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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Indigenous education funding arrangements

TUESDAY, 1 MARCH 2005

DARWIN

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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 1 March 2005

Members: Senator Crossin (*Chair*), Senators Barnett, Jacinta Collins, Kirk, Stott Despoja and Tierney

Substitute members: Senator Allison for Senator Stott Despoja

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Bartlett, Boswell, Buckland, George Campbell, Carr, Chapman, Cherry, Colbeck, Coonan, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Fifield, Forshaw, Harradine, Humphries, Hutchins, Johnston, Knowles, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mackay, Marshall, Mason, McGauran, McLucas, Moore, Nettle, O'Brien, Payne, Robert Ray, Santoro, Sherry, Stephens, Watson, Webber and Wong

Senators in attendance: Senators Allison, Carr, Crossin and Tierney

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The implications of the Government's proposed changes to funding arrangements for targeted assistance in Indigenous education, as contained in the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2004, and in particular:

1. Proposed changes to the IEDA and IESIP programs, with reference to:
 - the new tutorial assistance arrangements and Whole of School Intervention strategy under IEDA, and
 - new strategic initiatives for indigenous students in remote areas and the new flagship project for teaching literacy under IESIP.
2. The likely educational outcomes of the Commonwealth's new indigenous-specific funding measures, with reference to:
 - the Indigenous Youth Leadership and Indigenous Youth Mobility Programs, and
 - the Government's objective of accelerating educational outcomes for indigenous students, as stated in the 10-point national agenda for schooling announced in November 2003.
3. The accountability requirements applying to funding agreements made under IEDA and IESIP programs, with reference to:
 - the new framework of performance monitoring and reporting on educational outcomes, and
 - the new financial reporting arrangements.
4. The effect of the proposed funding measures on current state and other systemic indigenous programs, and future implications for the operation of ASSPA committees.
5. The extent of consultation between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, schools and parents, especially ASSPA committees, about policies and details of changes to the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000.

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Committee met at 2.08 p.m.

FITZGERALD, Ms Christine Ann, Director, Policy, Planning and Resources, Indigenous Education Division, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

GLASBY, Mr John, Acting Executive Director, Strategic Initiatives, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

SAUNDERS, Mr Trevor, Chief Financial Officer, Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the inquiry into Indigenous education funding arrangements. The formal part of proceedings will comprise appearances by DEET, the Independent Education Union and the Catholic Education Office. We hope that will conclude by 4.15 this afternoon. Then we will commence some more informal discussion on the effects of the amendment to the Indigenous education funding act on the educational experience of Indigenous students.

On 6 December 2004, the Senate referred to this committee an inquiry into Indigenous education funding arrangements, with particular reference to the principles underlying funding assistance and the funding model used to deliver it. The committee will be examining the ways in which these principles and the SES model allow schools to meet the national goals for schooling agreed to in Adelaide in 1999, the effectiveness of partnership arrangements between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, the effectiveness of current accountability provisions, and issues relating to efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation of public funds. The committee is particularly interested in changes made to the processes of parental and community consultation.

I remind all witnesses that in giving evidence they are protected by parliamentary privilege. This gives special rights and immunities to people who appear before the committee. People must be able to give evidence to the committee without prejudice to themselves. Any act which disadvantages a witness as a result of evidence given before the Senate or any of its committees is treated as a breach of privilege. I welcome any observers to the public hearing this afternoon. To begin with, I welcome our first witnesses, representatives from the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training.

The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public but will consider a request for all or any part of your evidence to be taken in camera. You have provided the committee with a submission, which is No. 8. Do you have any changes, additions or additional paperwork that you wish to provide to the committee in support of your submission?

Mr Glasby—No.

CHAIR—I invite you to make a brief opening statement of about five to 10 minutes to take us through your submission, and then we will go to questions.

Mr Glasby—I have asked Chris to make some opening comments in the context that we find ourselves in. After that we will take questions.

Ms Fitzgerald—I will give you some information on the context of Indigenous education in the Territory and you will see that it is core business for our department. In the Territory there are about 41,000 students in all schools, and 15,800 of those are Indigenous students. In DEET schools alone 40 per cent of the student population is Indigenous—that is, some 13,300 students. Of those students, 74 per cent or some 9,700 go to school in remote locations as defined by the ARIA index. We have 151 DEET schools in the Territory and 53 homeland learning centres. When you break down the figures for those schools you will see that 110 of them are in remote and very remote locations and that 41 are in what are called ‘provincial locations’—that is, the Darwin and Palmerston areas, which are considered provincial under the ABS ARIA index.

Indigenous education is core business of this department and a major focus of our business. When Minister Nelson announced the new funding package for the new quadrennium in April 2004, we were very pleased to see that the focus was on remote areas and on targeting need with funding. We have clearly identified in the Territory through our own data that there is a huge need in remote areas, so we are very supportive of that approach. We have had many formal and informal meetings with DEST staff from both the national office and the local office. We have a very strong working relationship with the local DEST office and we have been working closely together to work through this new funding package.

I will summarise quite quickly without going into a great level of detail about the meetings we have had. If you need to know about that process, I can clarify that later. The changes that have been made in the IESIP funding package will not have a significant impact and things will remain much unchanged for the Territory. The ESL-ILSS funding package that comes under that area has also remained much unchanged and will not impact on us in the Territory. We have received new funding under the Scaffolding project. That will be new money of \$2 million a year that will come to the Territory to support scaffolding or, as we call it in the Territory, ‘accelerated literacy’.

The major changes for us are those that are in the former ATAS program, which has now moved to the ITAS program, which has two components: the in-class tuition and the year 10 to 12 tuition. We do not have accurate data on the amount that DEST has spent on the ATAS program or on the number of students. Our figures are what we have been able to gain from our own sources. The in-class tuition program has been really successful in the last year. It has been delivered in the Territory for the last three years. Our estimates are that last year in the Territory the entire ATAS program, which covered secondary students as well, cost around \$7 million, with approximately 6,000 or more students benefiting from being able to access that program.

If we look at the changes—and I refer to the in-class tuition aspect of the ITAS program—we estimate that last year there were something like 3,800 NT government or DEET students being supported through tuition at a cost of about \$5 million. Under the new funding arrangements we will be funded on the number of students who did not achieve a benchmark last year in years 3, 5 or 7. That works out at 1,666 students. That will attract a pool of funding which we then have to use to tutor all eligible students. That funding pool will be approximately \$3.71 million.

The discussions over the last six months have led to increased flexibility of in-class tuition. Now, under the new arrangements, we are able to tutor any Indigenous student who is not achieving at the appropriate Northern Territory curriculum framework level assessed for their year. This will enable us to tutor students besides those who did not achieve a MAP benchmark last year.

Last year we estimated—under the whole Indigenous education targeted funding package, including our estimate of ATAS in-class tuition—there was probably about \$16 million. Our best estimate, because there is still not a lot of information available to us, is that in 2005 that could be approximately \$17.2 million, and that is including the funding for IESIP, ESL-ILSS, Scaffolding and the ITAS in-class tuition program. There is an increase. We anticipate that there will be more funding, but there will be fewer students eligible to access that funding.

The other component of the ITAS program is the year 10 to 12 tuition. Because of the timing, we have asked DEST to provide that program this year, which they are able to do. Under the administrative guidelines, DEST could provide it or we could. Because of the timing and the critical need to get tuition into schools as early as we could, we asked DEST to continue to administer the year 10 to 12 tuition program this year. We will consider what we might do in the future.

The big issue at the moment for our schools is that there is no in-class tuition for primary students. There are a lot of trained tutors out there who are actually seeking other employment. Because students need that support as we speak, the Northern Territory government has decided to roll out a program using its own funding until we can complete negotiations around this funding agreement, sign off and get funding in to support those students.

Senator ALLISON—Was it ever anticipated that this money would be made available from the beginning of this year, instead of dragging on for what sounds like it will be two or three months into the academic year? What has happened there—have the negotiations taken longer? Can you explain.

Ms Fitzgerald—We first got the draft provider guidelines in July. That was the first exposure draft where we knew the new criteria for funding those programs. We then commented on those and provided feedback and we received an updated version in December. Our first bilateral discussion with DEST was on 28 January this year. The timing has certainly been an issue for our schools and that is why we are rolling something out ourselves, because we are aware of that.

Senator ALLISON—Did you make the case to the federal government that, even if this agreement had not been signed, you should step in and the federal government should reimburse you for the costs of keeping those people in the classroom? Was that ever suggested?

Ms Fitzgerald—Our chief executive wrote to the NT state manager of DEST—I think it was late December, realising that it would take us some time to get through the negotiations and the bilateral discussions—asking if there were some interim arrangements we could make so that our processes did not interfere with the needs of students. Certainly, these discussions might have happened earlier if DEST did not have to go into caretaker mode when the federal election was called, which was a six-week period where nothing could happen.

Senator ALLISON—So you made the request of the Commonwealth to provide you with that funding. Have you had a response to that?

Ms Fitzgerald—There was an informal meeting between officers in early January and then our next meeting was our first formal bilateral. My understanding is it is related to the Commonwealth's ability to release funding under the legislation. Because we do not have a signed Indigenous education agreement, there is no capacity to release funding to us.

Senator ALLISON—Not even an undertaking that whatever you spent in the interim period would be reimbursed later?

Ms Fitzgerald—We are making sure that what we spend in the interim and the program we are rolling out meshes absolutely with what will be the requirements when we sign our agreement. We are starting early. We will basically be reimbursing ourselves with the funding when it becomes available.

Senator ALLISON—What does your department think about the benchmarking and the fact that we are talking here about years 3, 5 and 7? Is this the best way to assess needs in Indigenous students?

Ms Fitzgerald—Benchmarking is an assessment that identifies that a student has the minimum level of literacy and numeracy awareness to participate in education—so they have the minimum level of skill required. For anyone just below or around benchmark, it is not necessarily that they do not need support; they probably do need support to achieve above that minimum standard. To directly link the funding of the ITAS program to just those students severely limits our capacity to attract funding, because there are large numbers of students in other year levels who are achieving at well below benchmarks. We can actually map them on our curriculum framework; we know where the benchmark levels are. You can map a student's current progress against the curriculum framework, whether they are in year 1, 3, 5, 4 or 7. It is very clear whether they are performing at benchmark level, above it or below it. For us, it does not reflect the number of students who need support.

Senator ALLISON—It is said that students in primary schools who go through Reading Recovery do very well and seem to catch up to some extent to their peers but, because that program finishes at a very early stage in primary school, they often fall away towards the end of their six or seven years. Is that your experience too?

Mr Glasby—We need to mention something else to you. Notwithstanding the use of MAP as a basis for making these judgments, nonetheless, under the current agreement that we are about to sign we have the ability to deliver tuition to a range of students, not just to those students.

Senator ALLISON—So it is even at different levels, not just students who are—

Mr Glasby—Yes.

CHAIR—When did the Commonwealth introduce that change in their budget?

Ms Fitzgerald—Our minister met with Minister Nelson in middle to late November and had a discussion. Both our minister and our department had raised issues with the minister and the DEST national office and had said that only funding students that have not achieved the benchmark would mean a significant reduction in the Territory. For instance, last year we had about 3,800 students in DEET schools who were assessed as not achieving at the appropriate level, and we were only going to be funded on 1,666 students.

Senator ALLISON—Did that agreement change the 1,666 students? Is it now a greater number?

Ms Fitzgerald—No. We get funded on 1,666, so the students who do not achieve benchmark are used to attract a pool of funding. The Commonwealth have now allowed, under the guidelines, increased flexibility.

Senator ALLISON—So you can spread that over a large number of students?

Ms Fitzgerald—We can spread that over a large number of students, but it is not every student that is attracting funding—it is only that small group—and we must use that total pool of funding to be able to support a much greater number of students.

Senator ALLISON—But the total pool of funding has increased by \$1 million or so overall. Is that correct?

Ms Fitzgerald—That is over all our Indigenous education funding programs. If we are specifically looking at the in-class tuition program, it is probably going to drop in the vicinity of \$1.3 million from what we accessed in 2004.

Senator ALLISON—If it is dropped off in in-school tuition, where is it increased?

Ms Fitzgerald—We have got the new \$2 million in Accelerated Literacy.

Senator ALLISON—Did you agree or did this government agree with that as a change in emphasis or a change in funding with it being directed to one program as opposed to another?

Mr Glasby—There has been no agreement as such because I think we are still working through the terms of the current agreement.

Senator ALLISON—So you will agree to it, but you do not have a view about whether it is best to spend an extra \$2 million there and not in another program?

Ms Fitzgerald—I guess Accelerated Literacy is a literacy approach and it is not across all our schools. There are different approaches to delivering literacy to students and that is one particular approach that the evidence to date indicates can make a difference. Both our government and the Commonwealth government have been supporting Scaffolding or Accelerated Literacy for some years now. I think it was an emphasis by both jurisdictions to really test this approach over a broad range of schools to determine whether it can make a real difference.

Senator CARR—You are saying that the number of students affected by these changes has moved from 3,800 down to 1,666. Is that right?

Mr Glasby—Correct.

Senator CARR—That is about half the students.

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes. That specifically related to funding. Last year 3,800-odd students would have had a tutor assigned to them to deliver tuition.

Senator CARR—So last year there were 3,800. Under these proposals the number will now be 1,666.

Ms Fitzgerald—We will get funding for them, but then we have the flexibility to use that money on those other students who may not be achieving at the appropriate curriculum level.

Senator CARR—I am just talking about the Commonwealth funding, because your own resources are separate. As far as this inquiry is concerned, we would like to know the effect of the changes. That is basically a 50 per cent drop or thereabouts. You are saying that, in number of hours taught, there is a 25 per cent reduction.

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes.

Senator CARR—That is on page 3 of your submission.

Ms Fitzgerald—That relates to how, if you work out the cost of a tutor, we still can tutor those 3,800-odd students this year—

CHAIR—For a shorter period of time.

Ms Fitzgerald—but for a shorter period. It worked out last year that a student got about 87 minutes per week. This year, if we tutor those 3,800 students under the total pool, they will get about 50 minutes if we tutor them individually.

Senator CARR—So, either way you look at it, it is a substantial reduction in the available resources for students in the Northern Territory. Do I take it from this that the effective dollar amount has moved from \$5 million last year down to \$3.71 million this year? Is that the effect?

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes.

Mr Glasby—Around ITAS?

Senator CARR—Yes, that particular program.

Ms Fitzgerald—In-class tuition, yes.

Senator CARR—If we look at the other school participation initiatives for parents, what are the effects of the changes in terms of reductions in the number of parent committees? Do we have any estimate of that at all yet?

Ms Fitzgerald—This program has always been administered by DEST as the former ASSPA program, and they are certainly administering it. Clearly, ASSPA committees no longer exist because they are not funded, but it does not mean—

Senator CARR—How many were there, do you know?

Ms Fitzgerald—No; I think DEST would have to provide that information. There would have been more than 100, I would imagine.

Mr Saunders—With ASSPA the relationship is between DEST and the ASSPA committee; the funding is not via the schools.

Senator CARR—So you would have no understanding of how many ASSPA committees there were?

Mr Glasby—We could give you an estimate based on the number of schools that we have in the Northern Territory, but—

Mr Saunders—In terms of funding, it would be difficult for us to give you exact numbers.

Senator CARR—Do you think it is possibly 100?

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes.

Mr Glasby—We could take that question on notice and give you an exact figure if you need.

Senator CARR—Thanks very much for that.

Mr Glasby—And that estimate would be just the number of schools that could possibly have an ASSPA committee; it would just be an estimate.

Senator CARR—Obviously, you are going to get that information from DEST itself. If I might be more provocative: if I were a Commonwealth official, I might say that, in the middle of last year, Territory officials were told there was going to be a change and you did nothing about it, and therefore we have a situation now where students—how many tutors, by the way, are unemployed as a result of these changes?

Ms Fitzgerald—Last year there were, I believe, just over 500 tutors.

Senator CARR—So we have 500 tutors unemployed at the moment. Is that right?

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes.

Mr Glasby—That would be difficult to say, because I would suspect that principals would be counting on this money coming to them and I have no doubt that most principals in this situation would be—as indeed the government has done—underwriting the—

Senator CARR—Okay. So there are 500 unfunded. They are not funded by the Commonwealth; would that be a fair description?

Ms Fitzgerald—Some of those could be under the year 10 to 12 tuition program that the Commonwealth will be funding.

Senator CARR—How many tutors that were funded by the Commonwealth would not be funded by the Commonwealth at the moment, do you know?

Mr Glasby—Once again, we did not employ the tutors, so it is difficult for us to say, but certainly there could be a number of them.

Senator CARR—Maybe as many as 500 or several hundred—how many?

Mr Saunders—Senator Carr, we also need to acknowledge that DEET has introduced an interim arrangement to provide employment to these tutors. We would be happy, if you wish, to table the relevant departmental documents. We do not have them here, I do not think, but there is a document that outlines the arrangements for the tutors.

Senator CARR—That would be helpful, thank you. The point I am getting to is: why did it take six months for you to hit the panic button, to say: ‘If we don’t get this sorted, we are going to find at the beginning of the school year that there’s a good chance people won’t be on the payroll’? Why did you wait until 28 January 2005 for a meeting with Commonwealth officials?

Ms Fitzgerald—Legislation was not passed until December. We had several meetings and discussions. We got the first draft guidelines in late July; we had until late August to comment on those, which we did. Then we were in caretaker mode, and there was no discussion whatsoever around the issues we had raised. Legislation was not passed until the December sittings.

Senator CARR—So they refused to talk to you until the legislation was passed?

Ms Fitzgerald—I am just looking at my list of meetings. We did have some meetings. I know our minister met with Minister Nelson, and there was a briefing provided locally in Darwin on 2 December to local providers. There was also a meeting held in Melbourne on 3 December with senior officials from each jurisdiction and DEST national office.

Senator CARR—Then what we are looking at is bungling. The Commonwealth clearly is not able to get its act together. Caretaker mode is not an excuse on this because these are administrative guidelines. It is not about there being a change in policy; this is an announced policy. I cannot for the life of me see why the discussion process would have had to be curtailed because of that. You are saying that the legislation was not passed. Are you saying that they did not talk about the possibility of the implementation of the legislation prior to the legislation being passed? That does not seem to me to be a credible explanation. The fact that they are meeting with you in December suggests that someone is aware that there was a need to get

administrative arrangements in place. So we come to the situation of 28 January—which seems to me to be a bit of a crisis because we have nearly 2,000 students without assistance. It strikes me that there is a high level of administrative bungling here to allow this to go on for so long.

Mr Glasby—I think that, within the workings we have adopted and the various measures we have taken, we would prefer not to see it in that light.

Senator CARR—You might not, but I do.

Senator CROSSIN—Not on your part though, on the Commonwealth's part.

Mr Glasby—Subsequently there have been a number of measures put in place to ameliorate that.

Senator CARR—I noticed in your submission how keen you are to work with the department. You are strongly committed to working in partnership. But it seems to me that there is a pretty high-handed approach being exercised from the other end of this so-called partnership which is producing a situation now where there are thousands of students in this territory without assistance because the administrative arrangements have not been put in place. How far off the truth is that?

Mr Glasby—Once again, I think we would prefer to believe, think or argue that both of us have sought to resolve the various issues before us. I can understand, perhaps, your perspective. But I would like to reiterate that, given the position that we got to, we sought to move as quickly as we could to ameliorate the situation.

Senator CARR—I admire your dedication to this point of view, but can you think of another example where the level of administrative difficulty has been as great? Massive changes to schools funding and massive changes to higher education funding have been introduced. There have been quite substantial changes in vocational education. Nowhere do you see anything like this. So is there not, surely, a case for the thesis that this is substantial administrative bungling which has left Aboriginal kids high and dry? You could not possibly comment?

Mr Saunders—I think we will let this one go through to the keeper.

Mr Glasby—I think it is probably appropriate for you to discuss some of these issues.

Senator TIERNEY—I will change the pace a bit and come back to some of these issues later. We had a somewhat broader Indigenous education inquiry five years ago and we did come to the Northern Territory. We went to a number of the more remote communities as well as Alice Springs and Darwin. That committee came up with 22 recommendations that were unanimously agreed across party lines in the Senate. At the same time, the minister at the time, Dr Kemp, and MCEETYA came up with a series of recommendations in parallel that were almost identical, and these were agreed to by state and territory ministers. Given that so much was recommended five years ago, could you run us through what has changed in Indigenous education in a positive way in the Northern Territory as a result of those recommendations and their implementation at the territory level.

Mr Glasby—I think it would be helpful if we could put some things in context. Our total budget is in the order of \$540 million. The budget we get from the Commonwealth is in the order of \$17 million, which represents about three per cent of the total budget. So the Territory—

Senator TIERNEY—It is \$540 million for all of the education in the Northern Territory?

Mr Glasby—For our agency. So, within that context, Commonwealth funding is supplementary funding. We value the Commonwealth funding—it is important to our principals, our schools and our kids—but I think that we need to understand that the vast bulk of our funding is generated by the Northern Territory department of education. You asked what have been the major changes to Indigenous communities or to Indigenous education in the last five years?

Senator TIERNEY—To Indigenous education.

Mr Glasby—I could name a number and I will leave a couple to my colleagues here. Indigenous education is probably now more than it ever was core business for us. It is something, I think it would be fair to say, that in the past was not that way; but it is now. It is a focus. There has recently been an announcement to invest \$42 million in education, and one of the key elements of that is a strong focus on Indigenous education. Prior to that we had the Bob Collins report with 150-odd recommendations, which were also a source of focus for DEET and for government. The changes have been a marked focus on delivery, on seeking to improve attendance and to have principals engage their staff and their communities in delivering education to Indigenous people. If you were to look at the data—and I will ask Chris to talk about this—you would find that over the last five years there have been improvements in a range of areas.

Senator TIERNEY—Before Chris speaks, could we shift to outcomes. I know you can have more programs and you can probably spend more money, but what is actually happening out there as a result of that? You did mention attendance, which we found five years ago to be an absolutely chronic problem. Perhaps we could focus on that one first. What has changed in relation to attendance and what is your evaluation of the programs that support it?

Ms Fitzgerald—Attendance is something that we continue to have a strong focus on, even though it has not declined. We have a pattern that occurs across the year depending on the seasons, the holiday periods and the commitment of a lot of people in the remote areas to ceremonial business, because that does cause absences while students attend them. In all schools across the Northern Territory we have a commitment to put in place attendance officers to support communities. Some of the funding that goes into schools supports positions for Aboriginal resource officers. This is where a local person works within that community as a liaison between families and the school to encourage students to go to school, which involves working with both the parents and the students. The bigger remote schools also have home liaison officers.

Another focus has been on literacy and numeracy. The department has introduced a strategy whereby two hours of explicit literacy and numeracy are taught every day in our schools. That came into effect when the literacy and numeracy strategy was developed after the *Learning Lessons* report. As a consequence, we have seen a turnaround. If you look at the data in the

Learning Lessons report for our MAP results for Indigenous students in 1999 and those in 2004, you will see that we have more than doubled the number of students in very remote areas for year 3 reading. So there is a trend in the right direction. We realise that there is still a long way to go to improve outcomes for students, but we have certainly turned around the decline. We have a lot of work to do to move forward and close the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Senator TIERNEY—Could you provide the committee with some of that data? I assume you have stats and all of that?

Ms Fitzgerald—The MAP data?

Senator TIERNEY—Yes.

Ms Fitzgerald—Okay.

Senator TIERNEY—You mentioned education resource officers and I think home liaison officers all being geared to improving attendance. Could you also supply us with the figures for your increased spending on support of those sorts of programs? You can take that on notice.

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—What else has changed or improved in the last five years, particularly if you focus on outcomes?

Ms Fitzgerald—There has also been a focus on increasing the number of Indigenous employees within DEET and within schools in both professional and paraprofessional positions. The Territory is I think the first jurisdiction in Australia which has moved from totally IESIP funded AIEWs to government funded AIEWs. This year all of our AIEWs have been picked up and funded by the Northern Territory government.

Senator TIERNEY—So how has the shift in number of people gone over that five years?

Ms Fitzgerald—Forty-four full-time positions for AIEWs that were all Commonwealth funded are now funded by the Northern Territory government. We also have a whole range of positions in schools, as well as Aboriginal resource officers. We have an Indigenous capacity-building unit within our department to look at working with the Indigenous staff to develop career pathways. Through our staffing formula we have the capacity to employ Indigenous assistant teachers in schools. So there has been a focus on supporting Indigenous involvement within schools.

Senator TIERNEY—Could you also, on notice, provide us with information on how that has changed over five years—that is, can you give the number of Indigenous people in those positions you mentioned, say, five years ago compared to today. I think one of the things we saw as a ray of light when we went around Australia was the idea of employing Indigenous people in teacher aide positions. What we saw—and I think this is in one of our recommendations; you might want to comment on whether you are making any progress along these lines—was that,

through in-service training, you could perhaps upgrade people's skills to take on a greater teaching role. Are you doing anything along those lines in the Northern Territory?

Ms Fitzgerald—There are training programs available for assistant teachers. A lot of people are studying through Batchelor institute. That is supported by schools and DEET.

Mr Glasby—I think there is a recognition that we need to do more in that area.

Senator TIERNEY—You described the Commonwealth contribution in this area as \$7 million and your own home-grown—

Mr Glasby—It is \$17 million.

Senator TIERNEY—I am sorry; \$17 million. And your own home-grown budget is \$540 million?

Mr Glasby—Yes, roughly.

Senator TIERNEY—Given the special situation of the Northern Territory compared to the rest of Australia in terms of the percentage of Indigenous students, you have a particular educational challenge here. Have you ever thought of putting to the Commonwealth that perhaps you should take that aspect over in total? Senator Carr went through a number of administrative problems and the rather tortuous arrangements that are going on at the moment.

Senator CARR—Rather astutely, I thought!

Senator TIERNEY—Yes, it was very interesting. I think it did point to an administrative problem. Given it is such a small percentage of your budget, have you ever thought of a special circumstance approach to the Commonwealth so that you do all of this in the Northern Territory?

Mr Saunders—I would like to talk to you about some of the challenges we have as a jurisdiction in terms of cost. There is a discussion to be had with the Australian government about whether the level of contribution the Northern Territory receives from the Australian government is adequate or not in a relative sense. I will just give you some examples—

Senator TIERNEY—Do you mean on the broad funding agreement?

Mr Saunders—Yes, in terms of capital and recurrent funding.

Senator TIERNEY—Yes, Queensland gets far too much!

Mr Saunders—Yes. We talked about Indigenous remote students. We are building a school at a homeland centre that will accommodate 30 children. It will cost us \$1.3 million. That is the sort of challenge we have in terms of the resourcing issues. The average cost for a student in the Northern Territory is about 1.8 times higher than the Australian average. They are the sorts of challenges we also have in Indigenous education. There are discussions about the problems that we have, particularly with infrastructure in remote areas, and whether we can get some support

from the Australian government. The Northern Territory does not have enough capital to do the work that it should be doing in Indigenous communities.

Senator TIERNEY—I was not suggesting that; I was suggesting putting a special case, given the scale of Indigenous education as a proportion of your total compared to the other states—seeking, I suppose, broader funding on that basis, so you would not come across problems like this. I will come back to the specific matter under discussion. In your submission on page 4 you state that DEET has the option of administering the year 10 to 12 tutors, which it will not take up, leaving it to DEST, but that this is an option that does not extend to in-class tuition, resulting in a likely mixed delivery system. Could you explain exactly what that means, because I think it might get to the nub of this administrative nightmare that is being created by this approach?

Ms Fitzgerald—When the guidelines came out, providers such as DEET were advised that there was no option—if we wanted to access in-class tuition funding we must administer it. However, under the year 10 to 12 tuition program there was an option of DEST administering it or DEET administering it. We made a decision at that time that DEST should continue to deliver year 10 to 12 this year, because they had processes in place from running tuition for schools last year. I think we covered that ground of where we were at in negotiations earlier. In addition, one of the focus areas of Parent School Partnerships was school programs that would support literacy and numeracy outcomes. Certainly some schools would have looked at the changes that were occurring in ITAS and elected under their Parent School Partnerships Initiative to access some funding to provide additional tuition support to those students that might not be picked up under either of the ITAS programs.

The discussion there around the potential mixing is that you could have ITAS delivered by DEET and administered by DEET; you could have year 10 to 12 administered by DEST; and you could also have schools individually running a tuition program through the Parent School Partnerships Initiative. Our view was that it was better that all that tuition money remains in one program so that all students who were eligible could access it, rather than having potentially three different programs with three different reporting frameworks. So it was about streamlining administration for schools, which obviously have to report on student progress, and streamlining so that there was no duplication across various programs.

Senator TIERNEY—It still sounds like a good case for you doing the lot. Thank you.

CHAIR—Ms Fitzgerald, it was put to me in estimates a couple of weeks ago that the funding arrangements and the agreement between the states and territories with regard to the in-school tuition was now part of the IESIP agreement, but the minute that states and territories signed off on the page on in-school tuition the Commonwealth would release that funding, even if the rest of agreement was still being negotiated. Is that a position they have put to you? Are you aware of that?

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes, my understanding is that there is the contractual agreement—the legal agreement—at the front and that ITAS is a schedule that sits behind the legal agreement. We need to sign the legal agreement and then we can sign the schedule. There is a schedule for IESIP, one for ITAS and one for ESL-ILSS. If we have the legal agreement signed off—the actual funding agreement—we can sign the schedule for ITAS as soon as we agree—

CHAIR—But you cannot sign the schedule for ITAS first and then sign the legal agreement second?

Ms Fitzgerald—No, my understanding is that we must have the legal agreement signed before any funding can be released under any schedule.

CHAIR—That is interesting. That is not the view that the DEST officials put to us at estimates a couple of weeks ago. Can I just ask you about the scaffolding program—the accelerated literacy program. It is relatively new, isn't it? It has been around for only four or five years—is that correct?

Ms Fitzgerald—I believe it has been around longer in other jurisdictions. We have only had pilots in six schools in the Territory in, I believe, 2002, 2003 and 2004. It has certainly been in other jurisdictions, particularly in Western Australia, longer than that.

CHAIR—So it would not be unusual, given that the money that flows from the Commonwealth to the Northern Territory government is supplementary, to see an increase in funds to extend that pilot or a new program. Would that be right?

Mr Saunders—Can I just have a minute to refer to my notes before I answer that?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Fitzgerald—Mr Saunders is just finding some figures. Certainly the NT government has committed funding to accelerated literacy, as has the Commonwealth. I think the reasoning behind this new funding is to expand the program to see if it is possible to roll it out across the system and to look at the results. Obviously the six pilot schools demonstrated specific outcomes, and now the issue is whether that can be sustained across the system, because it is quite an intensive program.

CHAIR—These are the pilots that were at Ngukurr, Ludmilla primary—

Ms Fitzgerald—Gillen, Dripstone—

CHAIR—Yes. I remember asking questions about it a couple of years back. So, in other words, the increase in funds could be seen as an extension of this pilot or as a further commitment to test and evaluate this new methodology.

Mr Saunders—The Northern Territory is also contributing \$1.9 million towards the program, so that is a reasonable comment, yes.

CHAIR—Ms Fitzgerald, you have said the trend in Indigenous education in the Territory is heading in the right direction—

Ms Fitzgerald—It has turned around.

CHAIR—and to some extent that would be right. Doesn't that therefore lead to the logical conclusion that, if things are actually turning around, why should we see a reduction in the

funding from the Commonwealth to assist kids who need that additional tutorial support? Does it make sense to you as an educationalist that, at the point of time when we see a turnaround in educational outcomes, we see a withdrawal of a commitment of funding for in-school tuition from the Commonwealth?

Mr Glasby—I think any agency would like to see an increase in or maintenance of a program, but at the end of the day I suppose that is not our call. If you are asking us whether we are ecstatic about it, I suppose the answer is that we would prefer that the program would be maintained or increased.

CHAIR—I understand that your chief executive has written to schools about this—and rightly so. One thing I want to clarify here is that the \$5 million that was given for in-school tuition in previous years, when it was controlled by DEST, did not include program on-costs or administration costs such as for DEST officials travelling to communities. In other words—and I will ask DEST this question when we come across them—the allocation of the in-school tuition by DEST must have been higher than \$5 million for the Northern Territory, because it would have been \$5 million plus the cost to DEST of administering that program. Would that be correct, as far as you are aware?

Ms Fitzgerald—My understanding is that they would certainly have had a level of administration costs, because the figure I have given you is the costs they paid a tutor as a contractor. I would imagine DEST would certainly have staff administration costs.

CHAIR—You have now been given \$3.7 million and you are now administering the cost. Do you have to take your administration costs out of that \$3.7 million? In other words, are we actually going to see less money going to kids from the Commonwealth by the time you take your on-costs out?

Ms Fitzgerald—Under the guidelines, we are allowed to use up to 10 per cent of that pool of funding to administer the program. That 10 per cent can cover the costs of program management and staff. It is also required to cover the cost of professional development of tutors.

CHAIR—And any travel tutors might undertake?

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes, but normally we run in-class tuition with people who live within the area and we do not cover travel costs. One of the biggest issues for us in the Territory with in-class tuition is the availability of suitably skilled and qualified tutors in remote communities. There probably would be more students who would require tuition if tutor access were available, but housing and the availability of suitably skilled people to deliver tuition in remote areas are huge issues.

CHAIR—Mr Saunders, what is the administration amount you will be taking out of this allocation—or do you do it right across the IESIP agreement rather than program by program?

Mr Saunders—I do not have that paper in front of me.

CHAIR—It would be about \$370,000, wouldn't it?

Mr Saunders—Normally, the on-cost administration factor is 10 per cent of the program. The administration costs, if you like, of the tutors that we will have to fund will be in the areas of insurance—and we do not have final figures on that—

CHAIR—I think you provide that as a breakdown for us on page 4 of your submission. I guess what I am getting at technically is that you have \$3.7 million and you are going to take off \$370,000 to administer the program—

Ms Fitzgerald—Up to, yes.

Mr Saunders—Our submissions to and our negotiations with DEST have indicated that we think it is a cost shift of the program and that the administration component should be added into the budget.

CHAIR—Additional to.

Mr Saunders—We have made that statement to DEST over time. At the end of the day, our agency sees the program as fairly successful and would not wish to reduce the rate of pay for tutors and their insurance cover. It might eventuate that some of the administrative component of the program will be covered by the Northern Territory government, and that is not unusual. As Commonwealth programs develop, at some point they cease and the Territory might pick up the cost. The AIEWs are a good case in point for that.

CHAIR—You have a funding rate here of \$30 an hour, but the actual cost is going to be \$34.88.

Mr Saunders—That is correct.

CHAIR—So you are saying that the Northern Territory government would need to find \$4.88 per hour per tutor?

Mr Saunders—It depends on whether we group children together or whether we provide individual tutors to students. It might work out that, from within the total budget, we can fund that. We do not know that yet.

CHAIR—But the position of the government is that, if you are going to shift this program across to your administration as of this year, the amount of money you are going to get should include those on-costs rather than have the 10 per cent on-costs taken off ?

Mr Saunders—That is correct, and we have not signed the agreement yet.

Senator CARR—And there is the indexation issue. There will be a continual decline in the value of those dollars because it is not indexed. What is the AGSRC this year—8.4 per cent or something like that?

Mr Glasby—I am not sure, but we have raised the issue of indexation with DEST.

Senator CARR—My recollection is that it is that high. That means a further reduction on the figure you put, and it could effectively reduce it down to next to nothing pretty quickly.

Mr Saunders—Our indexation is not likely to be up around eight per cent. The types of price movements we would be concerned with would be wages, which might go to five per cent. But you are correct: the way price movement is measured on these programs is not adequate.

CHAIR—On the review of the IEDA program, and you would be aware of the final report: there were only 62 written responses to that review. Was the Northern Territory government one of those 62?

Ms Fitzgerald—We responded to discussion paper No. 3, which looked at various administrative models, and we attended some sessions in Darwin where they consulted. We were part of those.

CHAIR—Twenty-four responses were received in relation to the discussion paper on the ITAS bulk funding arrangements, and 62 responses were made to discussion paper No. 3. You did not respond to the ITAS bulk funding arrangements or put in a submission?

Ms Fitzgerald—We did not have any bulk funding arrangements. We ran a bulk funding pilot trial into schools in 2003 and 2004—I am not sure of the timing of that paper. But certainly we responded to discussion paper No. 3.

CHAIR—Are you able to provide this committee with a copy of your response to the discussion paper?

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes.

CHAIR—My understanding was—you may or may not know the history of this—that, out of the 3,800 ASSPA committees, only 400 were randomly selected in each state and territory, so 62 responses is not particularly high. I just want to ask you something about their conclusions. I am interested in the ASSPA program. This final report says:

There was no evidence to demonstrate that ASSPA has had any major impact on educational decision-making or school education policy. ... Evidence suggests there is little and sometimes no connection between school-based plans and ASSPA activity plans.

I am assuming that, even though you are not directly responsible for ASSPA, you would be aware of ASSPA committees and how they operate. Is that a view that is held by the department, or do you have contrary view? Did you see some benefits in the ASSPA committees and what they were achieving?

Mr Glasby—Like anything, it is probably patchy, but overall our view would be that ASSPA played a role engaging Indigenous people in the life of the school.

Senator TIERNEY—You might want to take on notice this question concerning outcomes over the last five years relating to the completion rates in high schools for Indigenous students,

particularly for male Indigenous students. How has that been trending over the last five years? Is there any improvement in completion rates?

Ms Fitzgerald—We could provide some data. We certainly can indicate that the number of students completing NTCEs—our year 12 certificate—has been increasing right across the Territory. When you refer to completions, are you referring to year 10 compulsory education or both?

Senator TIERNEY—Perhaps both—year 10 and year 12—and a male-female breakdown as well.

Ms Fitzgerald—Yes. The retention rates are increasing across the Territory. I know from aggregated data that our retention rate is increasing.

Senator TIERNEY—Significantly or only gradually?

Ms Fitzgerald—I think that in the last couple of years, because of some work we are doing with our secondary schools specifically around retention, there has been quite a jump percentage-wise. We would certainly be happy to provide that data.

Senator TIERNEY—And perhaps provide a description of the programs that are supporting that—what programs you believe are bringing about that change.

Mr Glasby—Are you talking about completion of year 12 or are you talking about retention through to year 12 as well as completion?

Senator TIERNEY—I think, for this purpose, completion of year 10, compulsory, and completion of year 12—the full certificate.

Senator ALLISON—Could I be permitted just one further question? Arising out of our meetings this morning, the suggestion was made that the concept plans, if they included breakfast programs, would likely be rejected by the federal government. Have you had any talks with the federal government? Would breakfast programs be in or out as far as your talks were concerned?

Mr Glasby—Once again, it is not a decision that DEET makes; it is a decision that DEST would make.

Senator ALLISON—I understand that, but have you raised it with them?

Mr Glasby—Yes, we have talked about this issue. Furthermore, it is planned that there be some bilateral talks between DEET and DEST around this issue and others.

Senator ALLISON—So it is unresolved?

Mr Glasby—It is currently unresolved. As you know, we do not administer the program nor do we set the guidelines around it. But our principals have put the case to us actively and with good reason, I believe. There are some programs, like nutrition programs, that provide support to

young Indigenous people and allow them, for example, to remain at school and improve attendance rates and so on. So we see it as something that we would like to see some funding around, yes.

Senator ALLISON—So do you expect a response from the government any time soon?

Mr Glasby—Our local DEST friends are very understanding. I am sure they will come to the party.

Senator ALLISON—But you do not have any undertakings from them at this stage?

Mr Glasby—No, not yet.

CHAIR—I urge you to have a look at the *Hansard* of the Senate estimates because the DEST officials clearly indicated to me that if in fact breakfast, lunch or nutrition programs were linked to educational outcomes—that is, improving school attendance or retention rates—they did not see a problem with that getting the tick.

Mr Glasby—I made that last comment on the basis of a comment that you made earlier in this hearing.

Mr Saunders—Would it be possible for us to table this document that we have premised our numbers around?

CHAIR—Certainly. We would welcome that. Have you got copies of that or would you like us to make some?

Mr Saunders— will need to find an unannotated one.

Mr Glasby—We will provide it to you along with the other documents you have asked for.

CHAIR—Ms Fitzgerald, Mr Glasby and Mr Saunders, thank you very much for your time today and for taking the time and the effort to provide us with the submissions. I appreciate it.

Mr Saunders—Thank you.

[15.14 p.m.]

FARAONE, Mr James Gerard, Member, Independent Education Union

STANLEY, Mr James H, Vice-Chairperson, Independent Education Union

TALBOT, Mrs Margaret Anne, Member, Independent Education Union

CHAIR—Welcome. Is there anything you would like to add about the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Stanley—I am working as an Indigenous education worker, an IEW, at Sacred Heart Primary School. I am also one of the presidents of the Independent Education Union. I have been there for the last eight to 10 years. Now I am representing them with this submission.

Mrs Talbot—I am an employee of St Francis Primary School, I am a resource officer for Indigenous education and I was also a coordinator of Tuition During School Hours, a program within my school. I am also a member of the Independent Education Union and I am here on their behalf.

Mr Faraone—I work at Kormilda College, as a secondary teacher. Prior to that I was out on Bathurst Island for three years, teaching at Xavier CEC. I was a union rep out there. Today I am representing the IEU.

CHAIR—Bear with me; I have a little bit more formality to do before we start. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public and it will consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given in camera—which is a private session—if you want it. Your submission, which we have before us, was sent in by Mr Simon Hall. It is submission No. 6. Do you want to make any changes or do you have any other items you want to provide us with to add to that?

Mr Stanley—No, we submit it as is, but we would like a preamble to some of it, to introduce what we want to say—either me or my colleagues.

CHAIR—That is great. I invite you now to do that. Could you give us a bit of an opening statement. When you have finished, just like with the previous witnesses, we will ask you questions. Who is going to start?

Mr Stanley—I will start. One of the issues is the loss of the ASSPA committee in urban settings. We are talking about an urban setting. I make my remarks on Darwin, Palmerston and beyond—more of the urban suburbia. It is the loss of respect for parents as an independent body, as a voice of their children in education. The grapevine network is the most powerful form of communication in the Aboriginal and Islander community. This has not been taken into account when they have talked about changes to ASSPA and have stopped funding and so forth. Meeting procedure and what I call a white man's political awareness—aims and objectives—are very far

from a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They are not aware of the political awareness in our community.

ASSPA is recognised by school boards. Some schools have not encouraged or recognised the importance of having their voice heard at that level. There is a great need for the education of parents and ASSPA bodies in urban Palmerston, Darwin and beyond. The change that has been imposed at this point in time has forced ASSPA to change from ASSPA to PSPI, which is the Parent School Partnerships Initiative. It is sad, because there is a lack of communication between the powers that be and the Aboriginal community. There is a lack of communication and consultation with the Indigenous Education Unit, which is federal and which receives funds for ASSPA homework centres and in-school tuition.

I work at Sacred Heart Primary School. We have got a number of children and families coming from remote communities to stay in Knuckey's Lagoon, which is a town camp Aboriginal community. The Christian Outreach Centre is another community which has Indigenous community people coming in for medical reasons. They bring their children with them and they stay there for a period of time. They end up coming to our school because we have got a school bus and we go and pick them up and take them to school. We find that there has not been proper negotiation and consultation, and they are not aware of what is happening with the children who are coming in. We look at the benchmarks when they come, and the changes made for this year, 2005. The benchmarks are in 3, 5 and 7. We find it very hard that they come in here and say, 'No, you can't have funding for in-school tuition,' for example. Those children were getting help from that in-school tuition. They are now missing out on that assistance that will bring them up to the benchmarks, from where they can go on to higher and further education.

It is sad to see, coming from where I am coming from, that these children are coming here for a short period of time. Some of them are coming from remote communities and staying here with their nanna. We have to go to their home and the homework centre and explain the school reports to them—about their achievements in school and how they can help them move on to a higher grade and a higher level of education. So it is really concerning to me. I am talking from my experience; that is where I am coming from.

CHAIR—Thank you. Mrs Talbot or Mr Faraone, did you want to say something or will we go straight to questions?

Mr Faraone—Following on from Jim, I was just going to add on to the stuff about ASSPA, having experienced school in the bush for three years at Bathurst Island. ASSPA was significant at Xavier CEC. One thing it contributed to was the nutrition program, which provided breakfasts, recesses and lunches for the kids to keep the kids at school because the kids were not able to be fed at home. It also contributed to the cultural program that got locals in to teach the culture to the kids.

That impacts negatively on staff and students, of course. The staff involved who are on the committees basically lose the only avenue they have—it is not the only avenue but one of the avenues—in the school in the bush to voice their opinions and to influence what goes on in their school. A lot of it out on Bathurst Island is administered from in town. These staff out on the

island are empowered through ASSPA. With regard to it being taken away, we have already had a couple of staff members leave the school last year. That is all I wanted to say regarding the bush.

Senator TIERNEY—This committee held a much broader Indigenous education inquiry five years ago. I would just like to follow up with a few of you on the progress of how things are going in the territory five years after we made a considerable number of recommendations, across all party lines. I will start with Mr Stanley, as an Indigenous education worker. One of our recommendations was to increase the number of positions for Indigenous education workers, working particularly with Aboriginal children to improve their learning outcomes. Perhaps from the IEU's point of view and from your own personal point of view, could you tell us how this is going in the Northern Territory in terms of the numbers of people employed and whether those roles are working well in the system of education in the Northern Territory?

Mr Stanley—Again, I can only talk from the Catholic sector. That is where I am working. That is where I am employed. But I have got connections with the wider Indigenous education workers. They call us AROs, but we do not have a bow!

Senator TIERNEY—Why do they call you AROs?

Mr Stanley—An ARO is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education resource officer. We were employed as resource officers and did not have our own status. It is only within the last five years that we have been employed permanently as Indigenous education workers in the Catholic system. So we were on 12-month contracts, and when that funding was not available, we were without a job. But let me say that the Indigenous education workers have proved very successful across the board—when those children see their own people working with them, being with them, showing them, telling them their own experiences and where they come from, and so forth. My experience is that I come from Cherbourg Aboriginal settlement in Queensland. Education for my eldest brother was fourth grade primary school and no further. So I wanted to lift above that. When I came up here to the Territory from South Australia, I experienced culture shock—an Aboriginal experiencing culture shock in his own country!—talking to children who had not had the opportunity and were then given the opportunity to go that extra level of education and to be encouraged to go on to further and higher education. They have proven very successful in the education system, and I say that for what I know of what is happening in the government schools as well.

Senator TIERNEY—Has the number of people in your position—Indigenous education workers—increased or expanded in the Catholic system?

Mr Stanley—That is difficult to measure. Our employment relates to the number of children within our school. So if, for example—

Senator TIERNEY—It works on a certain ratio?

Mr Stanley—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—In all Catholic schools?

Mr Stanley—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you want to comment on the state schools? Do they do a similar sort of thing?

Mr Faraone—I am assuming so. I am not sure.

Senator TIERNEY—Mr Stanley, in the Catholic system is there any avenue to upgrade your own qualifications? Can you undertake further study? Does your employer support that in any way?

Mr Stanley—Yes, there is opportunity for staff development, as we call it. We end up with a certificate for that—we call it ‘recall’. That has been going on since AROs first went into Catholic education. I have now been there for 11 years. A change has taken place, but there is a lot of increase in the school. They rely upon us now because they have seen how important our role is in education and in school, especially in liaising with teachers, as human resources who can talk with and relate to the children—and the children relate to us.

Senator TIERNEY—In the earlier inquiry, there some successful strategies that we saw across the country, and you alluded to two of them. One was school buses to go out and pick up Aboriginal children and the other was homework centres. Could you, or perhaps anyone at the table, comment on how these are progressing as tools to improve outcomes for Indigenous children?

Mr Stanley—We have a bus at our school. I drove it myself for eight years and then gave it away. I was driving as well as helping children into school as an ARO at the time. We see it as helping those children for attendance at school by picking them up and then taking them home. They go home to nanna, not to their rightful mum and dad, and sometimes it is a real difficulty for nanna to make sure they go to school. But that has proved very successful for numeracy, literacy and also for attendance at schools. That is the bus service that we run, but not all schools have a bus service.

Senator TIERNEY—How are the homework centres developing?

Mr Stanley—Again, I can only speak about the number that I have at my school. I have something like 86 Indigenous students at my school, and 45 of them are at the homework centre. They come there with homework which their schoolteacher has given them, they sit down as a group and do their homework, and then they get homework back the next day. But we are finding it very hard now, as we have not been given the green light to start homework in 2005.

Senator TIERNEY—Mr Faraone, if I could ask you about your experiences as a secondary school teacher, about the retention of Aboriginal boys, in particular, for a longer time in their secondary education—what trends have you noticed over the years?

Mr Faraone—Before this year, I was in Bathurst for three years and noticed a lot of boys were dropping out. They come up from primary school into our secondary school and drop out around the age of 15 or 16. That was the extent to which schooling was offered on the island. There are VET certificates now for years 11 and 12 over the next couple of years. A lot of the boys would come to school till the age of 15 or 16 and then just drop out. We would continually see boys get to the senior class and drop out halfway through the year—or, if some other boys

are dropping out. They are just dropping out and following a lot of the other young ones around the community.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you or the school being assisted in any way by any government program to try and improve retention rates for boys?

Mr Faraone—On the island last year—I believe it is continuing this year—there was the youth development unit. They were funded as a separate body to the school but they work from the school premises, and they physically go out in the mornings and pick students up. They come to the classroom first and tick off a roll, and if the kids are not there they go and get the kids and bring them back. Then they come back at the end of every recess and every lunch. Last year there were two recesses and lunch, and they would come at the beginning and end of recess and lunch, check who was there and who was not, make a note of that and then go and see the parents. That was quite dramatic, actually, when they first started doing retention at school.

Senator TIERNEY—How is that funded? Who does that?

Mr Faraone—I am pretty sure it is federal funding, but I am not sure.

Senator TIERNEY—Thank you.

Senator CARR—Mr Stanley, thank you very much for your submission, which we have before us. In paragraph 38 of the submission, you say:

The IEUNT believes that the replacement of ASSPA—

committees—

with PSPI will ... disenfranchise indigenous parents from the mainstream management structures of urban non-government schools.

Can you explain to me how you think that is happening?

Mr Stanley—By ‘disenfranchise’, I mean that they are not included in the education system at the school level and that they are not referred to. They are an identity on their own and are not respected. That was my first comment, at the beginning.

Senator CARR—I accept that. Why doesn’t the new PSPI structure fulfil the functions that ASSPA committees used to?

Mr Stanley—It was taken away. This is my own personal view. ASSPA is run, organised and administered by Indigenous parents themselves. With the Parent School Partnerships Initiative, it seems like they have taken away something from the individual parent body.

Senator CARR—That is a very serious criticism, because the whole government approach to Indigenous policy now is to claim—I am not saying they do this, but they claim—that this is all about partnerships, mutual obligations and people being involved in decision making at a local

level, yet the very structures that allow people to do that are being taken away. That is why I think your criticism is quite important. You say:

Few indigenous parents will have the skills and understanding needed to participate in the mainstream school management structures and the positive contribution towards attendance and retention produced by the ASSPA program will be lost.

These are very serious points that you are making. Are you saying that without these committees the level of engagement by parents will fall off?

Mr Stanley—It is the change. I think the change has been introduced to the Aboriginal community and the parents of Indigenous students in our school without any consultation with the people themselves, and that is why it is so frightening. People did not know what the change was until three weeks before we broke for Christmas, and we are still not further advanced in knowing what the changes are.

Senator CARR—I will put it to you from my own experience. I was a schoolteacher for over 10 years, I have worked for a minister for education, I have been involved in education in the parliament for 12 years, and when I get my boy's report home from school I have a lot of trouble reading it. I am wondering whether committees like this, particularly in primary school, where parents are much more heavily involved than they are at high school, are really important in explaining to parents what goes on at school and whether there can be any proper partnerships without these committees. It is a bit of a joke for the government to say: 'Listen, we have a partnership here. You will do what you are told.' Isn't that what you are suggesting—that there was no consultation, that it was a like it or lump it proposition and that people are only now coming to terms with it?

Mr Stanley—Yes.

Mrs Talbot—That is exactly right. ASSPA was owned by the Indigenous parents and parents of Indigenous students and, even in the lead-up to these changes, the field officer from the education unit would come along to meetings with ASSPA parents but could never tell them anything. Parents were trying to grasp it, as were we in schools, but no-one could answer any questions, because there was no consultation. It was as though they had said, 'This is going to happen, but we do not know how it is going to happen.' No-one could answer any questions. ASSPA was owned by the Indigenous parents, but a week before school broke we were suddenly given all of the paperwork and told to get concept plans and things like that in. Parents were just lost in the whole thing. Then parents were expected to meet in my school with principals and board members to come into this partnership. It was intimidating and terrible. Therefore, they have all backed off, because they have seen all of this paperwork. There are principals and board members talking language that is over a lot of people's heads. This is not ours anymore. This belongs to the school, even though it is supposed to be a partnership. It is very intimidating and quite frightening. It might take a while to get to that point. We have had ASSPA for 13 years and then all of a sudden it does not exist anymore.

Senator CARR—It makes the whole concept of partnership rather hollow. Mrs Talbot, can you explain to me what you mean in clause 58 on page 28 of our booklet when you say:

To argue that ASSPA Committees should cease to exist because urban schools have not understood the need for integration is a destructive move ...

Why is that? Are you saying that they are trying to mainstream even these sorts of programs? Is that what you mean by integration?

Mrs Talbot—That is obviously what is meant by the statement.

Senator CARR—Again, that is a pretty serious charge. I put this in a context where ATSI is being abolished and the government do not want to talk to Aboriginal organisations, it would seem, other than at their choosing. But at the local level, where they are saying the action is going to be, they are removing the support structure to allow for that dialogue to take place. Is that what you are proposing?

Mr Stanley—Could you repeat that.

Senator CARR—My reading of your submission suggests to me that you are saying that the support structures to allow discussion between government, government officials and parents in urban schools are being taken away. That is the point you are making. Therefore, the capacity to genuinely engage is being reduced.

Mrs Talbot—That is what it is saying. That is exactly right.

Senator CARR—That is what you mean?

Mrs Talbot—Yes.

Senator CARR—Thank you very much.

Mrs Talbot—It is true, because it has stopped people from engaging. The process might take a while because ASSPA works quite well in talking to schools. Parents have ownership of it. They talk to schools; they talk to government. They do that liaising. It comes back to the fact that there was no consultation. It has just happened.

Senator CARR—You are also saying, though, that this will have a profound effect on Indigenous education outcomes in the future. Why do you say that?

Mrs Talbot—It will have an effect until it picks up again and until everyone understands the new system. With ASSPA, with tuition during school hours where you employ Indigenous people, you have Indigenous involvement in your school and you get the children to school, so you have parental involvement. When you have parental involvement, you are going to get the kids to school. When you have things set in place such as a reward system—projects and things like that—for the kids coming to school then of course you are going to have better outcomes than if you have not got those support things in place in schools. That is what that is relating to. It is saying that you have to have the structure there; otherwise, the building is going to fall down. The structures are there. They might not be working as well as they could work but they are in place. The building has crumbled. I suppose it is just a matter of rebuilding it or building it into the proposal that is now in place for the PSPI. That is my understanding.

CHAIR—I want to ask one question before I go to Senator Allison. Mrs Talbot, if I was a DEST official now and I wanted to speak to Indigenous parents in a local primary school in town, how would I do that? Is there a formal structure I could approach? Would I need to go to the principal or the school council? What happens?

Mrs Talbot—You would go to the AIEWs in schools. Apart from that, I do not know who you would go to, because there are no more chairpeople of ASSPAs. In our school, we have not heard from our field officer since Christmas. The field officers have all disappeared. I am sure they are there but we have not heard from them. We have struggled with our concept plan, trying to work with the one parent who will come forward. I honestly do not know the answer to that question.

CHAIR—The very first goal of the 21 goals of the Aboriginal education program, before it was renamed ISEP back in 1990, was to try and encourage more Indigenous parents to participate in their child's schooling.

Mr Stanley—Yes.

CHAIR—You are obviously aware of that. Do you feel the government has walked away from that goal?

Mrs Talbot—Absolutely. Normally if they wanted to meet with the parents of Indigenous students they would go through the chairperson of our ASSPA, who would then organise something and they would come down. That structure is not there anymore. I know that in our particular school our parents do not want to know about this concept plan. It is: 'We'll just get on with the schooling.' The core business is to school these children, but where these programs come in is as a supplementary benefit, and that supplementary benefit puts our parents into schools and gets our kids to school. That is an important issue. The core business is good—we can do the core business in schools—but the supplementary programs enable us to get the parents into school, which gets the kids to school, which then produces the outcomes.

CHAIR—And that is what you believe is being eroded now?

Mrs Talbot—Yes, absolutely.

Senator ALLISON—I want to pick up on that point as well. You referred to a report—although I could not actually find the reference to it—that suggests that after 13 years of operation of the ASSPA program there is negligible evidence of improving educational outcome. If you could remind me what report that was that would be useful.

Mrs Talbot—Apparently there was a study done that said that there is negligible—

Senator ALLISON—So you dispute that?

Mrs Talbot—I would dispute that because if we go back 13 years to baseline statistics, as opposed to what we actually have in schools now, it has to have improved. Even when we look statistically at the number of Indigenous students that have gone through year 12, it has to have improved. It has gone from a baseline of very little to an improvement in some way. Something

has to be working. From my own involvement in ASSPA for 13 years and being a parent of Indigenous students, I can see major benefits that have happened because of it. They might not be magnificent, but they are certainly happening. When you look at the historical context of Indigenous education within Australia, 13 years is not a long time in which to see great outcomes. As I say, looking historically at Indigenous education and the lack of it 30 years ago, 13 years is certainly not a long time to allow for the outcomes.

Senator ALLISON—You criticised this as a competitive approach that is going to mean that some will miss out. Is it your understanding that there will be some schools that prepare their concept plans that will miss out altogether, or is this another of the unknowns?

Mrs Talbot—It is an unknown area. You may have a major school with one parent that can work really well with that school, if that school has the time to put in—because it is a time factor as well. Principals and support staff are busy and someone has to put the time into these concept plans. The concept plan alone was a nightmare for schools. We do not know the outcome. There is no feedback from DEST as to what the outcome will be.

Senator ALLISON—We heard this morning that at least one school that someone knows about had 11 of the points in their concept plan crossed out as being ineligible for funding. Have you had your concept—

Mrs Talbot—Our concept plan has not come back as yet. The word was out and it was in writing that you needed to get your concept plan in before a certain date, and those dates changed all the time. But I know of four schools that submitted in the first round—they had obviously worked on the plans over the holidays—and had them returned. They were asked to redo them, although the concept plan was supposed to be a very simple, basic—

Senator ALLISON—So more detail was requested, I think you are saying.

Mrs Talbot—More detail was requested.

Senator ALLISON—We heard earlier that there is some question mark over whether nutrition programs will be in or out and some argy-bargy going on at present.

Mrs Talbot—Meanwhile, it is week six and our children have no nutrition during school hours—and it is not going to happen for a very long time, obviously. Meanwhile, there are no parents involved in any projects. We cannot work towards any projects, even things that are in the concept plan, because it is the unknown.

Senator ALLISON—And at your school, the school prepared the concept plan with the involvement of one parent. Is that correct?

Mrs Talbot—That is correct.

Senator ALLISON—Is that typical?

Mrs Talbot—No.

Mr Stanley—No.

Senator ALLISON—I mean in other schools. Is this the experience they are having as well—the best you can do is drag somebody in?

Mr Stanley—They come to the Indigenous education workers as their point of contact. They are the ones that have contact with people that they can call in at the drop of a hat to sit down and talk with the principal and the IEWs.

Senator ALLISON—So you would not be surprised if most schools prepared the concept plan and called in a token Indigenous parent who then had a look at it and said, ‘Yes, that is okay; I will put my name to it.’ Do you reckon that would be a fairly typical process?

Mrs Talbot—In my personal opinion I believe that is very likely to happen. I am not saying that that is going to be typical, but I could imagine that that is what will happen in some schools.

Senator ALLISON—It was also suggested to us this morning that the important part of the partnership, if you like, with Indigenous parents, and the reason that many of them will come along and be involved in this, is that they are involved in actual decision making about money for particular projects. Is there a process that is akin to that with these concept plans? Is it possible to have a committee that determines how funding is spent under these guidelines?

Mrs Talbot—The guidelines are so vague, and that is the problem. Parents put in ideas and we know what they want, but until we get feedback we do not know what is going to be accepted. We started our concept plan last year. Parents have ideas and projects that they are quite comfortable with, and they will work with the school on Indigenous or cultural projects that they feel the school should be embracing. But we do not know within our school or with DEST what projects are acceptable. They are saying literacy and numeracy outcomes, but—

Senator ALLISON—To your knowledge, has any concept plan in the Northern Territory been accepted yet?

Mrs Talbot—I do not know the answer to that question.

Mr Stanley—From my point of view—and I work with remote community children—we have three stages. In the first stage, we go to the community and talk with the parents of those children who are coming to our school from that community. In the second stage, they come in for a short period of time and are accommodated at the Christian Outreach Centre, and representatives from our school talk with those parents. In the third stage, we meet with parents from urban Palmerston—that is where our school is—and parents from the rural areas. So we have three different levels at this point in time with our concept plan. Those are the three meetings we have with parents to inform them about the changes that are talking place and for them to give us some input on what they want for their children in education.

CHAIR—Mr Faraone, you made a comment in your opening statement about breakfast programs and nutrition programs at Bathurst Island. There seems to be a bit of a debate raging out whether or not that could be considered to be linked to educational outcomes. What is your view about that, given that you have had some hands-on experience?

Mr Faraone—Basically, if kids are hungry, they are worrying about filling their tummies before they are worrying about any education. We have found that, with breakfast in the mornings, the kids come into school and go into the class with full bellies. Usually it is toast or cereal and an egg—and we always call the egg ‘brain food’—to get them going in the mornings. At recess, the kids will often hang around and say, ‘Sir, I’m hungry; I’m going here’ or ‘I’m going there.’ When I say, ‘No, there is recess food here; come and get it,’ they will eat and stay at school. So it is a huge incentive for kids to stay at school throughout the day.

CHAIR—So you would say it is directly linked to the retention rates in the school you have taught at?

Mr Faraone—Directly, yes.

CHAIR—If you were asked your professional opinion about whether it provides an educational outcome, what would you say?

Mr Faraone—I would say it contributes towards educational outcomes. It is quite significant. A lot of the people in town finish work around lunchtime, and the kids will want to go off and have lunch. But if there is lunch at school, the kids are more likely to stay on. We noticed on days when the barge had not come and there was not as much breakfast as there was the day before that the numbers would be quite different.

CHAIR—Mr Stanley, Mrs Talbot and Mr Faraone, thank you very much for giving up your time and coming today to meet the committee. We appreciate it.

[3.57 p.m.]

GRIFFITHS, Dr William Robert, Director, Catholic Education Office

MURPHY, Sister Philippa Mary, School Principal, St John's College, Catholic Education Office

MURRAY, Ms Frances, Coordinator, Curriculum and Indigenous Education, Catholic Education Office

CHAIR—I welcome our next witnesses from the Catholic Education Office. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public. It will consider any request for all or part of evidence to be given in camera—that is, in private. Would you like to start by making an opening statement? When you have finished, we will go to questions.

Dr Griffiths—We have prepared a brief statement. There are 15 schools in the Catholic network in the Territory. Of the 5,000 or so students in those schools, about 1,500 are Indigenous. That is a very substantial proportion. Five of those schools are in four remote communities, so they have a specific educational agenda. St John's College in Darwin here is home to 180-odd secondary-aged students from remote communities. Of our town schools, you would have heard Mr Jim Stanley talking about his school, where there are 80-odd Indigenous students out of 400. There is another school in Darwin with a high proportion of Indigenous students. In our school in Alice Springs, again, there are a lot of Indigenous kids, particularly in the bottom end of the school.

Our experience in Indigenous education is rich and varied. Our commitment is strong and purposeful. We are pleased to be invited here. Sister Philippa has a particular interest with regard to boarding students. We have issues, perhaps, to raise with regard to ITAS and the new Commonwealth suite in particular. We are pleased to open this up for discussion and answer your questions.

CHAIR—Sister Murphy or Ms Murray, did you want to say anything, or are you happy to go to questions?

Sister Murphy—I am happy to go to questions.

Senator CARR—What do you say to the proposition that the changes to the ASSPA committees will in fact lead to a reduction in the level of parental involvement, particularly in primary schools?

Dr Griffiths—I think ASSPA committees have been very strong in many of our schools; in other schools, not quite so strong. I think they have provided a specifically Indigenous focus—which might be missing under the new arrangements—where there is a partnership between the school and the community. I will keep an open mind myself. We are a little bit handicapped because of the slow pick-up under the new scheme. That is not to blame anybody, but with the federal election last year, while we saw the paperwork in July, there was not much action from

the bureaucracy until the end of November. So we are a little bit behind. I think it is very important that that focus is there and that capacity is there. I will keep an open mind until we see how PSPI goes.

Sister Murphy—Could I make a comment on that. With PSPI I would like to see—and I have not seen it yet, because it is still new, but I am hoping that with some more discussions it might happen—it still enable us to have the relationship with parents from remote communities that we have now. In the past, we could fly parents in for special occasions and meetings. That is one thing that I would like to see, because I think it is important for the retention rate of senior students to have parents involved in significant events in the college.

Senator CARR—You say that you would like to see people flown in. Why don't you know?

Sister Murphy—We have not heard yet. I have not heard that that has been accepted. I have heard that other things have been accepted. If it is not accepted, then we will go to further discussion, because I see that as something that is crucial.

Senator CARR—I must say that I am surprised. I do not buy this caretaker argument as an excuse for failure to consult. I say that to you up front. There is a standard procedure under the caretaker conventions. If the department wish to continue with a policy that they believe to be controversial, they get the agreement of the opposition at the time. I just cannot believe that the opposition, my colleagues, would say that the consultation should cease on something as important as this. Putting that aside, I would argue that it was not necessary. This is an implementation of an announced policy. I just do not think that caretaker conventions are a satisfactory explanation for the failure to consult. Then we see the series of meetings that occurred last year—again, it is leaving it very late in the piece. You are telling me that, at this stage in the year—how many weeks have schools been back in the Northern Territory—

Dr Griffiths—Five.

Senator CARR—Five weeks back, and you still do not know which activities are funded and which are not funded under these arrangements. By any description, that is a monumental bungle.

Dr Griffiths—The Catholic sector has obviously had to use its initiative, and we have gone ahead and funded programs that were funded under last year's Indigenous education suite. Among those are NIELNS projects in Alice Springs and at St John's College. We have advanced money to two of our schools under what will be the new ITAS, because they cannot function without it. So we have grasped the nettle, and we live in hope that it will all come together. I think we have been proactive there.

The main issue for us, I think, is ITAS in particular and the SRA money that will come, because that is the bulk of the funding that flows to our schools. Also, we would be disappointed if there were not a lot of NIELNS money left, because we did have a number of quite successful projects with the money that came out of that scheme last time. We will keep those projects going no matter what, but a bit of support would be a help for us. We have no treasury to lean on to obtain extra funds. If we want to get something going, we have to make allowances elsewhere to have that happen.

Senator CARR—You have had some experience at administration of the Catholic school system, so you have been through a number of funding agreements now with the changeover of the SES model and the policy positions that this government has taken since 1996. Have you ever seen anything like this?

Dr Griffiths—One sees a whole variety of things in my seat.

Senator CARR—It is five weeks after the commencement of the term.

Dr Griffiths—From my perspective, there was a round of consultations in July-August, I believe—I will have to check my diary. Is that right?

Ms Murray—Yes.

Dr Griffiths—As far as I can work out, as a provider, not a great deal has shifted in the minister's view as expressed in the guidelines. I understand—although I am not really up to speed with this—that there were consultations among ASSPA groups in 2003 with regard to the future of the program. I am not out to criticise the department or the government. I am a little bit anxious, as you would expect, about it being the fifth week—actually, this is the sixth week. But we believe the intention is there. We have to work together on the actuality to make it happen.

Senator CARR—Your tolerance is commendable.

Dr Griffiths—I am broke as well.

Senator CARR—That is exactly right—and that does not pay the bills.

Dr Griffiths—I have had to put out approximately three-quarters of a million dollars to keep programs going—and I am not saying that out of malice or pride.

Senator CARR—I understand that.

Dr Griffiths—I believe that a lot of that will come back in the wash. But we live in suspension—you are quite right.

Senator CARR—I know that you have an ongoing relationship, which you want to preserve, with Commonwealth officials. I do not have that problem. If they do not want an ongoing relationship with this committee, that is bad luck—because they have got one. I say to you that it is our responsibility to draw these matters out. Frankly, if we have what appears to be thousands of students disadvantaged, across the systems in this jurisdiction, and millions of dollars not being allocated, then there is the potential for very serious effects on the future life chances of many Australian citizens. I reckon we are entitled to be a bit upset if there is a bit of bureaucratic bungling. There is always an argument about who is responsible—the Territory officials or the Commonwealth officials—but what we undoubtedly have here is bureaucratic bungling.

Dr Griffiths—I am sure that your views are worth recording and listening to.

Senator CARR—They would be a lot more so if we were in government—I know that.

Dr Griffiths—I will have the Catholic systems provide a status application. I believe it is ready to go in tomorrow or the day after. I hope that will give us access to ITAS money, at least, and to the PSPI stuff, when it comes on, and I am grateful for that. Yes, in the best of all possible worlds it could have been smoother. I would have to say we have some concerns that, at the end of the day, we might not have as much, under the suite of supplementary funding programs, as we would have had last year.

Senator CARR—By what measure?

Dr Griffiths—Inside that are the problems with what are, if you like, the punitive, negative or focused aspects of the new ITAS, which mean we are picking up kids in year 4, year 6 and year 8 who have missed out on the benchmarks.

Senator CARR—Yes.

Dr Griffiths—I think that is difficult for us, although we are allowed to be more flexible with the way the money is used. The cost of those programs has shifted to the provider, which is a cost to us as well, and we will have to work out what that means. With regard to the boarding school at St Johns, there is a cohort of children, particularly in year 8 and year 9, that are simply forgotten—

Sister Murphy—And they are boarding, so they need tutoring.

Dr Griffiths—and for whom there is no funding. We would hope to get funding through PSPI or something.

Senator CARR—You have mentioned a number of factors. What is the net effect in terms of the Catholic commission's obligations? What does it mean to you financially?

Dr Griffiths—We do not have a final figure on it. I have told you what I have had to put out, by way of what I presume to be reasonable management structures, just to keep good programs going, in the reasonable expectation that the funding will flow for that, back to the beginning of the current school year. The intent of the legislation seems to me, in principle, to move more money to remote and very remote areas, and I have to encourage that. But again the proof is in the pudding—in the eating—and we have not seen that yet. But the dust is still settling.

Senator CARR—And you say that the boarding schools are neglected entirely?

Sister Murphy—In some areas, for some groups, we had ITAS tutoring last year, so you were guaranteed of bulk funding and you knew that you could provide tutors for every single student to help them with schoolwork during the evening. However, at this stage that has not been approved. So, as Bill was saying, they have just given us money to run something for the students, hoping that, at some stage, something will come through the government. But, even in that, there are groups that have missed out, so you have to apply to some other funding agency to get the total funding. So I suppose that, as a boarding school, it would be good to have some guarantee that you would have funded tutoring for a period of time so you would know that, for the next three years, you could offer tutoring to your Indigenous students. Without it, there is no point in having the option of a boarding school.

Senator CARR—How many students would be affected in that way?

Sister Murphy—We would have 180.

Ms Murray—Further to that, may I explore some of the gaps for primary aged students, particularly early childhood students. These are gaps that are created by the funding formula. As Bill mentioned, the children who have failed the benchmarks in years 3, 5 and 7 get subsequent tutoring in years 4, 6 and 8. By definition, that leaves out all the early childhood years for tutoring support. That is okay on one level, in that we believe that we are allowed to be flexible with the dollars we attract in at the school level to include the cohort of students but cover other students as well. However, where that falls down, I feel, is in urban schools in the Top End—probably North Queensland and north WA have the same issues.

This decision has a very southern Australian perspective about it, in that it is presumed that most kids in urban schools speak English, or close to it, as a first language, and come from an urban Indigenous background or history. We have huge numbers of students in our urban schools whose parents come from remote Indigenous Australia and who speak English as a second language. These children are in our urban schools. Having been classified as provincial, as Darwin schools are, they attract funding at half the eligible student rate by the formula but in fact these students are the same as students at Bathurst Island and Port Keats. They just happen to be in our urban schools because they live in town camps such as in Alice Springs or out near Palmerston. So the same student group is being discriminated against because of where they find themselves temporarily—two or three years of living in a town camp, for example. I do not think that the picture of Indigenous Australia in the top of Australia is actually mirrored in the funding formula.

Dr Griffiths—We had this argument with the last quadrennial program. Nearly every one of the 180-odd students at St Johns is from a remote community but they only attract funding as though they were Darwin residents. The argument would be that somehow the school has resources to back that up, being in a town. But a place like St Johns has a very unglamorous SES rating and it does not have many resources apart from what it can get from the government. That is an anomaly, as Fran was saying. A lot of the students that end up in Catholic schools in the Territory, whether in Alice Springs or in the Top End, have education issues that are rooted back where they come from, and that is not reflected in the funding, nor was it in the last agreement either. It is an ongoing argument that we, as the Catholic sector across the country, have with the Commonwealth.

CHAIR—What is the SES score at St Johns?

Dr Griffiths—It is old category 12, whatever that is. The system is 11. It is the highest on the old scale. I just cannot give you the number off the top of my head.

Senator CARR—It is the lowest socioeconomic—

Dr Griffiths—Yes, it is the one that warrants the greatest level of subsidy.

Senator CARR—That is right. It is one of the poorest communities in the country.

Dr Griffiths—As you would expect, given the student enrolment, the SES reflects that they come from unglamorous places—ordinary places.

Senator ALLISON—How are you managing the concept plans in your schools? Are you taking a centralist approach? Are you managing to involve Indigenous parents in the development of the plans?

Dr Griffiths—Individual schools are taking up the cudgels. We have not involved people at this stage in putting in central plans, although there have been some discussions at central level about what we might do collectively. It is still early days. We will be looking for the option to run two- and three-year programs, which is allowed under the new legislation for PSPI. My feeling is that there is a bit of confusion and perhaps disillusionment in the school area because of people being encouraged to apply for very significant amounts of money that I do not think they are going to get, given that there would be only \$4½ million, we hear. We have PSPI, which is old ASSPA plus VEGAS, in the Territory, so there is no increase in funding overall. Some expectations have been unrealistically lifted. We have said to schools: ‘Look at what you got under ASSPA. You should be thinking about that in terms of the dollar value and how you might then write that up in discussions with your community.’ I think some communities have got very excited about the prospect of very large amounts of money that are not going to be there.

Senator ALLISON—Why would they develop that excitement, as you term it?

Dr Griffiths—I do not know; you would have to consult with them. That is just a feeling I get in conversation around town.

Senator ALLISON—So, having moved from a per capita, per student, dollar amount, now anything seems possible?

Dr Griffiths—That is the uncertainty: while I might have got \$30,000 last year, I might get nothing next year, or I might get \$30,000 or \$45,000 that I have applied for. I do not know. It is about the move from the security, if you like, of the per capita allocation to the insecurity of having to compete with everybody, particularly those with a bit more shine to the apple, as it were—those who have a bit more skill in putting submissions together, which I clearly do not have.

Senator ALLISON—Can I press you on the question of how real or tokenistic the involvement of Indigenous parents is in the new process.

Sister Murphy—At our school we had our local parents, but there was difficulty, because of the time limits, in coming in after the holidays. We could not fly in parents in time to have a meeting—which is what we normally do for ASSPA—because our students come from over 40 communities around the Northern Territory and Western Australia. We usually try and get a representative of that group, but we were not able to do that. The other thing is that we do not know if we are going to be funded for that.

Senator ALLISON—So would it be fair to say that your schools drafted concept plans without a lot of input from parents?

Sister Murphy—That is right. We faxed them through to the communities. Again, it was because of time and trying to get faxes through to make them understand that there were some difficulties.

Dr Griffiths—To get the money flowing.

Senator ALLISON—Do you have a direct line of communication with the federal department, as the government does here, and have you expressed concerns about this process and the dangers you see in parents not being as involved as they were previously? If so, what was the response?

Dr Griffiths—We have had a number of detailed briefings from the local DEST office. We have had almost daily conversations about the details in terms of getting our act together, as it were. I have not personally taken up the question of the involvement of Aboriginal parents with anybody in particular, although we had a meeting of principals last week, where it was a concern. As you have no doubt heard, the ASSPA committee was a natural place for Indigenous people to gather. Because it had a few years behind it, it had a momentum, as it were, so these things went from year to year. That could be an issue in some schools; the principals were concerned about that last week.

Senator ALLISON—Did you get the sense that it would not be possible to recreate those kinds of committees and give them some decision-making capacity with regard to how that money was spent?

Dr Griffiths—In some of our schools the ASSPA committees were next to useless. In some years they just did not happen. Sometimes it is personalities; sometimes it is people coming and going. They just did not function in some years, or there was token attendance. The fluidity of the population and the range of issues people have to deal with are also factors. While we can see some benefit in how ASSPA has worked in the past, I do not think we should overglorify the way it worked. It was very much about the principal and the Indigenous people being able to maintain their conversation, and that required a lot of effort on both sides.

Senator ALLISON—If that was not a perfect model, could you see ways in which it could have been improved, and do you think the government has gone down that path or got it wrong?

Dr Griffiths—The records show that the Indigenous students in Catholic urban schools—that is, Darwin, Katherine and Alice Springs—by and large are within spitting distance of achieving the benchmarks for attendance, literacy and numeracy of the general population. So I take that as a sign that we are doing reasonably well in the town schools. In other words, there are networks that are established and functioning in terms of keeping Indigenous people involved in the education process. Our work in remote communities schools is different in degree and nature, because all these people are Indigenous and there is a different social construct and way that you work with people in the bush. So we have a variety of approaches that work from place to place. I am not anxious at all, to be honest, about keeping Indigenous parents involved in our schools, because we will work out a way of doing it. Is that too broad brush?

Ms Murray—I also think that the ASSPA money, compared with the money generated to support student outcomes through ITAS tutoring or the SRA, is minimal; it is a small part of the

buckets of money. The issues are really about the ITAS tutoring money and the SRA—more so than the dollars that ASSPA would have attracted.

Senator ALLISON—The ITAS tutoring does not apply to students that are in grades lower than year 4?

Ms Murray—That is right.

Senator ALLISON—Did it apply previously to those younger students?

Ms Murray—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—Can you tell us how it was used?

Ms Murray—It was upon submission of individual parents for tutoring through DEST. The administration has shifted totally from DEST to providers, which means more work for us. That is not an issue as such, but it is something we have to provide for. More importantly, the formula to attract funding does have some gaps in terms of how you can spread the money over. Our urban schools would be the main issue, in that remote schools could attract sufficient funding to do things with. Our urban schools, with a minority of Indigenous students who need tutorial support, are likely to get a few thousand dollars to spread across 86 children for tutoring. That is where the gaps are. In my previous point I said that Darwin urban schools are the same as Sydney urban schools or anywhere else.

The other gap is that children who have participated in the Multilevel Assessment Program for the benchmarks only attract funding if they fail. We have many students who, through no fault of their own—their families are out bush for the months of August and September over the three-week period that the MAP is implemented—are not around. Schools do their best to find the kids and sometimes they cannot. In that three-week period they are not there. There might be double or triple the number of kids who have participated at a school. Therefore, they are an invisible figure for the ITAS funding. That is an issue in itself.

Senator ALLISON—Is there a perverse incentive if the funding is geared to failure? What the committee has been told in the past is that you are going to get blobs and bumps—that is, people get assistance, they pass the test and do not get assistance again, then they wait and next year do not pass.

Ms Murray—Pedagogically, it is unsound. We are looking at administratively delivering money, not at educational programs. It is a funding formula.

Senator CARR—It is a strange thing to say about the education department though.

Ms Murray—It is a funding formula. What schools do with it, we would insist, would be educationally sound, with a bit of flexibility thrown in. Going back to the original point: for our remote schools, it is not such an issue, in that the amount of dollars they attract will enable them to do something. Under the funding formula, the urban schools, given their geolocation, will not be able to do something to cater for their range of kids, from transition to year 7, who need tutoring.

Senator ALLISON—So that is just a lack of understanding on the part of the department, from your perspective.

Dr Griffiths—Those are the rules.

Senator ALLISON—The rules are made by someone who does not understand—

Dr Griffiths—The rules are in the legislation.

Senator ALLISON—Indeed, but devised by government—bureaucrats or whatever—which did not understand the situation here in the Territory.

Ms Murray—It would be nice to think that another piece of legislation might come in to cover the gaps—some alternative.

Dr Griffiths—They are not regulations, they are law—that is what I am saying.

Senator ALLISON—I understand.

CHAIR—Ms Murray, when you say it is ‘unsound’, given your extensive background and history do you have some research or papers that you can provide to the committee to show us that the money is possibly calculated and targeted at the wrong age in a child’s developmental stages?

Ms Murray—Not as such, because it is a new formula. I am just picking up Senator Allison’s point that it seems to be targeted at failure rather than at potential success. I think that is an issue. That is pretty obvious, and we all know that. Technically, I do not think any schools would do this, but if schools wanted to keep attracting money they would keep their children failing, wouldn’t they? But I am sure no teachers would ever do that; they would not want to do that. It is flawed to have to deal with this system.

CHAIR—I will be interested to know whether you have some schools in your system that are like this. We have a situation at Amanbidji, where 11 of the 13 kids have passed year 3 tests, so we have technically two students who will attract tutoring funding. It has been put to us that the principal thinks it is highly unlikely that the other 11 will pass year 5 unless they get continued assistance. Is that a concern that your schools have raised with you?

Ms Murray—Yes, and you could see that in the generic benchmarking data anyway, before this funding model came out. As school years go up it is tougher to get through the benchmarks. So, yes, it is a concern.

Dr Griffiths—There is the funding-generating mechanism over here—good and bad but it generates X students Y dollars for so many weeks of the year. In the classroom we will use that flexibly—I think with the department’s approval but even without the department’s approval we will use it flexibly.

Senator CARR—You would ignore the guidelines. Is that what you are saying?

Dr Griffiths—No. I believe the guidelines do not tell us exactly how to use the money; the guidelines show us how the money will be generated and how we must account for it.

CHAIR—Did you want that bit in camera!

Senator CARR—Do you run tutorials on how to get around DEST?

Dr Griffiths—I have found that the local officials have been very open to the word ‘flexibility’. If 11 kids in your class do not qualify and two do, obviously the person who goes in will do what is required.

CHAIR—Did your office have a chance to have any input to the review of the IEDA program? There were only 62 responses to the discussion paper.

Dr Griffiths—I honestly do not know; I was on long service leave last year.

Ms Murray—There were Darwin based consultation meetings that we were invited to. We gave verbal feedback.

CHAIR—But no written feedback on this?

Ms Murray—I think that notes were taken at all the meetings.

CHAIR—I am trying to track who were the 62 who responded. I have not yet found anyone in the Territory who put in a written response other than the Northern Territory government. I want to talk about ASSPA committees. I know that in the scheme of things it is a small bucket of money but it is the major area through which Indigenous parents participate in the school and what happens in the school. Dr Griffiths, have you any examples of where in your schools ASSPA committees have been a success and have achieved increased parent participation?

Dr Griffiths—Yes. There are schools—and all of our schools at some stage, I would hazard—in the last 30 years of the program that have had success through active and vigorous ASSPA committees. If you wanted that in writing, it would take me a while, but we could produce that information. I do not know whether we have a consistency year after year in every school, for the reasons I talked about a moment ago, but there is no doubt that it has provided a focus and a locus where Indigenous parents have felt comfortable and able to come in and make a contribution to what you might call education policy, if you like, or the way the school is run. I do not dispute that at all.

CHAIR—What has been the situation at St Johns in previous years?

Sister Murphy—We have used funding—both ASSPA and VEGAS funding—to fly parents in from communities so that we could have a good representation of all the students at the college, and we also invited local parents in. I would go and say hello, welcome them, and then they would conduct their meeting, usually outside where parents were comfortable, and after the meeting we would meet for dinner. It was very much controlled by them and they decided what they saw as the educational need for students, but not only for their own children; they were looking particularly at senior Indigenous students. At the moment we have about 87 whom I feel

could be affected by what is going on with the funding because of the ITAS tutoring and because of NLNAS being—I do not know what has happened to it. So the parents had a very active role. We always tie in our ASSPA meetings with some other functions for the year 12s—a presentation ball that parents will come to or maybe a parent-teacher night or a cultural festival at the school.

CHAIR—How many times a year would you be able to get them to come in?

Sister Murphy—Once a term.

CHAIR—Four times a year?

Sister Murphy—Yes, and we tie it in with something else that is happening at the school.

CHAIR—So they get to look at where their kids go to school.

Sister Murphy—We also have a reconciliation week, so they will run different cultural workshops for the other students in the school. That is the only concern I have with the PSPI, because I am not sure that there is a really good understanding of the role of the parents in helping us to retain students to year 12.

CHAIR—Has your concept plan tried to encapsulate that again?

Sister Murphy—It has, but that has not been approved at this stage.

CHAIR—So we will have to wait and see.

Dr Griffiths—You can see the difficulty with 40 communities. How do you get a signature, let alone an agreement?

Sister Murphy—As I said, we faxed it, but it is pretty hard to get information back. That is a problem, unless you actually get them in, and how do we get them in without the funding?

CHAIR—Yes, exactly. Do you want to add anything else as a concluding statement?

Dr Griffiths—Just to put on the record our appreciation of the NIELNS money.

Sister Murphy—It has run two successful programs for our senior students. The school to work transition program is very successful. We even have students returning. This week we have had a few from last year's year 12 seeking employment in Darwin with the help of the coordinator. There is also the literacy program for senior students, which has helped them complete year 12.

CHAIR—Which program is that?

Sister Murphy—There are two: a school to work transition program for senior students and a literacy program for senior students, to get them to year 12.

CHAIR—Was that previously funded under VEGAS?

Dr Griffiths—Under NIELNS.

Ms Murray—The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Sister Murphy—We are just waiting to see what happens with that, but we are still running it with the assistance of the Catholic Education Office.

Ms Murray—We believe that comes under non-capital grants in the new round, but there is no clear word on the money available.

CHAIR—Dr Griffiths, DEST, as a provider, is directly negotiating with you on behalf of the Catholic education system—is that correct?

Dr Griffiths—Yes, although, with regard to those projects, I simply have to decide to keep them going, because I cannot let them slip. Overall, I feel that there will be very little money left at the end of the day for NIELNS. That is how I feel; I could not demonstrate that. We have put in a whole suite of programs because, I have to say, some of the NIELNS programs we got funding for three or four years ago did not work. There are those two programs, one at O’Laughlin for senior Indigenous literacy and one at Alice Springs for ditto, and an early childhood learning centre for Indigenous mothers and three-year-olds—year 1, minus 2 sort of stuff—which has been very successful. It is run in a building just across the road from Bath Street. The point I am trying to make is that I think that experimental money, or that ‘let’s have a go’ money, is gone. If only the Commonwealth were able to help us have a go at a few new ideas. I am not sure that is under the new suite of programs.

Sister Murphy—No, it does not look like it.

Dr Griffiths—That experimentation is really important in the profession, as well as in the relationship with Indigenous parents and in trying to pick up new areas of need in what is a very volatile educational world. That is just a general comment. We have really appreciated the federal government’s support through the NIELNS program in the past and hopefully there will be something for us in the new deal.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time.

Sister Murphy—If you have time, I would love for you to come and visit St Johns, if you would like to look around and meet some of the students.

CHAIR—This committee is going to run out of time to do that, but I can take you up on that offer.

Sister Murphy—Thank you.

Committee adjourned at 4.30 p.m.