving skills;

(d) helping overcome learning difficulties by providing individual programmes of work, suited to the needs of each student; and

(e) developing a positive attitude towards school work by practical support and encouragement.[15]

4.23 Other examples of parent-teacher collaboration are:

(a) the La Trobe Parents and Reading Project in Victoria – which is designed to promote the language and reading competence of children from a variety of home backgrounds by encouraging parents to listen to their children read;

(b) the Victorian Country Education Project – which seeks to draw on the existing and often unrecognised resources of parents and others in the community. (For example, in one district mechanics from local garages, farmers, local people with craft skills and teachers from outlying technical schools bring their experience and expertise into the classroom.);

(c) correspondence schools throughout the country – where parents in isolated areas often provide considerable training support for their children.[16]

4.24 In addition to the considerable educational benefits of encouraging parents and the community to become involved in the school's education program, such involvement has the potential to give parents the confidence to take a more active role in the formal processes of school decision making.

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[14]P Penhall and others, *The Learning Assistance Program: A Handbook for Co-ordinators,* Wattle Park Teachers Centre, 1984, p.2.
[15]From ibid., p.4.
[16]See G Ochiltree, op. cit., pp.15-17 for further discussion.

School Decision Making

4.25 The traditional organisational structure of education in Australia, with schools being responsible to centrally located education authorities, has meant that:

> ... the community [has been given] ... a feeling of powerlessness and remoteness, an impression that a school principal was more answerable to the department than the school's clients. It created the impression that there were faceless persons who had to be satisfied before the school could change its programs to satisfy its community. But most important, it obscured the irrefutable point that professionals must be (and must demand to be) accountable to their clients.[17]

4.26 It is important that education authorities seek to remove as many as possible of the barriers that exist between schools and the community. Schools must ensure that they are not isolated from the communities which they seek to serve. The responsibility of schools to students, parents and the community will be most effectively discharged if the local community is involved more closely in the administration of the school. A move away from centralised control towards a more autonomous, flexible and locally based system of school decision making will help to reduce the isolation of the school and create a school environment that is more sensitive to the social, economic and cultural needs of the local community. This, in turn, will help generate greater community confidence in schools and encourage positive views towards education. It is important, however, that such moves not jeopardise the equally necessary moves toward greater comparability of courses, standards and certificates between the States.

4.27 To enable school-based decision making and to establish patterns of accountability it is essential that all States implement decision making structures which allow for community participation. At the school level this means school governing boards or school councils representing teachers, parents, students and others in the community. Real responsibility and resources should be devolved to these grass roots organisations:

> It is not enough that school councils be given responsibility over ground maintenance, money-raising, and peripheral school matters. They should be given the mandate for participation in decisions about curriculum ... about school rules and procedures, about the essential stuff of schooling.[18]

4.28 Some States have developed structures to involve parents in school decision making. In Victoria, for example, Parents' Clubs and School Councils operate in most government schools. School Councils, on which parents are represented, are established under State legislation and have the power to make decisions in relation to school finances, grounds, buildings and educational objectives. Parents are also represented on Regional Boards of Education and the State Board of Education.[19] In the ACT, parents are represented on each

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[17]Professor H Beare, op. cit., p.5.

[18]ibid.

[19]See Ministry of Education (Victoria), *Parent Participation: PEP Discussion Paper No.3*, 1987, pp.16-7.

local school board and on the Schools Authority, the central administrative agency. School boards in the ACT have considerable autonomy and are responsible for making policy decisions on all aspects of school activity including the courses to be made available in schools. The creation of 'school-based decision-making groups', and the devolution of greater financial and administrative responsibilities to regions and individual schools, are key elements of the Western Australian Government's current program for *Better Schools'*.[20]

4.29 Not all States have developed such open and democratic decision making structures, however, and the Committee recommends that:

> **those States which have not already done so be urged to review their formal education decision making processes with the aims of devolving increased responsibility and resources to individual schools and their regions, and ensuring that schools develop democratic decision making structures involving parents and community representatives.** *(Recommendation 5)*

4.30 As part of this process, the Committee believes that school communities should play a greater role in the selection and appointment of principals and key teaching staff.

Empowering Parents

4.31 A criticism frequently made of parent involvement in school decision making is that the same parents are always involved and that they do not necessarily represent all parents in the school community:

> the parents and community numbers who are currently participating in decision making at schools tend to be white, Anglo-Saxon and tertiary educated.[21]

4.32 There are of course very good reasons why some parents do not participate. For families where both parents work, or for single parents who work, time is at a premium. The Committee is concerned, however, that like their children, parents should not face any artifical barriers to participation. The factors that can work to exclude or discourage parents from becoming involved in schools include:

(a) a sense of alienation from schools and the education system;

(b) an unfamiliarity with the jargon of education;

(c) a fear of unsympathetic or patronising attitudes from teachers or other parents. (One parent with whom the Committee met was told at her first school council meeting: **What would you know, you're only a mother!**);

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[20]See Western Australian Ministry of Education, *Better Schools in Western Australia: A program for improvement*, 1987. NOTE: Many elements of this program have been developed in response to the findings of the 1984 Beazley Committee of Inquiry into Education in Western Australia.

[21]R Munn, 'Participation and the Curriculum Directorate', p.1. (an unpublished document from the South Australian Education Department).

(d) a belief that schools are responsible for education and that parents have no role to play; and

(e) for parents from non-English speaking backgrounds, cultural misunderstanding, or language difficulties.

4.33 School principals have a vital role to play in breaking down these barriers. The principal is largely responsible for setting the tone of the school, for encouraging the development of a climate for learning and for fostering professionalism among teachers.[22] It is largely the attitudes and policies of school principals which will determine whether parents and the community are welcomed or discouraged.

4.34 If more parents are to be encouraged to play an active role in the life of their local school, principals will need to commit time and effort to make them feel welcome in the school environment. It is not just a matter of establishing formal structures of participation; it also involves a commitment to honest and open communication.

Communication Strategies

4.35 During the Inquiry the Committee visited the Parent Participation Centre at Wattle Park in Adelaide. This Centre is the base for two South Australian programs which aim to increase parent involvement in education: the Learning Assistance Program, referred to earlier, and the Parent/Community Participation Program. The main objective of the latter program is to provide information and advice to principals, teachers, parents and community liaison officers in order to foster the wider use of collaborative decision making techniques in schools. An integral part of the program is to:

> ... assist those already involved (principals, teachers and parents) to develop strategies which will open up the school and its decision making processes to <u>all</u> groups within the community.[23]

4.36 Some of the successful communication and outreach strategies that have been developed under this program are:

(a) a door-knock survey of local households conducted by a school principal and parent volunteers to ascertain the level of interest in and commitment to the local school;

(b) home visits by principals and teachers or meetings of small groups in parents' homes – particularly for non-English speaking parents;

(c) the publication of regular newsletters to explain the education system to parents and the community and to provide information, ideas and strategies on how to empower parents to deal effectively with schools; and

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[22]Queensland Department of Education, *Information Statement No. 124: Community Participation in School Decision Making*, 1989, p.4.
[23]Parent/Community Participation Program, *1988 Annual Report*, p.1.

(d) the preparation of a resource manual for teachers and school administrators to provide examples of good practice in parent participation.

Summary

4.37 Parents have both the right to participate in schools and the potential to improve the capacity of schools to encourage success in learning. The development of community outreach strategies which encourage greater parent participation will:

(a) allow teachers and parents to develop common and mutually acceptable understandings about educational aims, policies and programs;

(b) generate public confidence in the education system by ensuring that schools provide relevant and worthwhile learning experiences that meet the needs of the community; and

(c) as a consequence, encourage more young people to stay on at school and complete Years 11 and 12.

4.38 Schools and school systems have a range of structures to encourage parent participation and in many respects this diversity is desirable because schools themselves are best placed to devise structures and strategies appropriate for their particular communities.

4.39 However, it is clear that progress towards greater parent participation is far from uniform and the Committee is concerned that many schools have not been given sufficient support, advice and assistance to enable them to develop greater participation. Too often it appears that structures and strategies are developed in isolation. This is inefficient as it can lead to duplicated effort: unsuccessful strategies are repeated from school to school and information about strategies that have been successful is spread only by word of mouth. To improve the availability and flow of information the Committee recommends that:

(a) using the South Australian Parent Participation Centre as a model, the Commonwealth and the States should establish Parent Participation Centres in each State on a cost-shared basis; and

(b) the Centres should be located in regions where participation rates are low, and be subject to review at an appropriate time. *(Recommendation 6)*

4.40 To promote the exchange of information, advice and ideas, it is important that the Centres establish networks of communication, both within their regions and between each Centre.

4.41 Parents are the first and, at least in the early years, the most influential educators of their children. This role carries with it certain responsibilities, such as the responsibilities to impart basic communication and living skills, and to instil fundamental social attitudes. This does not mean, however, that schools should blame parents when a student does not perform to potential. It means that parents have the right to be involved in their children's formal schooling, and

to hold schools accountable for their actions and their outcomes. Too many parents are unclear about their rights in this regard and have been alienated from the school system as a result.

4.42 To assist in the process of empowering parents in relation to the schooling of their children, the Committee considers that each State should adopt a charter of parents' rights. The central purpose of this charter should be to encourage parents to participate in the formal education of their children and to make it clear that their opinions and attitudes about schools are of value.

4.43 The charter would help provide a framework for the school-parent relationship and could be of particular value for those parents who presently feel alienated or uncomfortable in their dealings with schools, or who are unaware of their rights.

4.44 The Committee recommends that:

> **the States be urged to develop and adopt a 'Charter of Parents' Rights and Responsibilities in the Schooling of their Children'.** *(Recommendation 7)*

4.45 To assist in the process of discussion and debate, the Committee offers the following draft charter for consideration. The draft is not intended to be exhaustive: it is a beginning point in the development of an initiative which the Committee considers is vital to improving the formal school system.

CHARTER OF PARENTS' RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE SCHOOLING OF THEIR CHILDREN

(a) Parents have the primary responsibility to educate their children.

(b) Parents may be aided by governments or accredited education authorities in the education of their children but this does not usurp the primary responsibility of parents.

(c) Parents are entitled to be consulted and involved in the formation of education policies.

(d) Parents are entitled to be considered by school principals and teachers as equals and partners in the process of schooling.

(e) Parents are entitled to be treated by school principals and teachers with respect, courtesy, honesty and openness.

(f) Parents are entitled to full and frank information about the activities and progress of their children in schools.

(g) Parents are entitled to hold schools accountable for their actions and outcomes.

(h) Parents are entitled to play a greater role in the selection and appointment of principals and key teaching staff.

CHAPTER 5

FACTORS AFFECTING SPECIFIC GROUPS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students[1]

Aboriginal Retention

5.1 As indicated earlier the retention rate for Aboriginal students falls well below that of the wider community.

TABLE 7

YEAR 12 APPARENT RETENTION RATES, ABORIGINAL STUDENTS, 1979 – 1988 (Percent)

YEAR	ABORIGINAL RETENTION	TOTAL AUSTRALIA
1979	8.5	34.7
1980	7.7	34.5
1981	9.9	34.8
1982	9.9	36.3
1983	11.1	40.6
1984	13.2	45.0
1985	14.9	46.4
1986	17.0	48.7
1987	19.4	53.1
1988	22.0	57.6

Sources: DEET, Submission, p.10, and *Draft National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*, p.9.

5.2 In July 1988 an Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, which had been appointed to advise the Commonwealth Government on all aspects of Aboriginal education in Australia, reported that Aboriginal people are the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia and that a major change in education policy and provision for Aboriginal people is needed.[2]

[1]While the Committee acknowledges that there are two cultures indigenous to Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander – in this Report the word Aboriginal refers to people from both cultures.
[2]P Hughes and others, *Report of the Aboriginal Education Task Force*, DEET, Canberra, 1988, p.16.

5.3 Evidence presented to the Committee supports this conclusion. It is essential that the educational opportunities for young Aboriginal people are improved if the widespread economic and social disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal people are to be overcome.

5.4 The task is enormous and the Committee acknowledges that there are no easy solutions. The barriers that Aboriginal people confront when seeking access to education include:

- racial discrimination which serves to exacerbate the educational disadvantage faced by many Aboriginal people;
- *social and cultural alienation which is experienced both in local* communities and in schools;
- economic disadvantage and poorer living standards which inhibit Aboriginal participation and impede successful completion of an education;
- geographical isolation which is experienced by the one-third of the Aboriginal population who live in Aboriginal townships, homeland communities or other small townships ...; and
- lack of co-ordination among services at various levels of government which effectively isolates many Aboriginal people from available education programs.[3]

A National Strategy

5.5 The strategies proposed by the Task Force to overcome these barriers *and improve the educational opportunities for young Aboriginal people include:*

(a) continued support for an identifiable Aboriginal student financial assistance scheme as a means of overcoming some of the financial disincentives and costs of participation – for example, the Commonwealth Government's ABSTUDY scheme, which from 1989 has supported secondary school students as well as those in post-school programs;

(b) the establishment of participation targets to challenge governments to aim for greater Year 12 retention rates within the Aboriginal community – the Task Force recommended the adoption of a retention rate objective for Aboriginal people which aims to reach parity with that for all Australian students by the turn of the century; and

(c) support for the involvement of Aboriginal communities in the decision making process as a way of ensuring that the education available to Aboriginal children will be responsive to the diversity of circumstances *among Aboriginal communities, will recognise and value the cultural* background of students and will, in turn, demonstrate to members of the community the importance of completing a full secondary education.[4]

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[3]ibid.
[4]From ibid., pp.16-19.

5.6 The Committee supports these strategies and is greatly encouraged by the announcement in the Commonwealth Government's 1989 Budget Statement that many of the recommendations of the Task Force have been incorporated into a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. The Policy, which was jointly developed by the Commonwealth, the States and Aboriginal community representatives, aims to develop a concerted and co-operative effort to address the educational needs of Aboriginal people.

5.7 In summary, the goals of the National Policy are to:

(a) involve Aboriginal people in educational decision making;

(b) ensure equality of access to educational services;

(c) achieve equity of educational participation; and

(d) enable equitable and appropriate educational outcomes.[5]

5.8 The Commonwealth's commitment to the Policy involves the re-organisation of existing Aboriginal education programs and the allocation of $270 million over the next 3 years to fund initiatives and strategies to achieve the goals outlined in the National Policy.[6]

5.9 This policy is a positive step toward improving the educational opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Education for Traditional Communities

5.10 During the Inquiry the Committee discussed the problems of Aboriginal education with education authorities and Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. It was said during these discussions that the most complex problem in Aboriginal education is the provision of educational opportunities for young Aboriginal people living in traditional communities. While retention rates for young Aboriginal people in urban areas are lower than those for non-Aboriginal students, young Aboriginal people in towns and cities do at least have physical access to schools. In traditional communities, however, the problems of access are more pronounced and very few Aborigines from traditional communities have successfully completed Years 11 and 12.[7]

5.11 The Northern Territory Department of Education explains in its submission that, until recently, there have been two main avenues of secondary education available to young people from traditional communities:

> First, those who mastered the standard primary curriculum have been able to attend Yirara (Alice Springs) or Kormilda (Darwin) residential colleges from where, after a transition year (sometimes more), they attended a local high school and followed the standard secondary curriculum. The residential colleges also provide on-campus 'post-primary' programs for students ... from smaller communities where no such program is available.

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[5]See *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, A Joint Statement*, pp.11-13.
[6]See Commonwealth Government, *Budget Statements: 1989-90, Budget Paper No. 1*, p.3.80.
[7]Northern Territory Department of Education, Submission, p.14.

> ... *The second avenue to secondary education is available in larger* Aboriginal communities which have post-primary programs, that are largely oriented to the basics and vocational skills.[8]

5.12 Limited use has also been made of educational services provided by the Northern Territory Secondary Correspondence School.

5.13 Evidence indicates that these arrangements have not adequately met the educational needs of Aboriginal people. FEPPI, the Northern Territory Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, argues in its submission that post-primary programs suffer from being educationally 'second rate and having no clear direction'.[9] The alternative – the residential college option – has been criticised as being an unrealistic way of providing for young people from remote traditional communities. It has been reported that:

> A major problem encountered by residential colleges has been opposition *[from traditional communities] to students' leaving their communities.*[10]

5.14 This dissatisfaction has led to the development of a new education and training strategy for people in Aboriginal communities. Under this plan, all post-Year 7 educational activities, including post-primary programs and adult education, will be provided in new Community Education Centres. FEPPI reported that in the first year of operation (1988) eight Centres were established in selected Aboriginal communities. The aim is to establish, over time, between 30 and 40 Centres in communities around the Territory.

5.15 These Centres offer a range of programs designed to provide foundation studies in numeracy, literacy and further language studies as well as TAFE accredited courses relevant to community self-management, enterprise and self-sufficiency. The courses will be strongly linked to training and employment opportunities at the local and regional level. The Centres will also progressively offer access courses to secondary correspondence, TAFE correspondence and other vocational preparation courses.

5.16 The Centres are not intended, at least in the first instance, to focus on providing education at the senior secondary level. As FEPPI acknowledges in its submission, senior secondary provision through either Community Education Centres or regional boarding schools is, realistically, an objective for the longer term. For this reason the Committee believes that residential colleges, like Kormilda College in Darwin, which are presently able to provide courses at the secondary and senior secondary levels, can play an important role in providing educational opportunities for Aboriginal people.

5.17 While in Darwin the Committee visited Kormilda College and met with the Director and staff. The Committee was impressed by the facilities, the range of courses available and the enthusiasm and commitment of those involved with the College. Despite the social and cultural difficulties associated with young

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[8]ibid.

[9]FEPPI, Submission, p.8.

[10]Northern Territory Department of Education, op. cit. See also FEPPI, op. cit., p.9.

Aboriginal people leaving their traditional communities, it seems that the College is fulfilling a demand that exists within Aboriginal communities. Evidence from the Director of Kormilda points to a pattern of increasing enrolments from 76 students in 1987 to an anticipated student population of 360 by the end of 1989.[11]

5.18 An issue of major concern for those involved with Kormilda College is the cost of providing residential education services. The boarding costs at Kormilda are $6,600 per student while the amounts paid under ABSTUDY to meet the costs of education range from $2,900 (for students under 16 years) to $5,000 (for students aged 18 years). The difference in cost is met by the College.

5.19 The Committee acknowledges that financial assistance schemes such as ABSTUDY are intended to assist students to gain access to education, not necessarily to meet all of the costs associated with education. Nevertheless, in the situation where many young Aboriginal people from generally low socio-economic backgrounds [12] have, at present, no option but to leave their communities in order to proceed to secondary education, the Committee believes that the Commonwealth Government should examine ways of assisting residential colleges to meet the costs of boarding.

5.20 The Committee recommends that:

> **the Commonwealth examine ways of assisting residential colleges to meet the costs of boarding for young Aboriginal people; for example, by making provision to meet all or part of the difference between the cost of boarding and the ABSTUDY away-from-home rate.** *(Recommendation 8)*

Students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds

Variations in Retention

5.21 The variation in the proportion of young people from different ethnic groups who stay on to Years 11 and 12 has been noted elsewhere in the Report.

5.22 Given that non-English speaking sectors of the community are far from being an homogeneous group it is perhaps not surprising that there are such variations. This is not, however, to say that differences in educational attainment are desirable – young people from all non-English speaking backgrounds should be able to develop their skills and talents by participating in the senior secondary years of school at rates equal to the wider community.

5.23 In those ethnic groups with rates of Year 12 participation equal to or higher than Australian born students – that is Greek and Italian – a number of positive influences have been identified:

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[11] P Harris, 'Submission to DEET for A Review of the Cost of Residential Accommodation', 1989, p.14.
[12] ibid., p.18.

> The fact that they are often migrants, or children of migrants, who were motivated to migrate because of associated economic aspirations and so forth, disposes that group to have higher aspirations. There is a second incentive: a lot of migrants equate educational attainment with socio-economic mobility; ... [this] disposes them to encourage their children, and it disposes the children themselves to aspire to a higher level of participation.[13]

5.24 A number of submissions also identify a strong motivation to achieve among many young people from Asian backgrounds.[14]

5.25 The factors which act to discourage young people from other ethnic backgrounds from staying on are, in many regards, the same as those that affect all young people – they are the cost of schooling, parental attitudes and expectations and the series of school-related factors discussed in Part 3 of the Report. There are, however, subtle cultural differences in the way in which these factors influence young people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The Cost of Schooling

5.26 The cost of schooling can be a burden for many low income families – irrespective of ethnic background. For families from non-English speaking backgrounds, however, the ability to meet these costs is complicated by the difficulty that parents can have in getting a job. As the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia (FECCA) describes in its submission, the ability to get a job depends on the level of English spoken and the recognition given to overseas qualifications.[15]

5.27 If parents find it difficult to obtain secure employment, family finances may be stretched and young people may be discouraged from staying on at school.

5.28 It is important in this situation that information about Commonwealth and State financial assistance schemes is widely distributed and available in community languages other than English.

Parental Influence

5.29 Generally speaking families figure very highly in the lives of young people from non-English speaking backgrounds and so the attitudes and expectations of parents about educational and career options can be particularly influential. One manifestation of this influence is the under-representation of girls from non-English speaking backgrounds in Years 11 and 12 in comparison with boys from these backgounds. It seems that some ethnic groups give low priority to the educational needs of girls:

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[13]Office of Multicultural Affairs, Evidence, p.1729.
[14]See Camperdown High School (NSW), Submission, p.1; and Holy Spirit School (Aitkenvale, Qld), Submission, p.2.
[15]FECCA, Submission, p.1.

> Some female students, ... from countries such as Turkey and Iran, are actively discouraged by their parents from continuing to the end of Year 12. For example, they are pressured to obtain part-time work, expected to help run households [and] act as interpreters ...[16]

5.30 Parents can also exert a strong influence on the subjects chosen by their children:

> Some NESB young people ... study subjects not appropriate to their abilities or needs due to parental influence based on knowledge of overseas systems or opportunities.[17]

5.31 The importance of promoting positive attitudes among parents toward education and of fostering parental involvement in schools has been discussed in the preceding Chapter. This task is always difficult, but is even more complex when dealing with parents from non-English speaking backgrounds. However, given the pre-eminent role of families and parents in the lives of many young people from non-English speaking backgrounds it is clearly important. In developing the type of strategies and methods of communication outlined in Chapter 4 it is, therefore, important that schools and school principals consider the cultural and language backgrounds of nearby ethnic communities. Schools and school principals also need to be aware that parents from non-English speaking backgrounds may not necessarily be literate in their home language. This means that, for some parents, written communication may not be effective even if translated and that more innovative methods, such as home visit programs, may be the only way of communicating information about schools and what they offer.

School Related Factors

5.32 Two school related factors that can influence the staying or leaving decisions of young people from non-English speaking backgrounds are:

(a) the level of English language literacy; and

(b) cultural misunderstanding in the classroom.

5.33 As almost all subjects at high school are taught in English, a student's level of English language literacy will greatly affect his or her chance of success in learning. One submission described English as 'the language of success'.[18] While it is relatively easy to pick up 'school yard' English it is much more difficult to obtain proficiency in 'academic' English.[19]

5.34 A number of submissions argue that the Commonwealth's English as a Second Language (ESL) program is therefore essential if young people from non-English speaking backgrounds are to have the opportunity to experience success in learning. Funds provided under this program allow schools to, among other things, employ specialist language teachers. In the words of FECCA:

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[16]ESL Teachers at Narrabundah College (ACT), Submission, p.1.
[17]Migrant Resource Centre (Southern Tasmania), Submission, p.2.
[18]Catholic Education Office (Diocese of Parramatta), Submission, p.5.
[19]FECCA,op. cit., p.3.

> The ESL program is an integral and necessary part of the education of a young person from a NESB. If [ESL courses are] not provided, young people from NESB start their education with a large handicap which widens rather than disappears as their educational life continues.[20]

5.35 The Committee believes that it is vital that adequate funding be maintained for this program and welcomes the recent announcement that, as part of the Commonwealth's National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, the ESL program will be extended in primary schools at a cost of $3 million per year.[21]

5.36 In relation to the second of the school related influences on retention, the Office of Multicultural Affairs refers, in its submission, to recent research which suggests that teachers' lack of knowledge, understanding and experience of students' backgrounds can discourage young people from non-English speaking backgrounds from staying on at school:

> ... teachers may have little understanding of teaching methods and priorities of the student's country of origin; [and] some teachers have unduly low expectations of immigrant Australian students ... [22]

5.37 In these circumstances, it is argued, young people can feel alienated from school and will either not go on to Years 11 and 12, or not achieve to their full capacity. If young people from non-English speaking backgrounds are to be allowed to maximise the benefit that can be obtained from a full secondary education, teachers must be sensitive to their needs and cultural backgrounds.

5.38 A number of submissions also mentioned the need to develop a multicultural approach in the courses offered at schools. This, it is said, does not mean the creation of particular subjects on the culture or history of specific ethnic groups but, rather, the transformation or reorientation of a broad range of subjects to reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian population. Such an approach may help develop self-esteem among students from non-English speaking backgrounds and encourage greater understanding and tolerance among the wider community. Moreover, it may confirm the relevance and importance of education within the ethnic communities. The Committee is pleased to note that the Commonwealth's National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia identifies the development of multicultural education, within social science courses, as a priority area for collaboration between the States in 1990.[23]

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[20]ibid., p.3.
[21]Office of Multicultural Affairs, *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: Sharing Our Future*, AGPS, Canberra, July 1989, p.43.
[22]Office of Multicultural Affairs, Submission, p.3.
[23]Office of Multicultural Affairs, *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: Sharing Our Future*, p.36.

Statistics

5.39 All submissions that address the influence of ethnic background on retention argue that there is a need for more and better information on this issue. As the Office of Multicultural Affairs explains, even the most basic of information, such as a students' country of birth, is not collected by States in any systematic way. The absence of such information makes it difficult for governments to assess the scope of problems experienced by young people from non-English speaking backgrounds and to develop ways of overcoming these problems which, as indicated above, can often be specific to particular ethnic groups.

5.40 To overcome this deficiency the Office has drawn up, in conjunction with the State Ethnic Affairs Commissions, an agreed set of guidelines for the collection of data on the ethnic background of students.[24] The guidelines are intended to assist in the identification of the needs of people from non-English speaking backgrounds and the administration of appropriate social welfare and education programs. Despite being endorsed in March 1988 by the State Ministers responsible for Ethnic Affairs, it seems that they are not being widely used by State education authorities.

5.41 The Committee recommends that:

(a) **school systems routinely collect country of birth and language data using the guidelines developed by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and State Ethnic Affairs Commissions; and**

(b) **the Commonwealth conduct or sponsor further research into the significance of factors such as family value orientations, the importance of English literacy, and other related cultural and socio-economic factors, on the participation and educational aspirations of young people from non-English speaking backgrounds.** *(Recommendation 9)*

5.42 In addition the Committee recommends that:

(a) **in developing the community information and education campaigns recommended in paragraph 4.14 education authorities and schools consider the needs of ethnic communities in their districts;**

(b) **schools develop culture and language sensitive means of communicating with parents and involving them in the school activities and decision making processes (refer to recommendations at paragraphs 4.14, 4.29, 4.39 and 4.44); and**

(c) **teacher training programs emphasise the need to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences (refer to recommendations at paragraph 9.23).** *(Recommendation 10)*

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[24]Office of Multicultural Affairs, *National Guidelines for the Collection of Ethnicity Data*, AGPS, Canberra, 1988.

Girls in School

5.43 Girls as a group have a higher retention rate than boys as a group. Table 1 in Chapter 2 shows that since 1976 female retention to Year 12 has been higher than male retention. In 1988 61.8% of females stayed on to Year 12 compared with 53.4% of males. The major reason for the difference is that more boys than girls leave school at Year 10 or 11 to take up employment or training opportunities. As the Government of South Australia points out in its submission, there are a greater range of employment and training opportunities for boys of this age than there are for girls.[25]

5.44 Although girls stay on at a greater rate there is evidence to suggest that their participation in Years 11 and 12 does not widen their perspectives or their future options as much as it could. An indication of the nature and outcomes of girls experiences in Years 11 and 12 is shown by the job and study pathways to which girls proceed after secondary school. Studies have revealed that although a higher proportion of girls than boys complete high school, a lesser proportion of girls than boys go on to make the transition from school to further education and training.[26]

5.45 The occupational pathways to which boys and girls typically proceed are described in the South Australian Government's submission:

> In those occupations which have the most significant status and financial rewards: *business and commerce, medicine, law, engineering and* technology, men pre-dominate. Men also are numerically dominant in skilled, semi skilled and trades areas. Women are less represented in business and industry and professions and tend to dominate in areas such as service industries, teaching and nursing. Generally, the areas girls are employed in have fewer training opportunities and less career pathways. Young women 15-19 years, are also less likely than their male counterparts, to be able to obtain full time employment.[27]

5.46 These job and study pathways are, in many respects, determined or influenced by the courses chosen and attitudes reinforced in the senior secondary years. Many submissions point out that fewer girls choose top level maths, science and technology based subjects. Girls tend to choose social science and humanities courses.[28]

5.47 The Committee is aware that a great deal of work has been done in the States on improving the educational opportunities for girls in the senior secondary years and encouraging greater participation in top level maths and science courses. Many of these activities are being co-ordinated under the National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australia. This Policy, which was developed by the Commonwealth and has been endorsed by the State Ministers

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[25]Government of South Australia, Submission, p.19.

[26]Professor P Hughes, Dr J Abbott-Chapman and C Wyld, Submission, p.3. See also T Williams, *Participation in Education*, pp.89-92.

[27]Government of South Australia, op. cit., p.20.

[28]See D Crump, Submission, p.2.; Catholic Education Office (Hobart), Submission, p.2; and Queensland Department of Education (West Moreton Region), Submission, p.3.

for Education and major non-government education bodies, provides a common framework within which education authorities can draw up their own plans of action. The objectives of the National Policy are to:

(a) raise awareness of the educational needs of girls;

(b) provide equal access to and participation in appropriate education;

(c) encourage the provision of a supportive school environment; and

(d) ensure equitable resource allocation.

5.48 Issues receiving priority under the National Policy include:

(a) reform of the courses available in Years 11 and 12 to broaden girls options for understanding and participating in society and to remove gender stereotyping;

(b) the development of appropriate teaching, learning and classroom management processes to ensure that girls are not excluded or discouraged from participating in classroom activities; and

(c) reform of the social environment in schools, addressing in particular the persistence of some sexist practices in schools.[29]

5.49 The development of this Policy was a landmark event as it is the first national policy on any aspect of schooling. The Policy, and its requirement for annual reporting on progress towards its objectives, represent significant commitments on the part of governments and education authorities. The Committee strongly supports the initiative and hopes it will help girls reach their full potential in Years 11 and 12 and will open up a greater range of study and career options for girls after secondary school.

Students in Country Areas

Introduction

5.50 The proportion of students in country areas completing Year 12 is consistently below the proportion of metropolitan students who complete Year 12. As shown in Table 5 (see Chapter 2), the 1987 Year 12 completion rate for students in country areas was 49.5% compared to a completion rate of 61.3% for students living in metropolitan areas.[30] The difference is partly accounted for by the fact that some young people transfer from country schools to metropolitan schools to complete their secondary education. This can have the effect of distorting retention rate figures and exaggerating the difference between country and metropolitan retention.[31] The transfer of students does not

[29]See Commonwealth Schools Commission, *The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools*, May 1987.

[30]NOTE: See paragraph 2.17 for comment on the variations that exist within the broad categories of metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

[31]See Government of South Australia, Submission, p.32; and Victorian Country Education Project, Submission, p.3.

account for all of the difference, however, and it is generally accepted that young people in country areas complete secondary school at lower rates than their metropolitan counterparts.

5.51 While many of the factors identified elsewhere in the Report are relevant for country as well as metropolitan students, a number of submissions argue that these factors can take on a different character or significance for country students. The issue that contributes most significantly to the special character of schooling in country areas is that of physical access to school. This issue, along with many others, was considered in the Commonwealth Schools Commission's report *Schooling in Rural Australia.* The report pointed out that:

> ... while most rural students have ready daily access from their home to a school ... some have to travel extensively each day to get to school, while for others daily school attendance from home is impossible. This latter group must generally either study at home using distance education services, or live away from home to attend school.[32]

5.52 The report goes on to note that the difficulties of physical access need to be kept in mind when considering the specific factors that affect retention in country areas.

5.53 The factors identified in submissions as influencing country retention rates fall into three related groups – the costs of schooling, experiences at school and attitudes to education.

The Cost of Schooling

5.54 As discussed in Chapter 3, the costs of schooling can be of two types – the income or help foregone by the family to keep a child at school and the actual expenses involved in attending school.

5.55 The costs of income or help foregone may often be of greater relevance for country families, and the Schools Commission speculates that the low completion rate for boys in some country areas may be attributable in part to families choosing to have their son help on the family farm or in the family business.[33]

5.56 Many of the actual expenses involved in attending school, such as fees, books and excursion expenses, apply to students and families regardless of location. However, as pointed out in submissions from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA), country families can face additional costs because of the problems of physical access to schools. There may, for example, be costs associated with daily travel to school or, where daily access is not possible, costs associated with living away from home.

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[32]Commonwealth Schools Commission, *Schooling in Rural Australia*, Curriculum Development Centre, Canberra, 1988, p.194.
[33]ibid., p.197. See also Victorian Country Education Project, Submission, p.6.

5.57 A recent study at the University of Tasmania has found that for young people from country families on relatively low incomes, 'material disadvantage' can be a barrier to participation in the senior secondary years.[34]

5.58 The additional costs that can be faced by country families in keeping their children at school, and the possible consequences of being unable to meet these costs, have been recognised by governments and there are a number of financial assistance programs available to students in country areas.

5.59 The Commonwealth Government's AUSTUDY scheme (explained in Chapter 3 with further details at Appendix E) is paid at two levels for dependent students. As well as the standard rate, there is an away-from-home rate for young people who have to leave home to attend school.[35] In the financial year 1988/89 it is anticipated that country students will receive income support of about $190 million under AUSTUDY. This represents 30% of total AUSTUDY expenditure.[36]

5.60 Families in isolated areas whose children do not have ready access to government schools may also be eligible for allowances under the Commonwealth's Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme. AIC provides allowances for students who board, study by correspondence or live in a second family home to enable them to attend school. While AIC allowances are subject to income and assets tests, all eligible students attract a means test free payment of $989 per year for boarding students and $500 per year for students doing correspondence courses.

5.61 During the Inquiry, representations were made to the Committee about the recent introduction of assets testing to the eligibility criteria for AIC allowances:

> It is claimed that the assets-test will discourage small business families, including farmers, from keeping their children at school and will cause hardship.[37]

5.62 The assets test level has been set at $300,000 and excludes the value of the private home and any debts associated with the assets such as loans, mortgages or higher purchase agreements. Furthermore, only 50% of the value of the assets is taken into account. This allows small business owners and farmers to have business assets of $600,000 (excluding home and debt) and still receive AIC assistance. The assets test is estimated to affect less than 1,000

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[34]Professor P Hughes, Dr J Abbott-Chapman and C Wyld, Submission, p.4. NOTE: Material disadvantage is described in this study as not being measured in financial terms alone, but includes travel, accommodation and maintenance problems – sometimes associated with living away from home, but not always.

[35]NOTE: AUSTUDY also assists tertiary and adult secondary students in country areas by providing a fares allowance which reimburses the cost of three return trips per year.

[36]*A Fair Go: The Federal Government's Strategy for Rural Education and Training*, Canberra, 1989, pp.7 and 19.

[37]Department of Primary Industries and Energy, Submission, p.15.

(or 5%) of the 14,500 AIC recipients.[38] The introduction of the assets test will allow better and appropriate targeting of resources and will mean that assistance is provided only to those most in need.

5.63 Assistance for students in country areas is also provided by the State governments. In Tasmania, for example, students in country areas may be eligible for a conveyance allowance or a living away-from-home-allowance (under either the Hostel Boarding Allowance or Senior Secondary Accommodation Allowance schemes).[39] The Queensland Government also provides country students with living away-from-home and travelling allowances where appropriate.[40]

5.64 In Chapter 3 the Committee examined the question of State education allowances and concluded that the States ought to agree to the implementations of a standard, nation-wide education allowance (see paragraph 3.40). The Committee considers that there is merit in taking a similar approach on the question of State financial assistance to students in country areas and recommends that:

> **in the context of consultations currently taking place in relation to State education allowances, the States consider the adequacy of financial assistance they provide to country students and consider introducing uniformity in the provision of such assistance.** *(Recommendation 11)*

5.65 In addition to direct financial assistance, governments assist country students who have to live away from home to attend school by contributing toward the establishment and maintenance of a network of student hostels. Typically, hostels are established in a regional metropolitan centre to allow young people from the surrounding district to board at the hostel during the week and attend the local high school, thus obviating the need for extensive daily travel. Although hostels are often operated by church or community groups, the Schools Commission reports that in 1986 there were:

> ... 13 government assisted hostels in Queensland, Western Australia has 10 State-operated hostels managed by the Western Australian Country High Schools Hostels Authority and Tasmania has nine hostels operated by the Tasmanian Department of Education.[41]

5.66 A number of submissions refer to the need for the Commonwealth government to provide additional funding for existing hostels and make funds available for new facilities.[42] The Committee is pleased to note that the Commonwealth Government has responded to these calls by announcing that:

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[38]*A Fair Go*, op. cit., p.10.
[39]Government of Tasmania, Submission, p.5. See also Education Department of Tasmania, *Financial Assistance for Students*, 1988.
[40]ICPA (QLD Council), Evidence, pp.921-2.
[41]Commonwealth Schools Commission, op. cit., p.55.
[42]ICPA (Federal Council), Submission p.7; and Department of Primary Industries and Energy, op. cit., p.7.

> ... the Government will provide additional capital funding of $2.2m over the next 2 years to government and non-government organisations to establish and refurbish hostels for secondary students. [43]

5.67 This decision is to be applauded. The improvements to hostel accommodation likely to result from the decision should encourage more isolated country students to continue with their education and stay on to Years 11 and 12.

Experiences at School

5.68 A number of submissions point to the central role that the type and range of courses available in Years 11 and 12 can play in meeting the needs of students and encouraging even more young people to stay on. Meeting this demand can be challenging for all schools, but it is especially so for schools in country areas which may not have the necessary resources and expertise and which tend to have smaller class sizes. During the Inquiry the Committee visited two country schools in rural Victoria, St Arnaud High School and McCauley College near Dooboobetic. St Arnaud High School has a Year 12 population of 18 students and in some courses only three students per class. The numbers are similar at McCauley College with 22 students in Year 12 and a senior physics class of two students. Staff of these schools acknowledge that providing courses for such small class sizes is a very expensive way of operating. In addition, while small class sizes give teachers the opportunity to spend more time with each student, students can find it difficult to judge how well they are performing in relation to other students studying at the same level and thus to assess what they are capable of achieving. Despite these problems the staff at St Arnaud High School and McCauley College considered that it was important to offer as great a range of courses as possible despite small class sizes:

> ... if the courses were not provided students would either be denied an opportunity or would be forced to leave the district to study elsewhere.[44]

5.69 The States and individual schools have developed a number of strategies to minimise the difficulties experienced by country schools.

5.70 The Tasmanian Government reports that in recent years a number of structural changes have taken place in the provision of secondary education in country areas. The Tasmanian secondary education system is divided into high schools catering for Years 7-10 and secondary colleges located in metropolitan areas providing for Years 11 and 12. In some country high schools, however, where there is a sufficient student enrolment, high schools have been extended to include senior secondary courses. In other areas a Year 11 and 12 annex has been created within the school but with formal links to a city college, which is

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[43]Commonwealth Government, *Budget Statements: 1989-90, Budget Related Paper No. 9, Towards Social Justice for Young Australian*, p.11.NOTE: The Commonwealth has also announced that donations to building funds for hostels will be tax deductible (Statement by the Treasuer, the Hon P J Keating, MP, Canberra, 8 August 1989, Press Release No. 72).

[44]Comment made during discussions with the Principal and Assistant Principal at McCauley College.

resourced to provide the necessary support to the country students. In one location the Year 11 and 12 students have been integrated into the local TAFE college, thus opening up a new range of opportunities for students. Finally, in 1989 Year 11 and 12 subjects have been made available in three small rural areas through the School of Distance Education.[45]

5.71 In South Australia a number of country schools that formerly only went to Year 11 have had Year 12 'tops' added. Another initiative has been:

> ... the development of school cluster arrangements whereby a larger school with secondary enrolments becomes the focus school for post compulsory study; for example, in the Murray-Mallee region, Lameroo Area School provides the post compulsory schooling for Pinnaroo and Geranium Area Schools.[46]

5.72 The formation of small schools into clusters to improve the breadth of courses available is an approach which is gaining acceptance Australia-wide. In rural Victoria, the application of new technology to teaching and learning has led to the development of clusters of schools. More than 80 small secondary schools have been organised into 17 clusters. Schools within each cluster have established communication links through the use of computers, facsimile machines and audio linkages. The use of this type of technology enables teachers at one school to teach students at another school, thereby increasing the resources and expertise available to small schools.[47] Similar approaches to broadening the courses and resources available to country schools through the use of technology are being taken in Queensland.[48]

5.73 The Committee has given detailed consideration to the use of technology in learning in its Report *An apple for the teacher? Choice and technology in learning*. In that Report, the Committee supported the wider adoption of the cluster approach to schooling in all States and recommended that the Commonwealth encourage clustering through its negotiated resource agreements with the States.[49] The Committee reaffirms its support for this concept and recommends that:

> **the Commonwealth report to the Parliament on progress toward the implementation of this and other recommendations contained in its earlier report, *An apple for the teacher?*.** *(Recommendation 12)*

5.74 The implementation of strategies of the type described above has seen a considerable broadening of the range of senior secondary courses available in country schools. The Victorian Country Education Project, for example, considers that the courses available in country schools:

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[45]Government of Tasmania, op. cit., p.6.
[46]Government of South Australia, op. cit., p.33.
[47]See Victorian Country Education Project, op. cit., p.4; and *The Challenge of Retention*, pp.122-3.
[48]ICPA (QLD Council), Evidence, p.924.
[49]House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *An apple for the teacher? Choice and technology in learning*, February 1989, pp.48-50.

> ... offer students a chance to participate in a comprehensive range of senior school subjects ... and [that] this range is at best as extensive as that offered across the State.[50]

5.75 It would appear that the courses available in country shools are exerting less influence on the staying or leaving decisions of students at these schools.

Attitudes to Education

5.76 The attitudes that young people have towards education are influenced very largely by their parents' attitudes towards education, by the encouragement parents give to their children and by the expectations parents have of their children (see Chapter 4). In turn, parents' attitudes are influenced by their own background and the environment in which they live and work. The Schools Commission explains, in *Schooling in Rural Australia*, that:

> ... many rural parents are likely to be in occupations which are not highly dependent on educational qualifications [such as] graziers or farmers ... [51]

5.77 Coming from this background, it is conceivable that country parents may place little value on the need for higher qualifications or indeed the need to complete school. The Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy argues, for example, that people in agricultural centres may consider that there is little advantage to be gained from continuing in education when higher qualifications may not be required in the family business or for the local job market.[52]

5.78 In the opinion of the Department, perceptions among parents, students and the wider country community that completing Year 12 is of limited value is the major reason for the comparatively low retention rates in country areas.[53] The importance of family background and community attitudes is also recognised in submissions from the ICPA.[54]

5.79 If retention in country areas is to be increased significantly, these general and long-held attitudes must be changed. As discussed in Chapter 4, the task of changing community attitudes is slow and complex and requires a long term commitment to providing information directed at broadening the educational, social and employment horizons of young people. The information and education campaign recommended in Chapter 4 will have most effect in country areas if elements of the campaign are developed and delivered with a regional emphasis, involving all relevant institutions (government and non-government schools, TAFE colleges, tertiary institutions) and local business and community groups.

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[50]Victorian Country Education Project, op. cit., pp.4-5.
[51]Commonwealth Schools Commission, op. cit., p.196.
[52]Department of Primary Industries and Energy, op. cit., p.11.
[53]ibid., pp.11 and 15.
[54]ICPA, (QLD Council), Submission, p.1.

5.80 The recommendations in Chapter 8 concerning improvements in the provision of career counselling and advice about options for further study are also relevant for country students. In particular, computerised information and advice systems like the Victorian Job and Course Explorer have great potential to improve the access of country students to such information.

5.81 The Commonwealth Government's Country Areas Program (CAP) has an important role to play in widening the horizons for country students. Under this program funds are provided to sponsor, among other activities:

(a) career advisory services, work experience and visits to industry;

(b) tours by theatre groups, dance companies and orchestras;

(c) visits by specialist teachers - for example, music teachers; and

(d) visits to special facilities such as science laboratories and technical workshops.[55]

5.82 In 1988/89, CAP funds amounting to $11.6m were distributed between 920 government and 122 non-government schools.[56] *Schooling in Rural Australia* reports that CAP provides an effective and efficient mechanism through which the Commonwealth can help to improve the quality of country schooling while also helping to increase retention in country schools.[57] Few submissions commented on CAP, although those that did were supportive of the opportunities it provided for country students.[58]

Conclusion

5.83 The Victorian Country Education Project concludes in its submission, that:

> ... [country] schools are presently actively encouraging students to continue with their studies through offering a wide curriculum choice. They are making commendable efforts to provide information and change general community attitudes to formal education. These efforts must be continued and supported over the long term.[59]

5.84 The Committee believes that the strategies outlined in this Chapter and elsewhere in the Report will, if implemented, ensure that the momentum already developed in the provision of better educational opportunities for country students is maintained and further encouraged.

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[55]See DEET, *Commonwealth Programs for Schools: Administrative Guidelines for 1989*, Canberra, pp.83-5; and *A Fair Go*, op. cit., pp.9-8.
[56]ibid., p.9.
[57]Commonwealth Schools Commission, op. cit., pp.206-7.
[58]Government of South Australia, op. cit., p.33; ICPA (Federal Council), op. cit., p.9. NOTE: The Victorian Country Education Project, which is mentioned in this Chapter, is partly funded through CAP.
[59]Victorian Country Education Project, op. cit., p.10.

Independent and Catholic Schools

Higher Retention

5.85 Over time there has been a consistent and clear difference in retention rates between school sectors. In 1988 almost all young people in independent schools stayed on, compared to 64% in Catholic schools and 51% in government schools (see Table 4 in Chapter 2). Although, as always, there is a need for caution in using apparent retention rates to make direct comparisons, the various factors that may influence these differences have been addressed in submissions to the Inquiry.[60]

Quality of Education

5.86 Submissions from organisations representing the independent school sector argue that the reason why such a high proportion of students stay on to Year 12 is that independent schools are seen to offer a 'better' education. The particular characteristics of the education offered by private schools are said to be a focus on maintaining academic excellence[61] and an emphasis on providing pastoral care for students[62] It is also clear that some parents value the more traditional structured approach to learning and discipline that is often found in private schools.[63]

5.87 Catholic schools, too, place a strong emphasis on providing pastoral care for their students. The National Catholic Education Commission notes that:

> ... concern for the welfare of individual students is a characteristic of the Catholic tradition in education. The capacity of schools and educational professionals to care for their students' educational, personal, social and religious needs affects both the overall retention of students and the ways in which schools and students cope with this increased retention.[64]

Family Background

5.88 In relation to retention in independent schools, a number of submissions argue that it is not only what these schools are able to offer, but also the student's family background, that helps generate higher retention rates.

5.89 Children in independent schools typically come from different family backgrounds than do children in government or Catholic schools:

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[60]NOTE: Comparisons between government and non-government schools must be made with caution because of the net transfer of students from government to non-government schools. This tends to inflate the non-government school retention rates and reduce the government school rates. Moreover, if parents tend to select private schooling for their more academically inclined children then the respective retention rates will reflect this selection. (from DEET, *Statistical Monograph No. 3*, 1986, p.11.)

[61]See South Australian Independent Schools Board Inc., Submission, p.3.

[62]See National Council of Independent Schools' Associations, Submission, p.3.

[63]See T Williams, *Participation in Education*, p.83.

[64]National Catholic Education Commission, Submission, p.3.

> As a rule, they come from more highly educated families; their parents often occupy professional or managerial positions, have higher disposable incomes, knowledge and experience of the education system, a life-style which values formal learning and competitive achievement, high educational and occupational expectations, and the capacity as well as the inclination to mobilise other professional resources, continuously and intensively, in their children's total development.[65]

5.90 These factors combine to produce an environment where there is an automatic expectation that students will proceed to Year 12.[66]

5.91 As Table 3 (in Chapter 2) demonstrates, the social and economic background that young people come from can influence retention very greatly, with young people from the most advantaged socio-economic groups in the community completing Year 12 at considerably higher rates than those from less advantaged groups. It may be, therefore, that family background is of greater effect on the high retention rates at independent schools than any factors specific to the education available at these schools.

Conclusion

5.92 The precise effect of the factors that cause the generally higher retention rates in independent and Catholic schools is difficult to judge. Recent research in this area has found that both family background and perceptions about the quality of education play a part in explaining the differences, but that no one factor can be considered as dominant. The study concludes that further research is needed to:

> ... gather fact[s] on what it is about non-government schools and/or their students that result in these higher Year 12 completion rates. Such fact[s] could well serve as a basis for focussed compensatory programs that would remove between system differences.[67]

5.93 The Committee notes and supports this conclusion.

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[65]Dr R Teese, Submission, p.10.
[66]Townsville Grammar School, Submission, p.1.
[67]T Williams, op. cit., p.111.

PART THREE

School Factors

CHAPTER 6

LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENT

Success in Learning

6.1 Levels of achievement at school are argued, in a number of submissions, to be accurate indicators of whether or not a young person will stay on to Years 11 and 12. If a student is doing well at school, or likes learning, he or she will probably have a positive self-image in relation to his or her academic ability. If, on the other hand a student finds it difficult to learn what schools teach, he or she will get fewer rewards from school, will have a poorer self-image and may be inclined to leave school rather than stay on to Years 11 and 12.

6.2 These views are supported by recent research which has shown that:

> ... achievement in school has a substantial impact - perhaps the most substantial impact - on participation in all forms of education ...[1]

6.3 This study, like others, goes on to conclude that the key to learning well what schools teach is that students possess fundamental reading, writing and mathematical skills.

6.4 While it is common to hear the view expressed that the level of such skills among young people has fallen, surveys conducted by educational research organisations and school systems disprove this assertion. In a speech given in March 1989 the Commonwealth Minister for Education, the Hon J S Dawkins, MP, presented survey results to show that young people in schools perform better now than ever before:

> In May last year the Tasmanian Education Department released an updated survey of basic skills of reading and numeracy among 10 and 14 year olds which had been carried out since 1975. Using an index of performance for numeracy and reading the Tasmanian survey found no evidence of any change in the numeracy skills of 10 and 14 year olds since 1974, while literacy skills had improved significantly, particularly among 14 year olds. Similar tests, carried out ... all over Australia have produced similar results. Whenever it has been possible to compare test results with previous years, students demonstrate either the same or improved performance.[2]

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[1]T Williams, *Participation in Education*, p.103.

[2]The Hon J S Dawkins, MP, 'Speech to the Independent Teachers Federation of Australia', March 1989, p.4.

6.5 Nevertheless, it is clear that there are significant differences in the levels of basic skills among school age young people. If young people are to be given the opportunity to learn at school and experience the feeling of success that goes with learning and achievement, concerted effort is required to ensure that fundamental levels of reading, writing and mathematical skills are acquired.

6.6 Although the acquisition of these skills is a complex task, the difficulty of which is often underestimated, it is a task that is beyond only very few young people (specifically, those with intellectual disabilities). It is also a task which commences well before the senior secondary years of schooling.

6.7 In 1985, the Quality of Education Review Committee, chaired by Professor P Karmel, argued that:

> Students must be assisted to develop ... general competencies and skills from the earliest possible age ... Since students spend the first seven years of their school experience in primary schools, these must bear the main responsibility.[3]

6.8 The Committee agrees that the role of primary schools in ensuring that students acquire basic skill levels is paramount.

6.9 If primary schools are unable to impart basic skills and capture the interest and imagination of students from an early age, the educational future of the young people thus affected will be severely limited.

6.10 It is true that secondary schools can help young people acquire these skills through the development of appropriate courses and positive teacher attitudes and teaching methods. The task is, however, more difficult and complicated at this later stage. In the words of one group of parents who wrote to the Committee:

> A student who enters secondary school with reading or writing difficulty will find it impossible to keep up and, in many cases, will simply opt out as soon as possible.[4]

6.11 Implicit in this consideration, and of crucial importance in encouraging success in learning, is the need to identify those young people experiencing difficulty in learning and to provide them with learning assistance before patterns of failure become entrenched.

Identifying Learning Difficulties

6.12 The most appropriate way to assess whether students have achieved basic skill levels, and thus to identify those students experiencing learning difficulties, is a matter of some controversy. Some in the community propose the implementation of State-wide standardised testing. Under this proposal, tests are externally set and examined and students' results are published to enable

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[3]P Karmel and others, *Quality of Education in Australia: Report of the Review Committee*, AGPS, Canberra, 1985, p.83.
[4]Victorian Parents Council, Submission, p.2.

inter-student and inter-school comparisons to be made. This type of testing is vigorously opposed by, among others, the Australian Teachers' Federation. In its submission the Federation argues that:

> ... schools, seeing their work judged in terms of test results, naturally seek a concentration on narrow competency learning and practice testing as a method of improving test results and this inevitably leads to a withdrawal of resources and effort from those parts of the curriculum not subject to the tests.
>
> In turn, this produces a narrowing of the curriculum with less emphasis on curriculum content, and less emphasis on such functions as creativity, problem-solving, personal development and social development which are socially and individually beneficial. [In addition] ... the availability of a bank of test results creates the possibility of invidious comparisons between school sectors, regions, States/Territories and different socio-economic groups.[5]

6.13 A more widely accepted method of testing for learning difficulties is the application of 'diagnostic tests' within individual schools. Such tests allow schools and teachers to identify the weaknesses and strengths of each student and to devise specific programs of learning assistance where necessary.

6.14 Diagnostic testing is not a new concept. Its value is widely recognised and in many schools it is commonplace. One system of diagnostic testing drawn to the Committee's attention is the Tasmanian Education Department Diagnostic Information Service (TEDDIS). TEDDIS is a system that tests for the errors students make in basic mathematical calculations. Test results are analysed by microcomputers within each school to diagnose why a student has made a particular error, or series of errors, and indicates to the classroom teacher what exercises and activities are appropriate to remedy the student's errors.

> In about an hour, depending on the number of students, a teacher can:
>
> - administer the appropriate test;
> - process the results on a computer;
> - diagnose student errors by interpreting the print-out;
> - select from the index the appropriate remediation activities for each student; and
> - start students on their remediation activities.[6]

6.15 The Committee acknowledges that, in some cases, diagnostic testing merely confirms what teachers already know about a student's learning difficulties.

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[5]Australian Teachers' Federation, 'Curriculum Policy', p.14 (an attachment to the Federation's submission to the Inquiry).
[6]Tasmanian Department of Education, *Education Update: March 1988 – TEDDIS*, p.2.

6.16 Nevertheless, the example of TEDDIS demonstrates the great value of a system of diagnostic testing. To allow students the greatest opportunity to achieve success in learning at school, such tests should be available to students and teachers in the primary school years. This is not to say that diagnostic testing should be restricted to primary schools. The Committee is pleased to note that TEDDIS, for example, has been introduced in nearly every Tasmanian government school – both primary and secondary.[7]

6.17 While not suggesting that the results of individual diagnostic tests should be widely published, the Committee believes that, in view of the need to establish a partnership in education between students, parents and teachers, parents should be informed of the results of such tests and be involved in providing learning assistance (see Chapter 4 and below). It is important to emphasise that testing should not be seen as an end in itself and, in addition, that course work should not focus on the type of learning necessary to improve test results.

6.18 The Committee recommends that, as 1990 is the International Year of Literacy:

> **the Commonwealth Government, in partnership with the States, develop systems of diagnostic testing, like the Tasmanian Education Department Diagnostic Information Service, for widespread use within primary and secondary schools.** *(Recommendation 13)*

Learning Assistance

6.19 Identifying the need for learning assistance is of course only the first step in helping a student achieve success in learning: developing a program of appropriate learning assistance is the real challenge for schools and teachers.

6.20 Traditionally, schools have attempted to assist those students experiencing learning difficulties by grouping them together in special remedial classes. While many students benefit from the assistance provided in these classes, they represent 'retrieval' education for students who have not been assisted adequately in earlier years.[8]

6.21 For many young people, being placed into a separate remedial class can compound the learning difficulties they are experiencing and reinforce the perception that they are not succeeding at school. The Committee supports the view put the New South Wales Teachers' Federation that:

> ... apart from withdrawal programs for special education students [that is, students with disabilities] ... classes should not be streamed on the basis of assumptions about ability. Streaming and ranking simply reinforce the experience of failure for the majority of students and are powerful deterrents to educational participation.[9]

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[7]Tasmanian Department of Education, op. cit., p.1.
[8]SPELD (QLD) Inc., Submission, p.1.
[9]New South Wales Teachers' Federation, Submission, p.28.

6.22 Despite these concerns about the traditional approach to assisting students, the Committee accepts that it will be necessary in the short term to retain and even increase the number of remedial classes provided in schools. In the long-term, however, it is the Committee's firm view that a more pro-active strategy is needed to ensure that all young people experience success in learning.

6.23 An important element of this strategy ought to be efforts to improve teachers' understanding of language and mathematics learning, to develop their skills in teaching and observing, and to design appropriate course work. This argument is taken up in submissions from SPELD (QLD) and the Centre for Research and Learning in Literacy based at the Brisbane College of Advanced Education.

6.24 These submissions argue that learning difficulties occur most often because young people have not been taught how to learn. In their analysis, schools focus too much on the content of what is being taught rather than encouraging the 'language – thinking process' which enables students to learn.

> Typically ... most teaching activities emphasise recall and regurgitation of information ... In this event teachers actually foster rote learning at the expense of learning and understanding ... it is imperative that professional development programs and inservice courses [on the language-thinking process] be ... reinvigorated. Unless a commitment is made to provide that support, it is feared that many students of compulsory school age will continue to derive little pleasure and long-term benefit from, or confidence in, their studies. The result will be a disinclination to remain at school beyond Year 10.[10]

6.25 The professional development of teachers has been a key element of a number of recent State and Commonwealth Government programs aimed at improving the level of reading, writing and mathematical skills of young people. These programs include:

(a) Basic Learning in Primary Schools (BLIPS), a Commonwealth Government initiative;

(b) the Reading Recovery program in the ACT;

(c) the Learning Assistance Program (LAP) in South Australia;

(d) the Literacy and Numeracy Program in Victoria; and

(e) the First Steps Program in Western Australia.

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[10]B Morris and N Stewart-Dore, Submission, pp1-2. NOTE 1: Morris and Stewart-Dore refer in this context to an Australian teacher retraining program of international standing called Effective Reading in Content Areas (ERICA). This program focuses on those skills and language-thinking processes essential for effective learning. NOTE 2: The issue of teacher retraining is taken up more generally in Chapter 9.

6.26 An important element of BLIPS, for example, was the support provided to the Early Literacy Inservice Course (ELIC), a literacy project aimed at the professional development of teachers involved in the early years of schooling. In their Annual Report for 1987-88, DEET notes that:

> During the course of the program, which was established as a specific purpose program for the period 1985-87, over 25,000 Australian teachers took part in... ELIC, and endorsed its effects on their teaching skills and on children's learning.[11]

6.27 BLIPS was also endorsed by witnesses appearing before the Committee:

> ... BLIPS and ELIC were successful because they trained the average classroom teacher, in the average school, to be able to do something with available resources ... If you are ... dependent on specialist [remedial] teachers ... it is very costly. But if you can train the teachers who are there [in the classroom] it is better. BLIPS and ELIC were a self-perpetuating, self-training exercise.[12]

6.28 Another approach supported by BLIPS was the active involvement of parents in their children's learning, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics. These aims are shared by the South Australian Learning Assistance Program. The vital role that parents and the home background play in the development of the skills that lay the foundation for success in learning is explained in a submission from the Western Australian College of Advanced Education:

> Children learn language through use: through interacting with those around them. Traditionally, the people who provide the models for this early language development are the parents, grandparents and older siblings ...
>
> During their years at primary school their reading and writing skills develop. What is too little understood, however, is that the consolidation of these skills outside school hours is at least as important as what happens in schools.[13]

6.29 The Committee believes that the development of learning assistance programs which emphasise teacher retraining and parent participation will diminish the need for remedial action in the later years of schooling. In this context, the Committee notes that BLIPS, which operated for only three years, received widespread support among parents, teachers and administrators and as DEET notes:

> ... had a significant effect on children's learning in the areas of reading, speaking, listening, writing and mathematics.[14]

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[11]DEET, *Annual Report: 1987-88*, p.113.

[12]National Catholic Education Commission, Evidence, p.461.

[13]K Willis, 'Developing Language Competence', pp.1-2. (an attachment to the submission from the Western Australian College of Advanced Education).

[14]DEET, op. cit. p.113. NOTE: A total of $22.59 million was allocated to the program during its period of operation (see *BLIPS: A Select Annotated Bibliography*, DEET, 1988, p.v).

6.30 Finally, the Committee would like to draw attention to a successful literacy program being run at the Holy Family Education Centre at Emerton in the western suburbs of Sydney. The program, which is community based and church funded, provides direct learning assistance for over 140 students, young school leavers and adults who have not achieved literacy skills at school. The success of the program in helping people acquire basic reading and writing skills demonstrates, in the opinion of staff at the Centre, that 'everyone can learn these skills' and highlights the crucial importance of training teachers to identify learning difficulties and to provide appropriate learning assistance in schools.

6.31 While teacher development and learning assistance strategies will, in time, reduce the need for such centres, in the short to medium term, community based literacy centres will continue to provide valuable learning support for both young people and adults. It is, therefore, of concern to the Committee that these centres receive no recognition, much less assistance, from governments.

Conclusion

6.32 If young people are to complete twelve years of school, it is important that they experience early success in learning. A key element in achieving success in learning is the attainment of proficiency and confidence in mathematical, reading and writing skills.

6.33 To help young people attain proficiency and confidence in these skills, schools, teachers and parents must enter into an educational partnership to provide learning support and assistance when and where necessary.

6.34 Crucial elements of the system of support are the development of:

(a) appropriate courses and course content;

(b) positive and constructive teacher attitudes and teaching methods;

(c) achievable goals in learning; and

(d) means to ensure the early identification of students who need learning assistance.

6.35 The Committee recommends that:

the Commonwealth develop and fund a national strategy to ensure that all young people achieve proficiency and confidence in mathematical, reading and writing skills in the primary school years and that this strategy incorporate –

(i) appropriate systems of diagnostic testing (as recommended in paragraph 6.18);

(ii) a program along the lines of the former Basic Learning in Primary Schools program;

(iii) specific commitments to professional development for teachers and the involvement of parents in the provision of learning support; and

(iv) the accreditation of, and provision of financial assistance to, community based literacy and numeracy centres. *(Recommendation 14)*