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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Indigenous education funding arrangements

TUESDAY, 29 MARCH 2005

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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 29 March 2005

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

Substitute members: Senator Allison to replace Senator Stott Despoja for matters relating to the Schools and Training portfolio; Senator Carr to replace Senator Collins for matters relating to education

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 and Crossin

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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Subcommittee met at 2.43 p.m.

COLLARD, Ms Robyn Lee, Coordinator, Aboriginal Education K-12 Team, Catholic Education Office, Western Australia

DULLARD, Mr Ronald Patrick, Director, Catholic Education Office, Western Australia

CHAIR—I open this public hearing of the inquiry into Indigenous education funding arrangements. On 6 October 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 look at how these changes affect the ability of schools to meet the national goals for schooling agreed to in Adelaide in 1999. In particular, the committee will be considering the effectiveness of partnership arrangements between the Commonwealth and states and territories with particular reference to consultation and negotiation of agreements, the effectiveness of DEST administration of funding applications, the relevance of current accountability provisions, issues relating to efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation of public funds and changes made to the processes of parental and community consultation. Witnesses before the committee are protected by parliamentary privilege. This gives them special rights and immunities because people must be able to give evidence to committees 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 the witnesses from the Western Australian Catholic Education Office. Before moving to questions, the committee will give you an opportunity to provide us with a brief statement in which you may put anything you wish on the record or just state why you are here. You can also indicate, if you wish, whether you want any of your evidence to be made in confidence to the committee, and we can make arrangements for that to occur.

Mr Dullard—I might start. As the Director of the Catholic Education Office, I have an overview of what is going on here, but Robyn is the person who is more hands on in terms of the funding for Indigenous education. Senator Carr, you asked if we had a written submission. The answer is no. The first I was aware of this inquiry was a week ago when I was asked whether I would appear, and I said I would. In terms of a general comment, we certainly welcome the funding that goes towards assisting Indigenous education. It is a big help. We actually believe that the funding is so important that we treat it virtually as recurrent funding in the way that we operate our schools. In other words, whilst it is seen as an add-on—which it is—it is so fundamental to the delivery of education to Aboriginal children, particularly in remote and country areas, that we see it as fitting into more of a recurrent funding model. We think the tutorial assistance and all that will be of great benefit. There are difficulties with the lateness of the signing of the agreements, but I think that was complicated by the recent federal election. I think that is probably all I want to say, unless Robyn has something to add.

Ms Collard—No, I will wait until the questions are asked.

Senator CARR—How much money are you receiving from the Commonwealth this year?

Mr Dullard—In terms of Aboriginal money?

Senator CARR—Yes.

Mr Dullard—It is around \$5 million.

Senator CARR—Is that overall?

Mr Dullard—That is about overall.

Senator CARR—Can you tell me how that is divided into the program areas?

Ms Collard—For the parent-school partnerships, we have allocated \$380,000. For in-class tuition, we are not sure about the exact figures at the moment. I could not say what the exact figures are. I am not sure about the IESIP overall. I am pretty sure it is about \$5 million, though.

Senator CARR—Have you had any trouble getting money with regard to the ATAS this year? Has that flowed through to you? Has that already been arranged—is it in the schools?

Ms Collard—Not at this point because that is an agreement that we only put forward last week. Until that funding actually comes through to us, we do not have the go-ahead for any programs.

Senator CARR—You say the agreement was put forward. Is it ready for signing?

Ms Collard—Yes.

Senator CARR—It is now the 10th week of the school year here. Is that right?

Mr Dullard—The eighth.

Senator CARR—Is it usual to receive Commonwealth funding eight weeks into the school year?

Mr Dullard—It is most unusual and, as I said, I believe it has probably been complicated by the election. The agreement should have been signed last year and, as Robyn pointed out, we have only just recently signed it. The negotiations have taken a long time and we still have not received any funding.

Senator CARR—When do you expect to receive the money?

Mr Dullard—That is a good question. I would expect it probably in the next three to four weeks.

Senator CARR—So sometime in the post-12th week of the school year you will receive the money for this year?

Mr Dullard—We are hopeful, yes.

Senator CARR—Why were the negotiations so protracted?

Mr Dullard—That is once again a good question. I think it is partly related to the election that was held in October where for a whole time nothing happened. We have certainly had some difficulty in coming to agreement in terms of targets, and that also takes a bit of time. I think there is a belief that targets should keep on increasing or that the bar should keep on rising, which we agree to, but it should also take into account the local circumstances, and they vary quite dramatically—certainly across Western Australia.

Senator CARR—Can I just take you through that. The policy was announced in August last year, and you are saying that perhaps in May the following year you will get your money. Let us go through the arguments before—

Mr Dullard—Probably April, but yes.

Senator CARR—An election takes six weeks. The caretaker period is six weeks at the outside. Would you be surprised to hear that no approach was made to the opposition to expedite the processing of the guidelines during that time? That is the standard procedure for administrative arrangements for ongoing policy programs to be implemented during the election period where there is any possible difficulty. No approach was made. I think we can dismiss the caretaker issue. The question then boils down to: what administrative blockages were there? You were saying something to do with targets?

Mr Dullard—Robyn can correct me here. I do not think we actually started negotiating the targets until quite late. I really do not know why it was late; I just do not know. But they were late.

Ms Collard—It was late December when we had the first meeting—

Senator CARR—I see.

Ms Collard—to discuss the new arrangements.

Senator CARR—You know what I am like when I hear that people have trouble getting money. I ask them why that is the case—it could be that the Commonwealth public servants are a bit slow off the mark or it could be that you are slow off the mark.

Mr Dullard—I can tell you we are not.

Senator CARR—I have never ever known a Catholic education commission to be slow off the mark, so it does boil down to the question of why the Commonwealth was dragging the chain. Was there a problem with the state administration? Was there a difficulty with the education department?

Mr Dullard—Not that I am aware of.

Ms Collard—No, apart from the late meeting in December. We then met again in January.

Senator CARR—It was the Commonwealth officers who met you in late December?

Ms Collard—No, that was actually in January.

Senator CARR—They did not meet you till January?

Ms Collard—The late December meeting was with the state body.

Senator CARR—Did you raise with them the problem that you could see would arise with the beginning of a new school year without your money? Would you normally raise a matter of concern of that nature?

Ms Collard—That was raised last year with the state office.

Senator CARR—When was that?

Ms Collard—Again, it would have been at that December meeting. We are often in touch with them, explaining that we actually need the money for any of our programs to go ahead. It does put us in a difficult position, particularly with IESIP funding and the arrangements for our Aboriginal teaching assistants in the classrooms.

Senator CARR—So who is funding them at the moment?

Mr Dullard—We are cash flowing.

Senator CARR—So you are filling the gap?

Mr Dullard—Yes. We have not put anybody off for it; there are still—

Senator CARR—How many teachers do you have?

Mr Dullard—In total?

Senator CARR—No, Aboriginal teaching assistants.

Ms Collard—We would have about 100.

Senator CARR—How many students?

Mr Dullard—Aboriginal students?

Senator CARR—Yes.

Mr Dullard—Around three per cent of 65,000. I am sorry; I cannot give you a number, but I can probably work that out quickly.

Senator CARR—Three per cent of the student population.

Mr Dullard—Of our student population, which is about the state average of Aboriginal students.

Senator CARR—Have you seen any improvement in terms of the benchmarking that you have done in recent years?

Mr Dullard—Yes.

Senator CARR—What is the nature of that improvement?

Ms Collard—It is difficult to say, because what has happened in the past is that a lot of our students, particularly in the remote areas, have been exempted from the WALNA testing. Many of them have English as a second language. In terms of the progression, it would be fair to say that it has been about the same, with very small improvements.

Senator CARR—It is just that the guidelines for the ATAS funding have now changed. You can fund only on the basis of people not reaching benchmark standards.

Ms Collard—That is correct.

Senator CARR—What is your response to those changed guidelines?

Ms Collard—Because a lot of our students in the past have not completed the WALNA testing here in WA, it means that there will be students who will miss out on funding for the in-class tuition. We could be severely underrating the funding that is actually needed for the Catholic Education Office.

Senator CARR—How many students would miss out?

Ms Collard—I could not give you an exact figure. What has also happened in the past in the Kimberleys in particular is that the crop festival has been on at the same time as the WALNA testing in schools, which means that students are not in the school to actually do their testing. That has changed for this year.

Senator CARR—How are the parents' committees being funded at the moment?

Ms Collard—They are not.

Senator CARR—So what is happening?

Ms Collard—We are actually in the process of doing the first round of concept plans and schools are applying. But the first round of concept plans was in late January before school even went back and before the implementation of the programs. At this point in time, ASSPA committees are not being funded for any of their programs. I have had quite a number of schools within the Catholic Education Office system asking what is happening with that.

Senator CARR—In how many schools did you have ASSPA committees engaged in educational work?

Ms Collard—They are in all of those in the Kimberleys, which would be 12 schools. In the Pilbara we have about five. Then, of course, you have the metropolitan schools. There are a few down in the Bunbury region, but there would not be very many.

Senator CARR—So overall, would you be able to give me a rough indication of what you think the number would be?

Ms Collard—It would be between 20 and 30.

Senator CARR—Are those committees still operating if they are not being funded?

Ms Collard—The parent-school partnerships have to operate to do the concept plan. There will be some that have their applications in. Even with this round of applications, the funding will not be available until third term. There is another process in which applications will be called for after the concept plans have been prioritised.

Senator CARR—This is extraordinary. In the Northern Territory I was struck with the number of people who said to us, ‘These programs are really important as an incentive to get kids to come to school.’ They are providing basic dental programs in some places and food programs. They are a really important way of engaging parents in the community. It also struck me as odd that, while the government are talking about Indigenous affairs more generally, saying they now want to devolve responsibilities and talk to local communities, they are taking away the important underpinnings of community consultation. The school-parent committee, I would say, would be a really important one. How are you finding the loss of those sorts of services—for example, the dental and food programs—which are the basic incentives for people to come to school?

Ms Collard—Just to give you an example, the previous funding for ASSPA for St Mary’s school in Broome would have been in the vicinity of \$100,000 a year because of the high student number. Across the Kimberley and the Pilbara, which would take in about 18 of our schools, we now have \$270,000 to share out. I am just using that as an example. I think the amount of ASSPA money is a lot lower than schools have had access to previously.

Senator CARR—What is the effect, though, of losing that money?

Ms Collard—It means that some of those programs are not happening, particularly the tutoring program. There is nothing in place as yet, apart from what the Catholic system has in place and the programs that we are running in the schools regardless.

Senator CARR—Will that have an effect on attendance?

Ms Collard—It will. If students are not coping in the classroom—if they are not coping with the basics such as literacy and numeracy or any of the other programs that go with their schooling, whether it is the nutrition program or whether they have attendance strategies—they are less likely to attend school. These are the things that actually get kids to come to school. If they feel a part of it and they are coping okay then they will come, but if these things are not in place then it just makes it that little bit more difficult to attend.

Senator CARR—Will it have an effect on the relationship between local communities and the school if there are fewer parents involved?

Ms Collard—What you will find is that there will always only be a certain number of parents who will want to participate in the school program and it is usually the same parents that are participating regardless. We are actually putting more pressure on them to be involved in the school.

Senator CARR—If you are a clever public servant, you might say: ‘These same people are going to front up anyway. Why do we have to pay money?’

Ms Collard—In what way?

Senator CARR—They are providing assistance for programming. This is a wholly Commonwealth funded program. You cannot blame the states and you cannot blame the Catholic Education Office for this one; it is entirely with the Commonwealth. If there is less money available for nutrition programs or for tutoring programs then parents will have less to work with, but they will still do it, won’t they? They will still have a crack at it.

Ms Collard—That should not be taken away from the ethos of our schools, which is to look after those students and make sure that they get an education. It makes it a little harder, but we do not want that to be seen as only the responsibility of one body. This is a part of it. We should be looking more holistically at supporting those students; it is not just the educative side. Also, we do not know very much about the Indigenous coordination centres that have been set up. A lot of the schools do not know what they are about or what they do.

Senator CARR—I am not surprised; they do not seem to have much of an idea themselves about what they are doing. There does not seem to be a lot of material coming forward from within the public service about the role of the ICCs and the shared responsibility agreements as well. There is no clear definition of those; there is no clear understanding of where they are going. All of that will be a period of great confusion. That is what surprises me. Why would you take the parent support away now when there is all this confusion around with the destruction of ATSIC and with these new administrative systems running, which very few people seem to understand. If you look at the *Financial Review* today, it would appear that not even the senior levels of the public service have a clear grasp of what is happening.

Ms Collard—The confused state of things has come out quite clearly. Because we have got two programs that have come out in 2005, and they are both new, people are getting their wires crossed with the guidelines for them. With the Aboriginal teaching assistance program, staff in our office have to keep going back and looking at the guidelines to make sure that we are not getting the two programs confused. That is partly why we did not take on the tutoring for years 10, 11 and 12. We figured that, if another program had come out, it means that there are three and it will create even more confusion. We wanted to try and keep it to just the two programs for this year.

CHAIR—Can you clarify for me some of the issues you raised? Ms Collard, when you said you have \$270,000 to share out amongst ASSPA committees—

Ms Collard—Only in the remote areas.

CHAIR—Yes, but my understanding is that concept plans are put into DEST and DEST officials look at the concept plans. Is the Catholic Education Office involved in the committee looking at the concept plans?

Ms Collard—Yes. The regional Catholic education Aboriginal committees will each have working parties and they will be prioritising the concept plans with their regional DEST officers.

Mr Dullard—In putting in those plans, I think it is fair to say that there is no ceiling on them.

Ms Collard—There has not been.

Mr Dullard—And that is going to cause some difficulty when we find out the exact amount of money that is there, because people are putting in—I will not say they are ambit claims—claims that are quite substantial that are then going to be quite—

CHAIR—How do you know you have \$270,000 to share in the remote areas then?

Ms Collard—That came through in a letter a couple of weeks ago.

Mr Dullard—About a week or two weeks ago.

CHAIR—So DEST have already determined how much will be allocated for each region and have put a cap on that?

Ms Collard—Yes.

Senator CARR—So what happened to the merit based process?

Ms Collard—That will come out in the concept plans, I guess.

Senator CARR—I am sure it will.

Ms Collard—And with those concept plans, because it is a competitive process, there will be schools that will miss out on any funding whatsoever.

Senator CARR—They have already allocated a regional breakdown. That is an arbitrary decision. It is not based on any merit assessment.

Mr Dullard—We did not know that, I have to say, when we started talking to schools to put in their concept plans. We had no idea. That came as a bit of a shock to us.

CHAIR—There has been a reduction from \$19 million to \$16 million for the new PSPI schools. That is a figure we extracted from last year's budget estimates. That is \$16 million nationally. The whole aim of this new thrust was to get more resources, as I understood it, out to regional, remote and very remote schools. It would seem that \$270,000 for the Kimberley-

Pilbara region is not a very large amount out of the \$16 million. And you have no idea how the \$270,000 was arrived at?

Ms Collard—No.

CHAIR—You have to share that \$270,000 between 18 schools in that region; is that correct?

Ms Collard—That is correct.

CHAIR—So some schools will obviously miss out or will get less than they have in the past?

Ms Collard—Yes.

Mr Dullard—And certainly less than what they have put in for—probably substantially less.

CHAIR—Have you had any evidence of ASSPA committees not functioning now, of them being disbanded, of people walking away from schools? In the Territory we had evidence that ASSPA committees have sold any assets they had such as fridges and computers—they have given them to the schools or got rid of them. Is there any evidence that ASSPA committees are not functioning?

Ms Collard—If there has been any, it has not come through to me. What has happened is that at a recent community consultant meeting I was informed that there would be schools who would not bother to apply for the funding because it was too much work for too little money.

CHAIR—The in-school tuition is part of your four-year IESIP funding agreement now, isn't it? It is like a schedule or another annexe to the IESIP agreement; is that correct?

Ms Collard—Yes. It is a separate agreement within that. It is funded separately and signed off separately.

CHAIR—Did the Commonwealth make any approaches to you to sign that agreement quite quickly and initially before the rest of the four-year funding agreement was negotiated in order to fast-track the in-school tuition money?

Ms Collard—To be fair, we were asked to do that, but we could not get our WALNA data in time. We only received that recently and we were able to put that together with our application. It would not be fair to say that that has been DEST's problem.

CHAIR—So how many of your Aboriginal students passed the year 3, 5 and 7 tests?

Ms Collard—All I know is the number that did not meet the benchmarks. In each of the regions I think our totals were about 117 in each year level: 117, 113 and 117. I do not think that is a fair snapshot.

CHAIR—That is why you did not reach the year levels.

Ms Collard—That is right.

CHAIR—But do you have statistics of those who might not have been at school on that day?

Mr Dullard—No.

CHAIR—What about these students who you said were exempted from testing?

Mr Dullard—I will just make a comment. For the last two to three years, we have had a concentrated effort to get as many of those students sitting the benchmark testing as possible. That has taken some mind shifts amongst some school teachers and principals who thought that the tests were not culturally relevant and suitable—which is really not the aim of the test. There was a mind-set such that people felt they should exclude students if they did not look as if they would have any hope of passing. That was a silly mind-set, if you do not mind me saying so. We did have a lot of students in the past go away for the CrocFest and various things like that—and they still do. We would have those statistics that we would be able to give to you.

CHAIR—So those students who were exempted from the tests last year have now actually been penalised, because the new funding formula—

Mr Dullard—That is right.

CHAIR—is based on those students who sat and failed, as opposed to those students who never sat at all?

Mr Dullard—That is true. But that should have been minimised last year and this year, compared to what was happening previously. We have had a very conscious effort to try and get that to happen.

CHAIR—Do you know what the amount of in-school tuition that you were handling was, say, last year?

Mr Dullard—No, it would not have been—

CHAIR—No, because it would have come directly from DEST—but do you have an idea of what it was?

Ms Collard—It was about \$260,000. We were running a pilot with six schools, but in five of the schools we were not able to attract a qualified teacher, partly because we did not have the housing infrastructure in those remote communities to house extra teachers. That is always going to be an issue for us in those areas. That is something that we managed to negotiate for this year, in that we would be able to attract local people who could be trained to work as tutors within the schools in those remote areas. Housing may still be a difficult issue in attracting appropriate people.

CHAIR—So you had \$260,000 last year. Do you know how much it will be this year?

Ms Collard—I do not know; I have not done the formula. Our finance people would be able to work that out.

CHAIR—Would you be able to perhaps let us know that amount when you have it?

Mr Dullard—So that is the—

Ms Collard—in-class tuition funding formula.

CHAIR—I will just ask you one last question. Did you think the system was not operating adequately or efficiently last year, so that it warranted such magnificent changes this year? It has been put to us in the Territory that the system was not broken and that they fail to understand why such huge changes were put in place this year.

Mr Dullard—I can understand a position that says that, if you have limited funds, you are going to focus those funds on the most needy. I can understand that as a philosophical position, so I can understand then that the remote and the rural are the most needy. So, if there is going to be a change, we are quite happy philosophically for that to be the major thrust. Equally, again, if the most needy were those who were failing the benchmark testing, we would say that, philosophically, it would make sense to give them the most money. So we did not have a difficulty philosophically with the direction that was being taken. I guess we have had some difficulty in that it is not implemented—we do not quite know where we are at, and we are just marking time, I guess.

Senator CARR—Is it the case that urban Aboriginal communities are necessarily more advantaged than other communities in more remote areas? The evidence we received in the Northern Territory was that many of the conditions were repeated in both urban and non-urban areas. Many of the characteristics of the communities were quite similar. Was it a fair division to give preference to those particular regions at the expense of urban communities?

Mr Dullard—I would like to have money for all of them.

Senator CARR—Since none of them is getting any money at the moment, it is an academic argument, isn't it?

Mr Dullard—I guess my comment would be that it is easier for us to support those Aboriginal students in our metropolitan area than it is to support those in the country areas. The school has more resources. We have more ability to assist those students. There is better modelling. There is a whole range of things. But those students still have their disadvantages. I would say that the people in the remote and country areas are more disadvantaged. The easiest way to say it would be that there are more opportunities.

Ms Collard—Within our system, the students that we have attracted in the metropolitan region are, dare I say it, those who would not have the same sets of issues as those Indigenous students who are attending the government schools. So we have a different cohort of students who attend. Also, the pastoral care and the holistic approach that our schools take in supporting those students, particularly in the metropolitan regions, is far better than we are able to offer in the remote regions. Apart from that, we also have the healthcare card for students to access

Catholic schools in WA now. That is an offer for those students in the city particularly to attend. We also offer a number of scholarships through the Catholic Education Office in conjunction with those schools that can support them. There is an acknowledgement that the issues amongst our kids, both in the city and in the remote areas, are very similar; it is just that our system does not have them within our schools at this point.

Senator ALLISON—I want to come back to the tutorial assistance program and ask you about your negotiations and what they delivered. For instance, were you able to persuade the Commonwealth department that tutorial assistance should be available to students outside year 4, year 6 and year 8?

Ms Collard—No. This is a question that I keep asking my colleagues. There is no tutorial assistance whatsoever for year 9 students or to year 8 students, apart from those who have not reached the benchmarks.

Senator ALLISON—So your understanding is that you are only able to provide tutorial assistance from this program to those students in those levels who have been tested?

Ms Collard—Yes, and who have not reached the benchmarks. So there is no tutorial assistance for those students who may be struggling in particular subjects in year 8 or year 9.

Senator ALLISON—Or year 11 or 12, if you have any of those.

Ms Collard—No. Years 10, 11 and 12 do have access to tutorial assistance, and it does not have to be in special needs areas.

Senator ALLISON—Is that through this program or through another program?

Ms Collard—That is through another program. There are two separate programs here: in-class tuition for years 4, 6 and 8; and tutorial assistance for years 10, 11 and 12.

Senator ALLISON—Is that part of this package?

Ms Collard—No, the second one is administered by DEST. That does mean that there is tutorial assistance available to those students.

Senator ALLISON—What about pre-school through to year 3?

Ms Collard—They have shifted their thinking in that there is no homework centre assistance in early childhood.

Senator ALLISON—What is the rationale behind that? Was that explained to you?

Ms Collard—No. I find that quite difficult to believe. I strongly believe that children will learn far better in those early years of schooling. We are trying to fix the problem later on; it is not about nipping it in the bud and making a difference right at the very beginning of school and even before.

Senator ALLISON—Mr Dullard, how does this sit with you philosophically, especially with students who come to school with English as a second—or non-existent—language?

Mr Dullard—We should be putting our efforts, as I think every educationalist would say at present, in the early years of education. That is where our major thrust should be.

Senator ALLISON—What was the response when you put this argument to DEST?

Ms Collard—There was never any discussion. We have been informed of where the funding is going.

Senator ALLISON—Was there any give on the part of DEST about those students who had missed out on the testing for whatever reason?

Ms Collard—No, we have not had any discussion about that.

Senator ALLISON—Just to clarify, \$270,000 shared between 18 schools—I have just done a quick calculation—is about \$15,000 a school if the \$270,000 is handed out equitably or at least on a per school basis. What was the total amount received by those 18 schools under ASSPA funding?

Ms Collard—I am not sure of the exact amount. All I know is that the figure for St Mary's College, Broome, was about \$100,000 a year. Other schools would not have had those sorts of numbers, but they would have had a substantial amount.

Mr Dullard—We can find that out.

Senator ALLISON—It would be good if you could give us the precise figures.

Mr Dullard—My guess—and it would be a guess—is that it would be around that figure. It would not be too far out at a higher or lower figure, because St Mary's would be the biggest school with the biggest concentration of Aboriginal students that we have by a long while. And then when you add up all of the smaller schools, it could even be about the same amount. But I will find that out and let you know.

Senator ALLISON—Can you tell the committee about the concept plans. We heard in other places that there were some inconsistencies with what was rejected as fitting with the guidelines. What sorts of things were ruled out as being a possibility for using these parent committee arrangements?

Ms Collard—What has been suggested to the Catholic Education Office by DEST is that we choose some priority areas, whether they be literacy, numeracy, attendance, a transition program or a homework centre. Schools are being encouraged to apply for homework centres through this plan. But, when you look at the funding, there is not enough money to have a homework centre in these schools.

Senator ALLISON—What does a school need? What would it cost, say, St Mary's to run a homework centre for a year?

Ms Collard—You would be looking at a homework centre held, say, twice a week for an hour. You would be looking at a supervisor. The number of tutors would be dependent on the number of students attending the homework centre. There would be so many tutors to each group of students, probably one to eight—I am not exactly sure of the numbers. Previously, an afternoon tea—some fruit or milk or whatever—was supplied for the students when they came in after school. You would probably be looking at about five staff. I think the wages were about \$45 an hour. So I guess you could calculate that out over a 40-week period.

Senator ALLISON—If your school received only \$15,000, that would pretty much pay for the fruit and not much else.

Ms Collard—I guess it would be a shorter homework span, but then again it would be dependent on the number of students attending. I do know that in the past there have been issues with homework centres—perhaps they were not doing the tutoring properly or they were seen as a baby sitting centre. I think that could have been addressed by tutors having some kind of professional development in the sorts of activities that they could have been doing in the homework centres. For instance, tutors could have been giving students the opportunity to do oral reading, to play games that would enhance their English or to access computer programs if they were doing maths or a science of some kind, not just colouring in, telling stories and those sorts of things. In my previous position I worked with the tutors to see how we could improve the homework centres. We all have to take responsibility for the homework centres not being run up to speed.

Senator ALLISON—Did DEST tell you that this was the case?

Ms Collard—Not particularly. I know that that was the general feeling in some schools, but I do not know whether the parents who wanted to participate in school decision making were seen as disadvantaged—I do not know whether there were some issues with the parents who did participate. I think it is about involving as many people as you can. You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. It does not matter how many parents we try to involve—there will always be those who do not want to be part of it, and who are quite happy with what is happening in the school, and others who want to be proactive and involved in the school. That goes across the board in education for all students.

Senator ALLISON—Going back to the negotiations, were you given an understanding that homework centres should be the top priority? Who determines that it should be homework centres and not something else?

Ms Collard—No. Homework centres could have been brought in through the concept plans.

Senator ALLISON—I understand that, but in other states it is unclear what, on the list of everything a school might want in its concept plan, is likely to be approved. How did you know what was likely to be agreed to, and what was not, and how consistent was it from one school to another?

Ms Collard—We knew because we had many calls from schools asking, ‘Where are we going to get our homework centre funding from?’—particularly our boarding schools. For example, at

Tardun, outside Geraldton, we have a number of Aboriginal students from across the Kimberleys who have—

Senator ALLISON—I am not challenging homework centres. I am trying to understand what the process might be in determining the priorities. Were they your priorities, DEST priorities or priorities that were developed using some other parameters?

Mr Dullard—I would like to jump in and say one thing. At a meeting in Geraldton, I briefly sat in with a DEST officer who was making it very clear that you should be able to fit into the application many of the things that you have already done, and that you should set the priorities. I do not know what happened with Robyn's discussion, but DEST were really saying that you can put whatever you can think of into your application and work things around to keep on doing what you are doing. That is the message I got—but that was in a brief five minutes of listening to an answer.

Ms Collard—Even before the meetings were happening, people were asking: 'How are we going to have a homework centre up and running? We have students with numeracy and literacy issues and we do not have something in place.' It is something that we have had.

Senator ALLISON—So they put homework centres in their concept plans and went off to DEST. What happened then?

Ms Collard—We do not know. We have not had any meetings yet.

Senator ALLISON—So would it surprise you to know that some schools were told that programs associated with literacy and numeracy were not part of this program but were in fact the responsibility of the territory government or state government?

Ms Collard—That surprises me. I think that if we are going to be outcomes focused—

Senator ALLISON—Would it surprise you to know that programs for breakfast or for fruit at morning tea or afternoon tea were knocked back on the basis that they were not related to literacy?

Ms Collard—That would not surprise me. That is why I mentioned Indigenous coordinating centres earlier. If there is a health section in the programs, the DEST officer would be asking the other departments to have a look at their programs. But I do not know how that is going to work.

Senator ALLISON—So no Catholic schools in WA have received their concept plans back with a line through the items that are not agreed to?

Ms Collard—No. The first concept plan meeting is on 1 April.

Senator ALLISON—Have you been given a time frame for when the follow-up proposals to the concept plans—with lines having been crossed out and, presumably, having been prioritised before being returned to the schools—are required to be lodged?

Ms Collard—Yes, the dates have been sent out to us already.

Senator ALLISON—How many days will schools have to turn a concept plan into a proposal?

Ms Collard—They will have the two months between April and June.

Senator ALLISON—Would it surprise you to hear that in other places the turnaround time is a matter of days?

CHAIR—It is 48 hours.

Ms Collard—As to those two dates that I have just given you, 1 April is when the concept plans are due in.

Senator ALLISON—Due back?

Ms Collard—Yes. June is when applications are called for. So in that time the forms will go back to the schools and then they will be asked to make an application.

Senator ALLISON—So the reason is that you do not expect any funding until term 3?

Ms Collard—That is right.

Senator ALLISON—What do you anticipate to be the process of prioritising and sorting out how this \$270,000 might be distributed? Is it clear in your mind how the priority setting will go?

Ms Collard—Yes, it is. We have already set up working parties in our regions to work closely with their regional DEST officer to prioritise the concept plans. So that is going to go ahead. We have been given a flow chart of how that will happen. When the concept plans come in, when we meet, when schools will be informed that they have been successful or if they need to do any follow-up work and what elements of their concept plan will be—

Senator ALLISON—Do you take as a fundamental position the view that schools, or at least students, should be equally funded? In other words will you do what was effectively the previous system and say that that \$270,000 should be divided by the number of remote students and given to schools according to their numbers?

Ms Collard—That is something that we have discussed.

Senator ALLISON—Or will you accept an outcome which means that some schools will get nothing?

Ms Collard—That is a very real possibility, because at the end of the day the Catholic Education Office does not make the decision on which schools will get the funding; the DEST office will make that decision.

Senator ALLISON—So your role is just to be in there arguing for what you think is an equitable distribution of the money, such as it is?

Ms Collard—Yes.

Mr Dullard—I have asked for an overview of all the submissions and what is or is not approved. I would like to see some consistency in the approach. We just do not know. I have asked our officers to bring it all together so that we can see an overview—all the applications, what was or was not approved and in what region.

Senator ALLISON—Are the state government showing any interest in this process? Are they assisting you in any way?

Ms Collard—Yes. We have had quite a number of meetings with—this is the DEST office you are talking about?

Senator ALLISON—No, the WA state education department.

Ms Collard—No.

Mr Dullard—No, we have had none.

Ms Collard—I actually have met with them in terms of the in-class tuition because they have a very good process in collecting and reporting the data on all of the students. I have had meetings with the office there to obtain their pro formas and to see how that could work for Catholic Ed—why reinvent the wheel? We are doing the same sort of work, so it is about us working together and making that happen.

CHAIR—In a competitive tendering environment and with this money that has been previously allocated on an equitable basis, how are you going to ensure that there is equity across those schools?

Mr Dullard—We are going to get the data and have a look. Honestly, we do not know. We have to work within the guidelines that DEST put out and then see if we can make a case.

CHAIR—Has there been any suggestion amongst the Catholic Education Office that you might fund those schools that miss out or somehow provide some equity when there clearly is not going to be that equity at the end of the day?

Mr Dullard—We will have that discussion when we know what is there. It will also come through our Catholic Education Aboriginal Committees, so they will come together from the regions and they will have a discussion about that and on where to go forward from that.

Ms Collard—We had a strong discussion at our last meeting about that very topic—the distribution of funds across the state.

Senator ALLISON—The committee, on the strength of the evidence we heard in the Northern Territory, tabled an interim report to the Senate urging the government to continue to fund this year as a transition year until these questions are resolved. Is that something you would support?

Mr Dullard—Yes, I would, just off the top of my head. At present we do not have anything and it would be nice to have something.

Senator CARR—How long have you been doing this job, involved with education—how many years?

Mr Dullard—In this particular role?

Senator CARR—How long have you been involved in education?

Mr Dullard—Since I started teaching in 1970.

Senator CARR—So it is a fair while. As a former schoolteacher I probably share with you some experience, because I have seen a few administrative hiccups in my time. But have you seen a bungle like this—that reached this sort of proportion?

Mr Dullard—I would rather not comment on that, if that is okay. There have been some rippers along the way—

Senator CARR—This would have to be up there amongst them, wouldn't it? It is third term—

Mr Dullard—It is a bit unbelievable—I will put it that way.

CHAIR—Ms Collard and Mr Dullard, thank you very much for your time today. We will be sending you a proof of the *Hansard* for you to have a look at and correct if you want to.

Senator CARR—Which you cannot change!

Mr Dullard—I said 'unbelievable', didn't I!

CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time.

[3.38 p.m.]

O'KEEFE, Mr Kevin Andrew, Executive Director, Teaching and Learning, Department of Education and Training

SOMERVILLE, Mr Robert Stanly, Director, Aboriginal Education, Training and Services, Department of Education and Training

CHAIR—I welcome our witnesses from the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. I understand that there is a departmental submission, which I thank you for. Before we ask you questions, you have an opportunity to make a brief opening statement if you so wish. Any of your evidence can be made confidentially or in camera to the committee, and if you want to make any sections of your evidence confidential or in camera then you just need to make that request and we will facilitate that happening. On behalf of the committee, welcome to this hearing and thank you for your time today. If you would like to begin with a brief statement, we would appreciate that.

Mr O'Keefe—I will give a few general comments. I have not been involved in the detailed bilateral discussions, as Mr Somerville has, but there are probably a few general comments that are worth making. The dilemma about quadrennial funding was made more difficult, I think, because of the timing of the last federal election. One of the dilemmas for us as the state representative has been entering into detailed discussion about things that get put in place before that discussion happens. We have been fortunate in Western Australia in establishing a close working relationship with the local DEST office, but the dilemma is that the local DEST office does not always have access to the latest information to be able to share that with us immediately. So a number of discussions were held during the bilateral discussion which were associated with finding out about almost predetermined directions before we had had a chance to discuss them, and there were some issues around reporting and so on about that.

There was also, I think initially, a broad general view that the Commonwealth had decided on how it wanted to allocate the dollars and in what direction it would put them. I think there was a concern that the Department of Education, Science and Training had in the first instance that the role of the state in running the state education system was potentially going to be bypassed and that there would be direct negotiations between the Commonwealth and the schools, which we would find entirely unhelpful and which would not assist us in ensuring that we had a strategic view. We have worked very hard at establishing a very clear strategic view about improving dramatically the outcomes for Aboriginal students in both education and training. We believe that we have some very good plans and that we can significantly value add to the Commonwealth money that is available. We view the Commonwealth money here as growth and development money to bridge the gap. We acknowledge that we have a significant responsibility in our own state effort, and we believe we are very sharply focused and well resourced to do that. We have worked very hard during the bilaterals to ensure that there has been a significant amount of say about the way in which the programs roll out so that it reflects much more the way that we want to work with our schools to give them the opportunity for local decision making to meet the immediate needs of their own students. We have been successful in some and not successful in others, but I will leave the specifics of that for Mr Somerville to comment on.

Mr Somerville—I would like to comment on the whole process for the quadrennium. In many ways the state office is ruled by the central office of DEST. While we had substantial local negotiations and consultation prior to the bilaterals, quite often the state office was uninformed with regard to direction from the central office and we found out things at the last moment. I think that complicated the whole process for the quadrennium, and we can discuss that a little later on. I do need to point out, however, that I feel that the state has as much obligation with regard to consultation and consultation process as the Australian government. Consequently, I believe that we are just as responsible for ensuring that appropriate processes are put into place during the quadrennium.

The area that has been of greatest debate has been the target setting and the types of data required by the Commonwealth. On many occasions that data has not been negotiated but simply demanded. Some of it has been poorly put together and poorly constructed by the Australian government, yet they are still going ahead, despite other national data collection processes that are being put into place. Again, we can discuss that in detail. However, I will emphasise the excellent processes that the local state office has. In my opinion, the state office should be able to have greater powers to negotiate at the local level rather than constantly being hampered by a central provision, which is the case with DEST. But they are the Australian government processes. That is all I would like to say. As we go into detail with regard to the programs, I will make some more comments.

Senator ALLISON—I was interested in the comment you made about the Parent School Partnership Initiative. You said:

... submission based programs are inherently bureaucratic, reward articulate, well resourced schools and communities and disadvantage those with limited capabilities to compete successfully.

Could you give the committee some examples of how this applies in schools with substantial numbers of Aboriginal students, particularly remote schools?

Mr Somerville—We cannot comment on PSPI directly, because the process is still under way. We have taken enormous ownership of the PSPI process, unlike many other jurisdictions, and I will go into that in detail if you like. Certainly, in past submission based processes you often saw the larger, more articulate schools winning submissions simply because they have people who have the time and the experience to write them. That is why we have tried to put a process in place with PSPI that may not necessarily reward the articulate school, but we have to see what it looks like when the submissions come through in the concept plans.

The problem with the concept plans at the moment is the misinformation that obviously always is the case when you have a new process in place that is going out. It is a changing menu from day to day with regard to what the concept plans might or might not have in them, and what might or might not be rewarded. However, what we do have in WA is a process whereby, as a jurisdiction, we have some ownership over the concept plans and the ranking of the concept plans.

Senator ALLISON—Can you outline for the committee what the process is, if it is different from what we have just heard from the Catholic Education Office?

Mr Somerville—The first thing you need to be aware of is that homework centres are not a part of the concept planning process in Western Australia for the government school sector. We made a decision, along with the state DEST office, that the homework centre process was one that we were not prepared for our school principals to manage. The information was provided to us in late December that DEST expected the principalship to manage homework centres. We refused to allow that to happen, only because we have not gone through a due and appropriate process with regard to the principalship taking over homework centres. It has EBA ramifications and a whole stack of other ramifications.

Senator ALLISON—Does that mean there will be no homework centres funded out of this?

Mr Somerville—Absolutely.

Senator ALLISON—So there are no homework centres at all in WA government schools?

Mr Somerville—At the moment, there are not. I understand that DEST WA will go out for tender on the homework centres to a private organisation that will run homework centres in WA government schools.

Senator ALLISON—Is that as part of this PSPI process?

Mr Somerville—No. It is outside the PSPI process.

Senator ALLISON—And is it outside the funding that has been allocated?

Mr Somerville—It is outside the funding as well—that is correct. So the concept plan in Western Australia does not include homework centres for government schools.

Senator ALLISON—What does it include?

Mr Somerville—It includes literacy and numeracy; attendance, retention and participation; and any other area that the eight MCEETYA priorities tackle. It is mainly the first four priorities which DEST has put into the concept planning process. Schools are well aware of that. The process that we have got in place mirrors a process that we have already had in place for the last four years, which is that the concept plans would be placed to a local district committee. That district committee has already got a notional allocation of funding for PSPI. It has got an idea of about how much it will be delivering out. That local committee is made up of Aboriginal people as well as a DEST officer, and they will rank the submissions. That process is in line with what we call the IESIP flexible district process, which we put money out in as well. We believe that, in the end, by 2006, once we marry both processes together, most schools will get funded both from PSPI or from our flexible funding process that has gone out.

So the local district ranks them. Obviously those that are lower in the ranking will not get the money because of the notional allocation. They are well aware of that. Those concept plans then move to DEST state office, which then goes back to the school. So we have got some ownership and the Aboriginal community have got ownership over the process. As well as that, all government schools in Western Australia are expected to have Aboriginal education school plans. So there is already a school plan for Aboriginal education within the school, and a concept

plan will mirror that school plan and bring out part of the school plan. It is mirrored into and value adding to a process we have already had together for some years now.

Senator ALLISON—So you would not expect any surprises. Have any of the concept plans come back approved this year?

Mr Somerville—No, because the cut-off date is the beginning of April and then they will start coming through for ranking and so on. DEST officers have already been in schools providing advice about what the concept plans may look like. We have been out providing advice at principals conferences to principals that the concept plans need to be simple. They are not to be overbureaucratic or overwritten. We have provided advice to the committees that overwritten concept plans should be placed at the end, rather than at the beginning, because the whole thing is supposed to be simple. We are trying to get the competitive nature out of the concept planning. But of course it is still going to be ranked, so there is still some competition there, which is always the worry.

Senator ALLISON—Are there any programs or items that were funded under ASSPA which, in your understanding of the situation, will not now be funded under this concept plan proposal—the PSPI?

Mr Somerville—Absolutely.

Senator ALLISON—What will they be?

Mr Somerville—There may be a school where, under ASSPA, a breakfast program may have been seen as being particularly important but now it is under a concept planning regime—that is, part of a school plan with the Aboriginal community looking at a very different set of data. The school and the community may decide that the breakfast club is not the one they want to fund; therefore, that is the decision by the community and it may not be funded.

Senator ALLISON—I am sorry—I do not follow that. Why would they not continue with something?

Mr Somerville—Because they have got a higher priority—they might not wish to continue with it. That is what I am saying: there may be some programs that are not funded simply because the community makes the decision to no longer fund them. But we have not been given any restrictions on what we can or cannot fund. I do need to highlight that point.

CHAIR—Can you just clarify something for me, Mr Somerville: is the PSPI money coming to the state office of DEET to distribute, as opposed to being a distribution of money from DEST directly to schools?

Mr Somerville—It is not a direct distribution from DEST to schools—that is against the legislation in Western Australia. It will be going through to our office and then we will distribute the money to the schools through the normal financial gateways that we have. Schools cannot be directly funded in Western Australia from DEST.

CHAIR—I see. So that is why you have got such a hands-on approach to what is happening with PSPI money?

Mr O’Keefe—It is partly that, because, as Bob said, we expect all our schools to have a plan for the education of Aboriginal students focused on literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention. We are very keen that there be a sharp focus to this—that the value-adding role we play is to deliver clear, strategic direction and also to ensure that there are proper processes. We have been given feedback from our schools that they do not like having to apply for large buckets of money or go through complicated processes for small bunches of dollars with detailed acquittal processes when, especially in these sorts of schools, they are the sorts of schools that will get lots of little buckets of moneys. It does not assist them in being more strategic. The approach that we have taken, as Bob said, with the IESIP funding, is to say, ‘There is \$2 million.’ It is not for us to decide. The money is allocated to various districts on a range of various weighting factors and we basically say, ‘There are the priorities we expect you to have. In your local committees we want you to allocate the money strategically and not just depend on people to argue for it in the competitive process.’ We believe that this is a sounder way of operating than by expecting schools to compete in submissions for, basically, buckets of money.

Senator ALLISON—Overall, under this arrangement, will Aboriginal schools or Aboriginal students receive more or less money? How much more or less will they receive?

Mr Somerville—That is an interesting question. The homework centres are taking approximately \$3.2 million through PSPI. I have no idea of the amount that went out under ASSPA for Western Australia, but \$3.2 million seems reasonable to us. That is around about the amount of money we estimated would be in the PSPI bucket, for want of a better word. So, we do not believe they will be missing out.

Senator ALLISON—Is there anything to recommend this new system over the previous one? It sounds as though you pretty much see it continuing as it has done so far. Are there any advantages you can see?

Mr O’Keefe—I think the ASSPA process did need rethinking because the way that the money was sometimes allocated at the local level was not very strategic.

Senator ALLISON—Can you give us some examples?

Mr O’Keefe—I have been a principal of a school and I know that, in working with my local ASSPA group, sometimes the tendency was to say, ‘We spent \$2½ thousand on barbecues for parents last year; we will spend \$2,800 on that this year.’ That was not necessarily about targeting where we needed the money to go, so there was a need to rethink it. The dilemma that I have got is that I would want to make sure that this money, when schools access it, really reflects what we have identified as the strategic needs. I am also concerned that this should not send a message to schools that ASSPA groups should not continue—that is, that there should no longer be any consultation with the local community. We have been insistent at the state level in saying that schools have to have very close relationships with their local community. If people were not to receive the message properly that this has got to be discussed and developed in consultation with the local community, that would be a concern of mine. Some people might think it is just

for the school to decide, without that consultation, and I would have some concerns if that were to occur.

Mr Somerville—We did provide advice to DEST when they were reviewing ASSPA, and that advice was that we thought ASSPA was far too bureaucratic and already compartmentalised. The process now for the PSPI is far more flexible. We do not want to now see it weighed down by the bureaucratic process. Certainly, what we are seeing now is consistent with the advice we gave during the review.

Senator ALLISON—To get this clear, did you say it was the area consultative committee that determines the priorities?

Mr Somerville—The Aboriginal Education Council for the district.

Mr O’Keefe—There is one in each district.

Senator ALLISON—How many districts are there compared with how many schools there are overall?

Mr O’Keefe—We have 700-plus schools and we have 14 districts, but the four Perth districts are much larger, of course, than any of our country districts. So it would vary from about 21 schools in a district, say, such as Esperance, to 134 schools in a metropolitan district, such as Fremantle-Peel. They vary in size substantially.

Senator ALLISON—So in an area such as Port Hedland, for instance, what distance would one of these committees have to cover?

Mr O’Keefe—Generally, we would have one AEC in each district. What is the situation in Karratha? Do we have two AECs there?

Mr Somerville—No, it is just the one and people travel different routes.

Mr O’Keefe—Road travel from Hedland to Karratha.

Mr Somerville—They travel from Hedland to Karratha or they meet in Hedland and everybody goes up from Karratha. There are representatives on that committee from Onslow, Yandeyarra and so on.

Senator ALLISON—The reason I ask is that we were at a school on Elcho Island a couple of weeks ago. That school said it had enough difficulty getting to its homeland schools in order to talk about the concept plan. It seems to me that if you are further centralising this approach with concept plans to districts then not too much consultation is going to take place when you get into the more remote parts of Western Australia. Is that a fair comment?

Mr Somerville—The district make the decision with regard to the prioritisation, but each school is still going out and working with its local community on its concept plan. So that has not changed. It is just that there is a process that then ranks them at the district level and involves Aboriginal people from that particular district in the ranking process. That is what we have done.

Senator ALLISON—But the ranking process is everything: it determines what will or will not be funded, does it not?

Mr Somerville—Absolutely. They are used to doing that. They have been doing that for four years on a \$2 million budget and it has worked particularly well. The district sets a priority, which could be attendance, literacy or numeracy.

Senator ALLISON—So you are not concerned that previous ASSPA committees that might have been working well—except that some would not have been—would be disenfranchised by this new process?

Mr Somerville—The ASSPA committees are involved in the process because they have already been involved at the local level in setting a school plan for Aboriginal education and then they are involved in writing up the concept plan to submit to the local committee. If the ASSPA committee was working well before, they are on the front foot with regard to the concept plan. That is our belief, anyway.

Senator ALLISON—We might let you know what we have found out since then.

Mr O’Keefe—Absolutely. Certainly if what we found out was that there was not substantial Aboriginal representation at the local level we would be very concerned about that, and that is what we would want to address. But we have tried to send strong messages to our schools that this is not for the school to do without consultation with its local community. We would assume that that would be reflected at the local level and, as Bob said, the Aboriginal education councils do a lot of that sifting.

Senator ALLISON—Is your experience the same as the Catholic education offices in that the funding will not come through for this program until the third term?

Mr Somerville—We were given five funding gateways, so you could work as quickly or as slowly as you liked. We have decided that we would work a bit slowly to allow schools to put in their submissions and take the time to do the consultation at the local level, so we can get the process right. It is likely to be the second or third term when the money will begin to flow. But we do not have six months suspended. DEST has allowed us to roll the money over, so it can be rolled over into 2006.

Senator ALLISON—In terms 1 and 2, the schools do not have access to that funding?

Mr Somerville—That is correct, unless—

Senator ALLISON—Does that concern you?

Mr Somerville—Not particularly, no. It is always the case when we go into a new quadrennium and new programs are going to start that there is going to be a slow take-off. If schools wanted to move quickly, we could have got the money to them at the beginning of second term, but schools were quite comfortable with taking their time and getting this right in the first instance. Being able to roll the money over has been a great incentive as well. We would

be quite miffed if we had to spend the money in six months, as we did in the first quadrennium with late funding. Being able to roll it over is quite a comfortable way for us to go.

Mr O’Keefe—We would rather that this had all been fixed up last year. There were the beginnings of bilateral conversations at that time. In a sense, along came the federal election and everything—

Senator ALLISON—What happens in Western Australia if there is a state election? Does everything in your department stop for seven weeks?

Mr Somerville—There are things that we cannot sign off. During the state election we would have been unable to sign off the Indigenous education agreement, for example. Certainly, there are things that do not occur. We cannot employ certain levels of officers.

Senator ALLISON—So we have an election period of six or seven weeks, but we are talking here about funding not flowing through for two terms, which is—

Mr O’Keefe—Honestly, there is no doubt that we would much rather have that money. We think that it is good targeted money, and it would be better to be in the schools when it should be there. We would rather have had this all sorted out towards the second half of last year. We are responding to the fact that sometimes these things intervene. It is a four-year funding agreement. From memory, it has been like this for a little while. In the last quadrennium we struggled with getting the funding up and going at the start of it. We wish it had not happened, but our job is to try to make it work as best we can, given an environment that is out of our control.

Mr Somerville—It is no doubt annoying. It could have been done months and months ago but it was all done in a last-minute rush and some things were just given to us by saying, ‘This is the way you’ll do it.’ That is annoying. What we have got out of it now is a better process. We are quite comfortable with the process.

CHAIR—When you say you have determined the priorities in which PSPI money can be spent, do you mean that the state education department in WA have determined the priorities? What happens if you get an ASSPA committee or an Aboriginal community who fervently believe that they want a homework centre and believe that that has been a key aspect of improving literacy and numeracy and encouraging kids to come back the next day? Have you totally shut that off as an option? Has it been a bottom-up process—the determination of these priorities?

Mr O’Keefe—I do not want to comment on the PSPI. Bob is much more across that particular process. In a sense, with literacy, numeracy, attendance and retention, we say, ‘They are the outcomes; we know we’ve got to improve.’ Aboriginal students need to be able to read and write, so that they have the same life chances as every other student. They need to be at school every day and to stay at school for the same length of time as non-Aboriginal students. How that strategy is played out at the local level is really for the local people to determine for themselves. If people determine that this is the strategy they want to use to improve literacy, basically we will say, ‘There’s a fair bit of evidence about what strategies work and which ones don’t, but it’s really for you to determine at the local level how you want to use the money that you’ve got to do that.’

CHAIR—So it could include breakfast programs, lunch programs or even homework centres if the local community wants it?

Mr O’Keefe—Absolutely. If you are wanting to get students to feel familiar with and involved in their local school, there are some communities which are so disadvantaged that those natural things that other communities take for granted do not get provided by the community. If the school decides that that is the way it wants to go, they are very successful programs.

Mr Somerville—The only thing that we cannot fund through PSPI is the homework centre. However, if the Aboriginal community is an incorporated body, it still may apply directly to DEST for a homework centre. We just have not got the payment system together within our jurisdiction for schools to run homework centres.

CHAIR—How was the ASSPA money distributed previously? Was it a direct payment from—

Mr Somerville—To the ASSPA committee.

Mr O’Keefe—It was a per capita allocation.

CHAIR—But through you?

Mr Somerville—No. Because the ASSPA committee is not part of the education system, DEST was able to pay directly to ASSPA.

CHAIR—What has changed in this quadrennium so that you now handle that money?

Mr Somerville—Because the money now goes to the school, not to the committee. That is the difference.

CHAIR—No doubt there would have been homework centres operating in previous years?

Mr Somerville—Yes, and that is why we have said we have not got the payment system to run homework centres, and nor have principals in the past organised and run homework centres. It is a significant workload for principals to flick them homework centres without due consultation, and no consultation has occurred with the jurisdictions across Australia with regard to homework centres. You cannot do that. You just cannot as a government turn around and say, ‘Here’s a 10 per cent increase in workload and we will embed it into the PSPI process.’ We have said: ‘No, put it out as you did before. Principals can still oversee it but the payment system can go through another process.’ It should have stayed with DEST, and that is what the state offices understood until mid-December—that they were running homework centres.

CHAIR—Do you know the amount of money that was allocated to the in-school tuition last year as compared to what you will get this year?

Mr Somerville—In 2004 \$1.3 million was allocated to in-school tuition for primary schools. In 2005 it is \$5.2 million for primary. That does not include years 10, 11 and 12.

CHAIR—So your in-school tuition money has increased by \$4 million?

Mr Somerville—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that because more Aboriginal students have sat and passed the exam?

Mr Somerville—No, it is because we only took on in-school tuition as a department in 2003. Because it was a state initiative and it is being run by the state, there was only a small bucket of money. The state office negotiated with us about whether we were interested in taking on the then ATAS for primary schools, and we decided we could value add to the process. So in 2003 we took on the program, and there was only a small bucket of money for 2004. As now with the new quadrennium, it is looking at the whole cohort of children who are below the benchmark, and we had a substantial increase. The \$1.3 million was servicing only two districts in Western Australia.

CHAIR—So the \$5.2 million is for each year over the next four years?

Mr Somerville—That is right.

CHAIR—So how many students is that calculated on?

Mr Somerville—I think it is about 1,900 who are eligible for in-school tuition—that is off the top of my head. That may not be completely correct but it is around there.

CHAIR—Some 1,900 in a year?

Mr Somerville—That is correct—who are below the benchmark.

CHAIR—In the Northern Territory the figure is 1,666 but that only generates \$3.7 million.

Mr Somerville—It might be slightly more. I can find the exact figure.

CHAIR—Can you take that on notice and provide us with the calculation as how that is determined.

Mr Somerville—I can give you the calculation, certainly. The calculation is the normal DEST calculation.

CHAIR—So you are saying the increase to \$5.2 million is because more students have become eligible for the funding?

Mr Somerville—Yes, that is correct. We were given a certain bucket of money before that was fixed, and it was not fixed on the number of students who were eligible; it was just a bucket of money.

CHAIR—So that \$1.3 million then was inadequate if it only served two districts—is that correct?

Mr Somerville—That is correct, yes.

Senator CARR—Can I get some figures from you. In our previous hearings, the local jurisdiction—in this case, the Northern Territory—made it clear that Commonwealth funding was only supplementary when it came to Indigenous programs. What is the ratio? How much money does Western Australia spend on Indigenous education?

Mr Somerville—Direct money that is for Indigenous education flows through the Aboriginal Education Directorate. Approximately \$30 million of state and federal money flows through my directorate, of which approximately \$12 million is Commonwealth and \$18 million is state. Of course there are a large number of other programs in other directorates that significantly affect the outcomes of Aboriginal children.

Senator CARR—That is direct funding for Aboriginal education.

Mr Somerville—That comes into my directorate.

Senator CARR—How many students does that service?

Mr Somerville—Approximately 24,000.

Senator CARR—What percentage of the Western Australian school population is Indigenous?

Mr Somerville—It has now moved to 8.9 per cent.

Senator CARR—Of the 24,000 students, how many are currently receiving Commonwealth money for Indigenous programs?

Mr Somerville—I could not answer that directly.

Mr O’Keefe—As Bob said, the dilemma is that is money that is tagged in his own directorate but a lot of the money—both state and federal—would also go primarily to Aboriginal students. One of the indicators for giving schools an advantaged allocation would be that they have a larger number of Aboriginal students, so that would occur in programs—

Senator CARR—Okay, but I am interested—

Mr O’Keefe—The Commonwealth literacy and numeracy programs, for instance, would also go out to schools, and more of those would go—

Senator CARR—Sure. I am just trying to establish how much money goes from the Commonwealth to Western Australia and is spent on Indigenous students.

Mr Somerville—With the Commonwealth recurrent grant, we have been asked to start commencing those calculations at present, so there is a significant amount of the Commonwealth recurrent grant that would be spent on Aboriginal children as well.

Senator CARR—I do not think it is an unreasonable question. If the Commonwealth parliament appropriates X millions of dollars for Aboriginal education, I think we, as members of parliament, would want to know that money is spent on Aboriginal education. So that is not an unreasonable request—and you do not dispute that?

Mr Somerville—Absolutely not.

Senator CARR—Your submission clearly does not dispute that. We would equally like to know whether or not the states are maintaining their efforts. Isn't that an old argument in education? It is as perennial as any of them. We do not know that at the moment, do we?

Mr Somerville—We do know that there have been significant increases in state funding with regard to Aboriginal education over the last 10 years.

Senator CARR—Could you show me what those are?

Mr Somerville—Yes. An example is Aboriginal education islander workers. We now spend close to \$15 million on that particular program, of which \$5 million is Commonwealth and \$10 million is state.

Senator CARR—If it is possible to take this on notice, what I would like to see from you is an aggregate of what you spend on Indigenous education.

Mr Somerville—That has been asked for by the Commonwealth through the new legislation. Our chief financial officer will be providing advice on that as to how much we spend.

Senator CARR—Would you take that on notice for this committee?

Mr Somerville—I do not know whether we can give it to you tomorrow.

Senator CARR—Surely you know of the sort of interest I have in these matters, so it seems to me not an unreasonable proposition. How long would it take you to provide that sort of information?

Mr Somerville—It would take some time. What do you want exactly?

Senator CARR—I would like to know how much you are spending on Indigenous education.

CHAIR—It would be broken down by program?

Senator CARR—We want an aggregate amount. You have told me that it has improved over the last 10 years.

Mr Somerville—To give you an example, the amount for educating an Aboriginal student at Warakuna, in the middle of the Central Desert, is significantly more.

Senator CARR—I am not arguing the case about whether or not there are relative cost differences. I am asking you if the state appropriates more money for Indigenous education, because I think you said to me that you have improved your expenditure over the last 10 years. There must be an aggregate somewhere for you to make a statement like that.

Mr Somerville—There certainly is within some direct budget allocations that we have.

Senator CARR—So you must know that. The Commonwealth officials in Canberra always tell me by how much they are increasing their expenditure, and we must be able to know therefore how much extra money is being spent if we put the two things together. I do not think that is an unreasonable request.

Mr O’Keefe—If you were asking how much money was coming through Bob’s directorate, we could answer that question; that would be clear. The dilemma, as I have said, is that allocations to schools most in need are often to schools that have a lot of Aboriginal students. So it would be difficult if we were saying, ‘Okay, from the literacy program there is a substantial bucket of money from the state going out, but more is going to that school because there are Aboriginal students there.’ It would be a very challenging—

Senator CARR—Fair enough, but I would like to know what it is, because, while I have considerable sympathy with a lot of what you say in your submission, I have considerable sympathy with the view that Indigenous people are entitled to a fair cut of the action. If the states are not improving their effort and the Commonwealth is, that is a reasonable public policy issue. I am not altogether persuaded that the Commonwealth has managed to maintain levels of expenditure as they are, but then I have heard Mr Evans tell me for years that, on his analysis of your budgets, your expenditure is going down. I would like to hear from you what your estimates are. It is in that context.

Mr O’Keefe—We can provide those.

Senator CARR—You say here that there is agreed policy objectives in Indigenous education and training known as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy and Partners in a Learning Culture, Australia’s National Strategy for Vocational Education and Training 2000-2005. That is an extraordinary title for a non-bureaucratic program. You are saying though that there are some real problems in actually getting beyond the agreed objectives. That is the thrust of your submission, isn’t it? It is not just a question of objectives; it goes to the implementation. You are saying that the Commonwealth has appropriated to itself increased powers over the states, and that is what you are objecting to. Is that the thrust of what you are saying to me?

Mr O’Keefe—The concern we have is that there is a clearer expectation about reporting requirements and target setting that we have not agreed with. There are some processes which the Commonwealth has wanted to impose on us which, if we were left to our own devices, we would not use exactly in the same way.

Senator CARR—You said:

In practice, the Commonwealth Minister ... can both unilaterally set or vary performance targets at his discretion, be they realistic or not.

Moreover, if the minister considers that you have broken the agreement, he can cut off your money. You are saying that they have done that unilaterally. That is the thrust of what you are saying to us.

Mr Somerville—That is in the agreement.

Senator CARR—On top of this, the minister has the ability to set or vary performance targets and then be judge and jury on whether you have met them.

Mr Somerville—Yes.

Senator CARR—And that is why you will not sign the agreement.

Mr Somerville—There are some areas of concern within the agreement. One of them is that the Australian government minister is able to cut the funding, yet we are obliged to continue and pay for the programs.

Senator CARR—So the Commonwealth is now appropriating to itself the power to determine what goes on in the schools without talking to you?

Mr Somerville—There certainly has not been the amount of talking that we would have—

Senator CARR—I know. I am a simple person. You can use whatever language you like, but that is how I read your submission. It might be short on some empirical data, which I think a submission of this type should have, but the thrust of what you are saying is that there has been a high-handed approach taken by Canberra and you do not like it.

Mr O'Keefe—That is right.

Senator CARR—That is fair enough. As I say, I have some sympathy with that approach, because I would have thought that, if Aboriginal people were actually to get a better deal out of this, they would not want public servants treating other public servants in this way. Is that what has happened? Is it a Public Service dust-up, or are there more fundamental issues?

Mr Somerville—I do not think it is a Public Service dust-up.

Senator CARR—What is it then?

Mr Somerville—In the last quadrennium, the minister set the targets.

Senator CARR—So it is a political dust-up, which is fair enough. That comes to the real point: the policy was announced in August last year and the caretaker period went for six weeks, but there was no approach to the opposition to speed up the implementation of these processes. There was no attempt to do it until January this year, when you had your first bilateral meeting. Is that right?

Mr Somerville—We had a number of discussions prior to the first bilateral.

Senator CARR—So you had these informal chitchats, but when did the first bilateral occur?

Mr Somerville—The formal bilateral would have been January this year.

Senator CARR—What date in January?

Mr Somerville—I cannot tell you that.

Senator CARR—In the Northern Territory it was around about the 27th, if I recall. So it was the end of January, and schools start in February. Do you find it normal that programs of this importance would not have the administrative arrangements in place prior to schools going back—especially since they were announced in August the previous year?

Mr Somerville—We had hoped that the bilaterals would start much earlier.

Senator CARR—Why didn't they?

Mr Somerville—I do not know.

Senator CARR—Is it a matter for the Commonwealth, or is it a matter for you? You see, the alternative proposition put to me is that you took your eye off the ball—you did not follow this up. How do you respond to that proposition?

Mr Somerville—I would not agree with that, because we were having a number—in fact, weekly—meetings with the state office with regard to processes, where we were going and what things might look like. We certainly had a number of meetings with the state office, and this is where I go back to my proposition at the very beginning—that the state offices need to have far more power than they do under the centralised process. That is part of the difficulty.

Senator CARR—But if it is a political problem, as you say it is, it requires some leadership from the top to get these things sorted out. I cannot follow for the life of me why it was that these bilaterals did not occur before the last week in January, and it would seem now, from two jurisdictions, that that was the case in the week or two before schools came back. Why did it take so long? I do not buy the caretaker argument. That is complete nonsense. We were not approached. I can tell you now that the Deputy Leader of the Opposition was not approached about this, so you can dismiss that as an argument. If they were dead keen to get this stuff sorted, they would have talked to us during the election period. That is what caretaker conventions are all about.

Mr O'Keefe—We saw it as a political discussion that was going on. Bilaterals require two people to be at the table. We were well and truly ready in the second half of last year to have and conclude that discussion.

Senator CARR—Had you requested bilaterals?

Mr O'Keefe—As Bob said, there were regular weekly meetings.

Mr Somerville—We were having regular meetings. In fact, a multilateral with all the jurisdictions occurred at the end of last year, where we raised a number of issues on the data suite. We were getting information through with regard to the discussions virtually immediately after August. So discussions began. Whether you call them formal bilaterals or informal bilaterals, I do not know, but certainly discussions were occurring.

Senator CARR—Okay. As a result of this bureaucratic bungling—whether or not it is in terms of Canberra not getting a bilateral—how many thousands of kids in this state are not getting access to Commonwealth money?

Mr Somerville—We are working on deficit budgets, so kids are accessing—

Senator CARR—So you are paying the money out now, are you? So the homework programs are still running?

Mr Somerville—No, the homework programs are not running.

Senator CARR—That is the first thing. How many thousands of kids were involved in homework programs under the old program guide?

Mr Somerville—It was significant.

Senator CARR—Were there several thousand? How many of the 24,000?

Mr Somerville—Probably 5,000, off the top of my head.

Senator CARR—Are the breakfast programs that were Commonwealth funded in the past all running now?

Mr O’Keefe—There would be programs that would be affected by this. Anything that was an ASSPA to a PSPI would possibly be affected. Some of those would still be running, as Bob said; some of those would be continuing to be funded, assuming and expecting some money would come and they could be picked up through other areas of school expenditure. But, definitely, a lot of the programs that would have been affected by ASSPA would be affected by this delay.

Senator CARR—My proposition is that, as a result of this bureaucratic bungle, thousands of Australian citizens are not getting the support from the Commonwealth that they are entitled to.

Mr O’Keefe—Some students who were involved in programs running under the old ASSPA program would not be involved in them now.

Senator CARR—Thousands of students.

Mr O’Keefe—I do not have the numbers.

Senator CARR—‘Some’ is a nice, polite way of putting it. I am saying to you that there are thousands. What about the other programs? Are they all currently being funded—no student is missing out?

Mr Somerville—There have been some significant changes with regard to ITAS over the old ATAS. Certainly there are students who would have been accessing tuition in years 8 and 9 who are no longer eligible. There are students in the TAFE sector who would have been accessing tuition, even though it is a very small number, who are no longer eligible under the new criteria. So some changes have affected students in that way. We have completed the in-school tuition process in Western Australia, so students will be accessing that in second term as they accessed it in second term in 2003 and 2004. Students are not accessing years 10, 11 and 12 tuition at the moment, but I understand that the processes will be in place for them to start accessing that in term 2.

Senator CARR—On page 2 of your submission you say:

To deny ... Indigenous students in the Vocational Education and Training sector, when their support has clearly been flagged as a national priority, is difficult to comprehend.

What explanation have you been given?

Mr Somerville—The explanation that has been provided is that so few TAFE students were accessing tuition that it is not affecting many students and, consequently, that is the reason they are no longer eligible.

Senator CARR—But they are if they go through a school?

Mr Somerville—That is correct if it is a VET in schools process.

Senator CARR—That makes sense, doesn't it? This has been incredibly well thought through, hasn't it? You are currently in discussion with DEST about a number of unresolved matters. Could you give us a succinct summary of what the unresolved matters are?

Mr Somerville—Some of the unresolved matters are around data collection and the data that DEST is requiring us to report on. For example, currently DEST is requiring us to report on quartiles. The process for the quartile reporting is totally incorrect and the data analysis is incorrect. At the national level there are already discussions on being able to provide data across a range. PMRT is currently putting that together. But DEST is ignoring that and going ahead with a process that will not work and will give invalid data. We have brought this up on a number of occasions, but they just ignore it. We brought it up at the multilaterals only last week. Again, they ignored the advice that was provided. That is an example of some of the difficult negotiations that occur. As to data-setting, DEST is very clear on the targets and very difficult to negotiate with in regard to those targets. Some of those targets—and this is what occurred in the last quadrennium—are just impossible to reach. Consequently, you are setting targets for schools—

CHAIR—What was your target in the last quadrennium?

Mr Somerville—Some of those targets were for 60 per cent gap closures. That is just impossible to get. While we would all agree that we want to reach those targets—there is no doubt about that—when you provide that to schools, they say, 'This is ridiculous.' So, from the word go, you have a negative reaction to it. So that is what we have been trying to negotiate with

DEST. They are the funder and this is the way the targets are to be set. At one stage during the negotiations, as a statement we walked out of the negotiations because of the unreasonable target-setting. That is not saying that we are not talking about accelerated performance. Schools are being stretched to the limit with regard to improving performance.

Senator CARR—The Commonwealth has a view that, by 2012, we can close the gap between white and black Australia in education. You do not agree with that?

Mr Somerville—It is admirable and I think we would all love to see that occur. Whether it can occur is the debate. It is a difficult debate as well. There is no doubt that none of us would disagree with what the Commonwealth is saying. All of us want to see the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians closed and for things to be the same. We have proved in many of our schools that it can be the same.

Senator CARR—When can you close the gap in Western Australia?

Mr Somerville—In certain areas it is going to take a long time. We are closing the gap quite quickly when we look at metropolitan Western Australia, but, as we move further into the very remote regions, the gap widens quite significantly. That is going to take some time.

Senator CARR—There is nothing wrong with that objective. In fact, I would have thought it was highly commendable. The question is whether it is realistic—and I accept your point on that—and whether or not resources are adequate to deal with that situation. Is that the point you were making or do you not think the gap can be breached?

Mr Somerville—I think the gap can be breached, but it needs enormous resources in place there. You are correct on that. The other thing is that we are setting targets that we know are unreasonable from the very beginning. The minister has the ability to cut our money off if the targets are not met or redirect money into areas that the minister believes are more appropriate. Already we have had the minister making decisions on what works. For example, the Northern Territory's scaffolding literacy approach is a decision that people have made. It works, therefore money is being placed in it. But where is the data to say it actually does work? What we are saying is that decisions are being made but we do not know where the data in the background comes from.

Senator CARR—So you are saying that you want evidence based policy-making? That is an extraordinary claim to make! Where would we be if that became policy! You are saying you want that and you want to be told about these things to give you time to talk about what the policy is. That has not happened since the policy was announced—that is, from August through to December, there has been no serious discussion about any of these matters?

Mr Somerville—There was serious discussion at the state level. I need to make that quite clear.

Senator CARR—I got that point. But it is quite clear that the state officials have not been told what the policy is—is that your impression? You have an agreement here which was not reflected in the discussions you had with Mr Greer—is that right?

Mr Somerville—That is correct.

Senator CARR—Quite clearly, what we are being told is inconsistent with what you are being told in regard to the way in which these programs are actually being implemented. Is that the thrust of it?

Mr O’Keefe—The Commonwealth money comes with a whole lot of tags attached to it. To give you an example, the Commonwealth in the rhetoric has the same sorts of expectations that we have. Literacy, numeracy and attendance retention are the major ones. In particular, you have to go to the areas of greatest disadvantage—that is, the remote community schools. There are 42 of those. What we had been developing was a mandated, structured literacy strategy across all of our remote schools. We would have appreciated having more of an opportunity to sit down with the Commonwealth and say, ‘Look, this is what we have developed. This is based on the best knowledge we’ve got about how to improve literacy, including for Aboriginal students.’ The problem was that, when it came to us, there was not the opportunity to have that sort of conversation and say, ‘Look, we’ve got some pretty good ideas about how to do this which are built on a firm foundation.’ Instead, what the Commonwealth said was, ‘Look, we think that the strategy for Aboriginal students is the scaffolding program. So we will give a whole lot of money to the Northern Territory and you can go and do that.’ We will need to find ways, through ITAS or whatever, to meet the guidelines and expectations of the Commonwealth while still meeting what we believe are our strategic purposes. This is the issue, in general terms, that you are dealing with all the time—the Commonwealth have the same expectations of us but they put a whole lot of other tags on it which often make it very difficult for us to operate. We have been very fortunate with the local state office to get a greater degree of flexibility that meets our needs, but the dilemma they have is dealing with what comes out of DEST.

Senator CARR—I am surprised that all of this was not sorted out before the guidelines were published.

Mr O’Keefe—We are responsible to the state Minister for Education and Training. Ultimately I suppose it is a judgment call for the minister to say whether he wants to have a stoush with Brendan Nelson over this.

Senator CARR—Of course, that is absolutely right. I am just asking you whether, in your experience in dealing with the Commonwealth—I suspect for many years—this has become more frequent; that is, that you have guidelines announced which pre-empt the normal processes and unilaterally change the methods in which you work?

Mr Somerville—So far these bilaterals have been far more flexible than the last bilaterals.

Senator CARR—So things are toughening up?

Mr Somerville—No, things are becoming more flexible. In the last bilaterals we set targets in negotiation with DEST and the minister turned around and provided us with the targets. He said, ‘No, I don’t like those,’ and we were provided with the targets by the minister. So things are becoming more flexible and the discussion is quite fruitful, we believe. It is still difficult, and certainly our bilaterals compared to the bilaterals occurring in other state departments—

Senator CARR—Why have you not signed the agreement if things are so good?

Mr Somerville—There are still areas of concern.

Mr O’Keefe—There is still a fair bit, but it looks like it is buying a pig in a poke. There are a whole lot of things to be negotiated. There are some good local discussions going on, but we do have a concern that the federal minister for education can take unto himself or herself—

Senator CARR—I would like to ask you about your capital works projects. The government have announced that they are going to bypass the states entirely and allocate moneys to schools as they see fit. Is this not a precursor to all of that?

Mr O’Keefe—It would fit the rhetoric of the Commonwealth and how it wants to bypass the states. I guess our job as bureaucrats is to say, ‘This would result in an enormous wastage of money in places where we do not think it needs to be put.’

Senator CARR—You would also presumably say that there is a law in this state—

Mr Somerville—Schools cannot be directly funded by the Commonwealth.

Senator CARR—So how would that work for the capital works projects?

Mr Somerville—The funding would end up flowing through out department, whichever way it goes.

Senator CARR—Or it will not flow?

Mr Somerville—Or it will not flow.

CHAIR—I want to ask some questions before we finish up here. Mr Somerville, you made some comments about multilateral discussions held last week and how you had put forward a proposal about the collection and interpretation of statistics that DEST have totally rejected.

Mr Somerville—That is correct.

CHAIR—What is the difference between the two and why do you think DEST have rejected your proposals?

Mr Somerville—I understand that Mr Greer went back and spoke to the minister’s adviser and that the minister is set on having quartile reporting. So it seems that it may be a ministerial priority rather than a departmental priority. What we are saying as states is, ‘We’ll report, but we’ll report quality data to you.’

CHAIR—On a yearly basis?

Mr Somerville—Yes, on a yearly basis. We report very early in Western Australia. We have no difficulty in reporting; what we are saying is that if we are going to report then we want to report quality data, not data that is not useful or is misinformed.

CHAIR—So we now have a disagreement about the nature and the type of data that will be reported and a minister who has total control over what type of data can be collected and can set the targets—and can possibly set an unreal target as far as you are concerned. If, at the end of the day, you do not reach the target then you are going to be to blame; aren't you?

Mr Somerville—That is correct, because when we signed up we said that we will make every effort to reach those targets. In the last quadrennium we exceeded targets in certain areas, so those were realistic, but in other areas we did not and could not meet those targets. We were not punished for it, and certainly money was not redirected because of that. One would hope that in this quadrennium there will be a similar process where there is enormous discussion that occurs on why or why not we meet targets.

CHAIR—Is this a clever process for this triennium so that there is a shift from the Commonwealth? Will this ensure there is more smoke and mirrors so that, at the end of the day, if Aboriginal outcomes are not improved, quite clearly Brendan Nelson can lay the blame at the feet of the states?

Mr Somerville—I do not know whether the Australian government will lay the blame at the feet of the states. Certainly, if there is no shift then all of us have to ask the question: why is there no shift? As a state, we believe we are going to start to see some accelerated performance in literacy and numeracy and we will be asking ourselves why it is not occurring if we do not.

CHAIR—Is that because you are now putting more money in?

Mr Somerville—We are putting more money in, but the other part of it is that we believe we have got our structures right now. We have devolved an enormous amount of decision making in Aboriginal education to the local level. We have more Aboriginal people involved in the education process. We have more money locally, we have more people locally. We believe we have taken the last four years to get that correct and now we should start to see the acceleration in performance. It is about getting things right before you see that acceleration. On top of that, schools are required to report on the performance of Aboriginal children. District directors, as part of the performance review of schools, are specifically looking at the outcomes of Aboriginal children as well. I guess we are putting more pressure on to see that acceleration of performance too.

CHAIR—Mr O'Keefe and Mr Somerville, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today.

Proceedings suspended from 4.37 p.m. to 4.47 p.m.

COX, Ms Nita

FLORISSON, Mr Steve

FORBES, Ms Michele

HESLOP, Dr Jim

HILL, Mr John

LITTLE, Mr Grant

MACK, Mr Les

PICKETT, Ms Carolyn

SUTCLIFFE, Ms Laurel

CHAIR—I am going to start by saying a few formal words to get this session under way. Welcome to this discussion on the effects of the changes to the Indigenous education funding act, and thank you for coming. We are travelling to places in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley, the Pilbara and North Queensland to find out what people think about the new funding arrangements. You will be aware that amendments to the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act were passed in the federal parliament last year.

The committee has already spent about four days in the Northern Territory and has heard concerns that, in making these changes, the government did not consult parent and community groups very widely and that, since announcing these changes, there has been little consideration given to the consequences of these changes. The committee has noted evidence that in many Indigenous communities there has been considerable distress and criticism directed at the federal government over changes to the act.

We are here to find out in detail your concerns and the reasons for your criticism of the changes. Governments are often accused of making decisions without regard to local and community opinion or need. The current government makes policy at the highest level, which is the proper role of the Commonwealth, but some would argue that it is now trying to manage details of implementation without regard for the widely different needs of the children and the communities concerned.

Mr Mack and Mr Hill, do you have any comments on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Mack—I work for the Aboriginal independent community schools, of which there are 15 throughout Western Australia.

Mr Hill—I also work for the Aboriginal independent community schools of Western Australia.

CHAIR—I am pleased to hear from you today. Thank you for coming and appearing before the committee. I understand that you had intended us to visit the Rawa community at Punmu. Is that correct?

Mr Hill—The Rawa Community School at Punmu community, yes.

CHAIR—But I think lack of time prevents us from travelling there. Before we ask you any questions, we will ask you to give us a brief statement. I also need to let you know that if there is any part of your evidence that you want to say in confidence, which we call in camera, you just need to let this committee know that you have something private to say that you would not want others to hear, and we can facilitate that. I now invite you to start by giving us a brief statement.

Mr Mack—We really appreciate the opportunity to speak to the committee. I think it was through contacting Tim that we managed to arrange this at such short notice—on the Thursday before Easter. It is really appreciated. The reason the Rawa Community School from Punmu community was not available is that, like other members from the AEC schools in this room, they will be attending an AEC conference, which is an annual event. The purpose of the conference is to contact senior decision makers within the Commonwealth sphere—usually from DEST national office and state office. It also provides the schools with an opportunity at the conference to share information amongst themselves and to give the support unit direction for the next 12 months and into the remainder of the quadrennium. That is an annual event.

The other thing is that we are going to be presenting a number of cases to highlight some of the issues in dealing with the Commonwealth in relation to the programs that they administer. These are not exclusive to those schools; they are just a sample of the 15 schools that both John and I work for. Their experience is, I guess, typical of small, independent Aboriginal community schools. When we reach the roundtable stage, there will certainly be representatives from those schools included in the case descriptions in the yellow document—the iridescent yellow one. That is a copy made by accident, actually. That gives an outline of their cases and will include Nyikina Mangala, CAPS Coolgardie and CAPS Wongatha. John and I will talk about the activities of the support unit.

Mr Hill—I would just like to add that we are really appreciative that we can be here. I think it is really good for the committee because, unlike a system with the Department of Education and Training of WA—who are represented in this room—every school as a non-systemic, independent education provider has a legal funding agreement individually with the federal Department of Education, Science and Training. These issues are of vital importance to every single school because they are non-systemic and every school has its own agreement.

CHAIR—Did you want to take us through a couple of the examples where the new funding arrangements have caused issues or do you want us to break into the roundtable discussion?

Mr Hill—We could lead that perhaps by starting with Nyikina Mangala.

Mr Mack—Nyikina Mangala Community School is the newest Aboriginal independent community school in Western Australia. It was only registered on 5 December 2000. Representing the school here we have Michele Forbes, who is the principal of the school, and Linda Nardea, who is the chairperson of the school's governing body. Again, as Les pointed out,

these issues are not necessarily exclusive to the schools that we are mentioning but are interesting case studies. In Nyikina Mangala Community School's case, they have never been in receipt of the funds called transitional project assistance—TPA funds—which then became NIELNS funds in the last quadrennium. Because the school was only registered in 2000, it has never been in receipt of any of these funds, so they are financially disadvantaged compared to other schools. Also the changes to the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme appear to be going to have a severe negative financial impact on this school. I will pass over to Michele and Linda.

CHAIR—The microphone is not to make your voice louder; the microphone is so that your words are more clearly picked up by the recording equipment. Could you start by giving us your name and where you are from.

Ms Forbes—My name is Michele Forbes and I am the principal of the Nyikina Mangala Community School in the community at Jarlmadangah. Our school is a very small school. We have approximately 30 students. They range in age from four to 17. As a very small school, one of the problems we experience is that we have a low number of students who sit the benchmark test every year. Last year, in 2004, we received approximately \$30,000 as part of ITAS. Having only one child who was in the age group that could sit the WALNA test and another child who was absent on the day of the test means that our school—because it is so small—will have its funding drop a lot. In fact, we could be looking at just a couple of thousand dollars to support our programs, instead of the \$30,000. For us, that is like a teacher's salary.

In our small school, with the age range that we have, it becomes quite a problem to try to meet the needs and to get the required educational outcomes that we seek for our children. It means that we will not be able to afford the extra person that we have for tutoring. In our small community, that is a big thing. We need that person to provide one-on-one tuition and to help us with our accelerated literacy program—which was known as the scaffolding program. In our community we will effectively be one teacher short. Also, because we were not able to get any of the TPA money—which became NIELNS money, which all the other AIC schools get—we will not have any access to the NIELNS money either. So it will really be touch and go this year to try to achieve the programs and the outcomes that we seek for our kids.

CHAIR—Where is your school located?

Ms Forbes—We are about an hour and a half from Derby—just off the highway towards Fitzroy Crossing on Mount Anderson Station.

CHAIR—Have you travelled all the way here for this hearing?

Ms Forbes—We have come here for the conference as well.

CHAIR—So the \$30,000 you previously got was for your in-school tuition?

Ms Forbes—Yes.

CHAIR—And you could nominate the number of students you believed needed that special support?

Ms Forbes—Yes.

CHAIR—Whereas now it is calculated on the students who sit and do not pass the testing? Is that correct?

Ms Forbes—Yes.

Mr Hill—The standard or the benchmark test. That is correct.

CHAIR—I would like to ask you a question about the scaffolding program. If you were actually using the scaffolding program, is there no likelihood of you getting money to continue that initiative in your school?

Ms Forbes—We currently have two teachers who work with that broad range. If you have one teacher who deals with kindergarten and pre-primaries up to class 5 or 10-year-olds and another teacher working with 11- to 17-year olds, it is very hard in that class situation for them to provide that extra one-on-one or small group tuition. We used that program extensively last year to help the children and now we are not going to have the funding. It is very difficult. We do not quite know where we are going to go next with it.

Mr Hill—We would like to address the issue of the scaffolding funding a bit later, talking more generally for all the schools and their support unit. As we are having a roundtable, there may be some people in the room who would like to make some comments on the issue of the transitional program assistance, the TPA funds, which in the last quadrennium became NIELNS funds and in this quadrennium will be attached to the school SRA Indigenous education agreement.

Ms Sutcliffe—I am the principal of Yakanarra Community School, which is not a long way from Fitzroy Crossing. Jessie and I have been at the school since it started back in 1990. We have concerns about the TPA, the transitional funding, because it has been transitional for something like eight to 10 years. That is a very long time. The reason it was set up was that, more than 10 years ago, this particular funding was submission based. When the IESIP funding went from being submission based to per capita, some schools would have lost money. So there was a transition period, which I think was going to be a triennium for three years. That triennium turned into a quadrennium, then there was another quadrennium and here we are in our third quadrennium and we are still being told about this transitional funding: ‘Yes, we’re going to review that.’

Our school became eligible for Commonwealth funding in 1992, which is now 13 years ago. By that stage, IESIP funding had become per capita. There were other schools who received their per capita, and some of them received in excess of \$100,000 of TPA per year. So, in the 10 years since then they have received \$1 million. We made a bit of noise in the last few years, so in this quadrennium we have received \$45,000 per annum. Schools like Jarlmadangah still have not received any, because they are too new. Somebody started to feel sorry for us and for Wulungarra a few years ago, so we received this \$45,000 per annum. I am getting sick of it. This transitional period seems to be going on forever. We are going to address it in our conference this week. Some of our schools are in the ‘quite nice’ category but, because we are not in that

category, those funds need to be split up and added to the per capita rate or something like that so that there is not this disadvantage going on and on.

CHAIR—Your school will sign an agreement directly with DEST as an education provider. What other funds do you get through the IESIP money besides the \$45,000?

Ms Sutcliffe—We get a per capita grant.

CHAIR—Plus the \$45,000.

Ms Sutcliffe—Yes.

CHAIR—And there is no change in this new quadrennium to roll the transitional funding into a higher per capita funding, for example.

Ms Sutcliffe—Correct. Apparently it is going to be transitional for another couple of years. Is that right?

Mr Mack—Yes, it is another two years.

Ms Sutcliffe—Yes. But, as I said, it has been going for about 10 years of transition so far.

Mr Hill—I think an important issue is that the funds are very valued, but it is extremely inequitable. This seems to be continuing. It purely depends on when your school starts to exist—Yakanarra and Wulungarra did not have it for several years, but managed to get some funding. After five years of operation Nyikina Mangala, at Jarlmadangah community, still has not one cent of that money. As each year goes past, that lack of equality grows larger and larger. Something like building it into an extra per capita funding would make it far more equitable amongst schools.

CHAIR—Can I take it then that you do not actually have an ASSPA committee, because your school council is made up of Indigenous people.

Ms Sutcliffe—They are one and the same.

CHAIR—Could you tell us a bit about how your concept plans are going for the ASSPA funding?

Ms Sutcliffe—We are just getting started on those. We have some ideas recorded. It is only in the last month or so that we had a meeting. Geoff Bowley's gang came up to Broome. How long ago was that, Mr Hill?

Mr Hill—That was on 16 November.

Ms Sutcliffe—Didn't we have another one? No, the people with Robin Keen came round.

Mr Hill—That was three weeks ago.

Ms Sutcliffe—So really we have only had an in-depth talk about it three weeks ago.

CHAIR—How many students are there at the school?

Ms Sutcliffe—We have between 40 and 50.

CHAIR—In the past, under the ASSPA funding, you would have been given a per capita amount and that funding was guaranteed.

Ms Sutcliffe—Yes.

CHAIR—There is no guarantee with the ASSPA funding now—is that right?

Ms Sutcliffe—That is correct.

CHAIR—What effect has that had on any programs or participation at your school?

Ms Sutcliffe—I am an optimist. I have been thinking that we will get these forms done and we will get some money. Obviously, we have not been able to spend any of those dollars yet.

CHAIR—What will you be spending them on? Could you give us an example of what you have done with ASSPA funds?

Ms Sutcliffe—We have done some good things with our ASSPA money. We support our language and culture program with bush trips. Wamala here has been head of our Walmajarri language and culture program for 15 years. We have spent ASSPA money on that and on getting specialists in. Because we are just a small school and can only have literacy and numeracy teachers, we get specialists in. We have specialist music teachers, who come in for two weeks a term. Hopefully we will have the Making Movies Roadshow. They come in for five days in the year and our people make their own videos. There is also an Awesome Arts program. We are going to receive five weeks of online support from an art specialist somewhere in Perth and then we are going to have a teacher in residence for three weeks in the third term. Our students will produce some works of art and so on. This will all culminate in a big international Awesome Arts expo in Perth in November. That is all in our concept plan so far. All of those things cost money. As I said, we have had our music specialist out for two weeks already but I have been thinking we will pay her from somewhere else and hopefully the ASSPA money will be sorted by the time we are ready for her to come back next term.

Mr Mack—Dr Jim Heslop from Coolgardie has specific comments about his experience with concept plans.

Dr Heslop—I am the principal at CAPS in Coolgardie. Our community got together during January to put together about \$65,000 in concept plans so that they could meet the first deadline, of 25 January. Those concept plans were submitted to the local DEST office and, following some minor changes to them, nothing else has been heard from them. I understand there is supposed to be a committee meeting to examine the concept plans and their validity as to whether they meet the criteria. That meeting should be held in the next few weeks. If any of them are seen to be fitting the criteria, I will then be asked to rewrite them as a formal submission with more

accurate costings which may then be passed. My understanding is that the concept plans that we have submitted may be some of the only ones that have been submitted because of the early closing date for the first round.

The problem then is that, with a limited amount of funds, I would expect that it is highly unlikely that all of my submissions will be accepted, despite their reasonableness, because if all of mine are accepted then what money would be left to pick up the next round and the round after that? Also, of course, my submissions will be competing against nothing else, so I am not optimistic that the effort we put in to tag the initiatives to the annual school plan will actually have the success that we originally planned. We had the perception that perhaps there was a little more money in the bucket, but now it may be that I do not even get the same amount as I did when I was with ASSPA last year.

CHAIR—How many children are there at your school?

Dr Heslop—There are 135 students from K to year 11, of which currently 33 are boarders from the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and from the Kimberley and other localities. They come to CAPS to board.

CHAIR—So your ASSPA funding last year would have been fairly significant.

Dr Heslop—It was over \$27,000. It was \$27,000 plus a few dollars, and it was used to support the school plan. The concept plans that we came up with were the direct result of the development of our annual plan. The problem we have is that we did not anticipate that we could be sitting for some months before we might get any feedback on whether they are going to be successful or not and therefore I made an error in trying to include the initiatives in this year's school plan. Perhaps I could have looked at it for next year's school plan or something like that.

Senator CARR—Who is funding these activities now?

Dr Heslop—A number of them are not happening at all. The others are being funded by the school by moving funds around from other cost centres that we developed.

Senator CARR—What sorts of things are not happening?

Dr Heslop—We clocked over 4,000 absentee days last year, so the first car off the rank was the employment of what we term the student welfare officer, who goes from class to class first thing in the morning, collects the details of students who are not at school and contacts their parents immediately. We anticipated employing that person for two hours a day to make the calls, create the liaison and perhaps even troubleshoot issues that there might be within that family and support that family. That program is not happening, but it would most definitely be the first thing that we would have gone with in terms of support. That was funding that we were going to put in from the school as well as from the WoSIs, but clearly WoSI was going to pick up a good proportion of the funding. I am not prepared to go ahead with the school's section of the funding if the program dies—it raises expectations only to see them killed off.

Senator CARR—Are there any other activities that you can no longer perform?

Dr Heslop—We have put back the writer-in-residence program. One of the strengths of the scaffolding program, I find, having just come out of the department of education, is that it has provided students with a very rich capacity to write. The ability to actually put what I term very rich sentences together and write is one of the outstanding features of this program. I felt that if we could bring a writer in residence in to simply cap off that program and build it up in line with the environmental programs we have going, then it would add motivation and purpose to the students' development of writing skills. I have put the writer in residence off until probably September but with the proviso that it may not happen at all. Another one is pastoral care programs that we have to do with supporting the National Safe Schools Framework. We will fund those somehow, but that may have to come from another source. That proposal for funding was in our WoSI for this year as well.

I am not saying that none of those will get up. I think at the moment we are confused as to exactly what the process will be and whether the funding will be delayed and what sort of time lines are going to be worked on so that we can actually plan with some expectation of maybe some money coming in. I do not even mind a submission basis—in the olden days, when PCAP was going, we argued in November of the year before to put our submissions up. This year, we are arguing in the year that we need the money, but we do not know what the ground rules are that we are supposed to be playing under.

CHAIR—There is no guarantee of that money either, is there?

Dr Heslop—In fairness, when we went to the meetings in November, DEST said to us: 'Expect nothing.'

Senator CARR—They knew in November you were not going to get any money?

Dr Heslop—We were told to expect nothing. ASSPA used to be run in such a way that you knew what you were going to get so you could sometimes forward spend against that money reimbursing programs. One popular use of ASSPA in many schools was to support in-term swimming lessons for students who could not afford them. Nutrition programs were often supported in that way. Then you could reimburse the school afterwards. In fairness, we were told not to expect that to be on this time. Therefore, we have not gone ahead and made any funding commitments like that. We have simply put them through our school plan on the basis that maybe the funding round would have been a little bit quicker than it has been and we could implement them in our school plan this year.

Senator CARR—What about excursions? Have the excursion programs being reduced?

Dr Heslop—Yes, the excursion program has been reduced. That is another one of our WoSIs, to support the pastoral care program. Again, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility, if the money staggers in some time later in the year, that some of that program can be picked up. But I think it is always useful, for example with students who are new to the school, to take them away for two or three days as an orientation, especially when some of the students have come from places like One Arm Point or Beagle Bay or Wangkatjunka up in the Kimberley. They come such a long distance to Coolgardie. We like to get them away, if we can, for a few days to orientate them to the school. We have not been able to do that as well as I would have liked.

Senator CARR—Is that experience reflected in other schools?

Mr Florisson—I am the Principal of Wongutha CAPS, which is a year 11 and 12 vocational school near Esperance. We have about 60 students and all of them are boarders; they come from the Kimberley and throughout the state. I refer you to the letter we wrote to Mr Bowley on 21 March which details the programs that will stop. Some of these programs were developed by the committee as result of members being enthusiastic about this new program and wanting to put together some funding ideas that we knew were absolutely essential, for instance the long-term funding for a post-school mentoring project for students when they leave the school, to ensure that they go into employment or further training. So these things have been cancelled: the long-term mentoring project and the VEGAS excursion. The incentives sports program has been reduced, the in-school tuition will cease at the end of this turn, the Indigenous parent visitors program has been suspended and the driver training program will be reduced by 50 per cent. While not all of those things have been funded by VEGAS or ASSPA in the past, VEGAS and ASSPA have certainly been an important part of our funding. They have provided for programs that have been essential to the school.

I would like to make a couple of other comments. Firstly, the problem with this has been the transition. There has been no transition funding available, therefore that means you are out on a limb for at least six months. With the WoSI programs, we put in our concept plans in February; we will not hear about them until July and possibly will not get money until August or September, which means we are out in no-man's-land. You do not know what is going to be approved and what is not going to be approved. With the other funding, I guess it is just a matter of waiting until the agreements are sorted out. I imagine they will eventually be sorted out. I suppose the climate of funding has changed over recent years—I have been involved in this for about 20 years. The whole funding thing used to be fairly adversarial: it was them against us, and they were trying to stop us from getting funds and we were trying to get as much as we could. These days it has been much more of a partnership with the funding agencies, and we are seeing this with the Abstudy and the DEST programs. There is certainly a partnership. I think the way this is happening at the moment certainly can affect that whole partnership and the concept of the partnership.

CHAIR—Did you benefit from in-school tuition in previous years?

Mr Florisson—We had a small amount of in-school tuition last year, and the students benefited enormously. We have older children, many of whom have severe literacy problem deficits, so we knew before the advent of in-school tuition that this was what we really needed. We needed to be able to deal with these students on a one-to-one basis, and we have data to show how effective that has been.

Dr Heslop—In-school tuition, or what is now called ITAS, provided us with \$32,000 in second semester last year. This year we will be lucky to get \$24,000 for the entire year. One of the main reasons for that is that, because of our proximity to Kalgoorlie, we are classified as provincial rather than as remote. That reduces our funding by half. If I could pick up the school and shift it 90 kilometres closer to Perth, it would be classified as remote and therefore pick up the extra funding. My colleague alongside me is principal of a school called Kurrawang CAPS, which is seven miles out of Kalgoorlie. Because it is a discrete Indigenous community, it is classified as remote and so picks up the full funding.

I do not mind picking up less funding as long as I can understand the rationale behind the whole arrangement. But, because my school is now a provincial school for ITAS but a remote school for all other classifications, I have lost about \$36,000 that I would have expected to pick up when I was working out last year's budget. Now, I will not pick up more than \$24,000. Added to that, when you remember that a third of my school come from locations that are extremely remote, such as Warakuna and places in the lands as well as in the Kimberleys, and that they come with whatever baggage is associated with that remoteness, the fact that we are classified as provincial rather than as remote makes it just a little more confusing—and I cannot receive any answers either.

CHAIR—Perhaps we will ask DEST those questions when they appear before us in our hearings in Canberra and see if we can provide you with some answers to your questions.

Dr Heslop—Those answers would be appreciated.

CHAIR—Did someone else want to make a comment about ASSPA and the impact of the ASSPA changes?

Mr Mack—My observation is that our largest school is Coolgardie, with 135 students. The point that the delegates to this hearing have made is that a change of \$10,000 is very significant for a very small school. Coolgardie is a very small school and Nyikina Mangala is an extremely small school, so a difference of \$10,000 or \$20,000 dollars makes a big difference to the effective operation of those schools.

Ms Sutcliffe—I am from Yakanarra. I have a comment on the way it is going to be administered now. When it was a per capita system, you knew exactly how much money you were going to get: if you had 50 children, you would get \$10,000 et cetera. Now that it is submission driven, you cannot guarantee anything. Quite often you will have programs such as our music program, and you will want to employ that teacher from year to year. If you have no guarantee of your funding from year to year then it is difficult to make commitments like that. So we cannot guarantee that we can give a job to the music teacher that we used last year and that we would like to use this year.

CHAIR—I think that is the issue that was presented to us in our hearings in the Northern Territory: the uncertainty of the funding. We certainly had evidence of people expending money knowing that, at the end of the day, as you said, it would come to you and could be allocated back to the school. But people were reluctant to put in place any programs, because the funding was just not there. I wonder if some of the Indigenous people here want to make a comment about the changes to the funding programs. In the Northern Territory, Indigenous people at Milingimbi and at Elcho Island, which are two communities off the north coast, put to us that they felt it was hard now to get involved in the school, that they had lost a lot of the power to make decisions about where the money ought to be spent in the school. In fact, at Elcho Island it was put to us that they would write a concept plan and then some mob in an office would decide how that money would be spent, and they were not happy about that. I wonder if some Indigenous people here want to tell us what they think about the changes.

Ms Sutcliffe—I guess there were always guidelines that we had to fit into, so in a way it is not that different. It was not as if Indigenous people could just spend that ASSPA money on whatever they liked; it had to be—

CHAIR—No, but you now write a concept plan and somebody sitting in an office is going to say, ‘Yes to the first two but no to the last five.’

Ms Pickett—But that has not happened to us.

CHAIR—That has not happened to you yet?

Ms Pickett—We have not put the plans in.

Mr Hill—This is all very new to us.

CHAIR—We had an experience in the Northern Territory where some remote Indigenous schools had put in a concept plan that had five areas to it and, the day we were there, we heard that two of the five had been accepted and three had not. So people were a bit cross about that.

Mr Mack—I think, if you come back to us in three months time, when people will have had the experience of the new, they will be able to make a comparison with the experience over the past two quadrenniums. At the moment, it is so new that no-one—I would include administrators as well as community members—is really too sure what it means. I think that is an indication of how slow DEST has been in engaging schools and their communities in the process. It has been extremely slow. That is really what this silence in response to your question indicates.

Mr Hill—I think it also speaks to the whole idea of transition. In this room now, you have school governing bodies and their principals, who are working on finishing the last report for the 2001-04 quadrennium, negotiating with DEST new performance indicators and targets for the new quadrennium and trying to understand what WoSIs, PSPIs and concept plans are. All of this is happening now and is for this year. That is the point I think Jim was making earlier: we are already at the end of March this year and these programs cannot happen because there is no certainty. It is just a real shame that there was not a period of transition to allow the Indigenous independent schools, particularly, which we represent here, to understand what the changes in terms of WoSIs and PSPIs were all about, to allow people to be informed before the changes were enacted. That is something that is not happened.

Ms Sutcliffe—It is a little out of character for DEST. In my 19 years working in independent schools, we did not have something like this sprung on us. In the past, we have had trienniums turned into quadrenniums, which gave time for everyone, particularly the department, to get all the paperwork and plans sorted out before we had to respond. So, Geoff, it is not all bad, your department.

CHAIR—Do the Indigenous people who are here want to talk to us about whether they thought the old system was not working and whether there needed to be changes? Were you happy with the old system or do you not understand why there are new changes? Do you want to make a comment to us at all? If people do not want to comment, that is fine.

Senator ALLISON—I want to ask a question about funding for the Coolgardie school. I think you said there were \$65,000 worth of proposals in your concept plan. What were you entitled to for the same number of students under the old ASSPA funding?

Dr Heslop—I was previously entitled to just over \$27,000 in ASSPA funding. Of course, WoSI has taken in homework centres and VEGAS as well, so under the previous regime the school would have been applying for more than \$27,000; it probably would have gone up to closer to \$50,000. That sort of money is now at risk, because we currently have nothing.

Senator ALLISON—Why did you settle on the figure of \$65,000? Were you encouraged to go for broke? What sort of advice were you given as to the likelihood that you would get \$65,000?

Dr Heslop—I had a perception, obviously wrongly developed, that there was a little more money in the trough this year.

Senator ALLISON—Would that be because the government said that remote areas would benefit from these new arrangements?

Dr Heslop—Yes, that is right. But in the normal review process that we went through as a school, we came up with an annual plan that included initiatives such as the ones I mentioned earlier to do with pastoral care and student attendance. We wrote submissions against those initiatives, through the school plan, so that we could show to DEST and to anyone else that we had an accountability process within the school structure. That is where the figure of \$65,000 came from. The ideas were not so much plucked out of the blue as they were a process of development from a review of 2004 to the actuality of what we needed in 2005. So every cent of the \$65,000 is needed to support the school plan. It is not peripheral funding in that regard, even though it might be fifty-fifty with the school.

I recognise the supplementary nature of the funding, but it still has a core role in meeting some of the needs we have in the school. So \$65,000 was a well worked out figure. We were not trying to go for broke, but we were under the impression that we could probably obtain more money with a properly worked out submission. I felt that we worked out a very good submission. We had it couched in a proper way to answer questions on accountability—the fact that the funds were truly being used to support programs that were integral to the running of the school.

Senator ALLISON—Part of that \$65,000 is for the student welfare officer two days a week, the swimming program, the excursion plan and so on. Are they all part of the concept plan?

Dr Heslop—Yes. The student welfare officer will be there two hours a day, from nine to 11, as I anticipate it for that person. But there are other areas, particularly to do with pastoral care focusing on mental health, that we feel are very important and that come up through the review process. There is support for VEGAS, career awareness camps and the orientation process of students, and the general welfare of our young people. Also, there is support for other features such as NAIDOC Week and the running of a writer in residence program, as I mentioned before, to build upon the scaffolding initiatives and support for sport carnivals, such as swimming carnivals. Quite frankly, we have a policy that no-one misses out in our school if their family has not got the money for it. Therefore ASSPA in the past has helped and teachers have put their

hands in their pockets to help as well. We will continue with that. It is just that we now need to look at the money in other ways, and to support the school we have made some very strong shifts.

Senator ALLISON—I will ask a more general question. Are you fully publicly funded or do parents pay fees?

Dr Heslop—We are 99 per cent fully funded. There are a couple of families who pay fees because they are not eligible under Abstudy and still wish to send their children to the school.

Senator ALLISON—Is it the case that in some of the places where your schools are located there is not a government school?

Dr Heslop—Yes, that is true. We get a lot of students from, for example, Beagle Bay. Beagle Bay has a Catholic primary school. It does not have a government school. Also in the Lands, where I was once a director, very few of the schools can provide an adequate secondary program as well, and the parents feel that their children need to get into a different environment for secondary and postsecondary schooling.

Senator ALLISON—Which of the schools represented here has run a breakfast or other nutrition program as part of ASSPA funding? What has happened to those programs? What has been the result in terms of student attendance?

Mr Little—My name is Grant. I am from CAPS Kurrawang. Kurrawang is a small Indigenous school between Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie. I would like to say, as an aside about ASSPA, that I feel every school in AICS actually ran ASSPA committees as they were supposed to be run. I think the changes have occurred because in a lot of other places ASSPA did not seem to be as effective as it could be. The sheer facts that these schools are Indigenous and are run by Indigenous boards and that Indigenous parents have a major part in the day to day running of the schools mean that ASSPA worked incredibly effectively in those AICS schools. However, if you look at the broad range of schools across Australia, the comment that I have heard is that some were not effectively administered and some schools did not have ASSPA committees, which is possibly the case in suburban areas where the Indigenous population is quite small. In our schools, where pretty well 100 per cent of our students are Indigenous and therefore the parental support and input is 100 per cent Indigenous, ASSPA was probably one of the most effective programs that was running. I cannot understand why something that was not broken needed to be fixed, but perhaps in other spheres and aspects of ASSPA across Australia there were some issues that needed to be dealt with, so I guess in one sense the AICS schools are an unintended outcome of change. On the other hand, the thing is that there is potential for more money to be there for my little school—our little school—in Kurrawang. ASSPA used to pay about \$9,000 or \$10,000. In a small school, as Les Mack has said, \$10,000 makes an incredible difference in terms of balancing the budget or how much further you are in the red.

To come back to your question about nutrition programs, we were running a morning tea program where fruit was provided through ASSPA funds. The basis of that was for nutrition but it was also to increase attendance. There were broad issues to do with that, but part of the reason was personal health as well. A lot of kids were having a lot of time off school. So ASSPA

provided morning tea, and that morning tea was purely fruit. That was it. There was nothing extra; there was nothing flash about it. It was purely fruit.

That has finished, and this year we have had to charge the kids through our school canteen for food at recess. That has been okay. We are selling things such as muesli bars and fruit at a subsidised price. However, the school is now coping with that loss out of its general revenue. An issue, too, is that some kids are missing out on their morning tea. They do not have the money to buy it, whereas last year they were being fed through the nutrition program funded through ASSPA.

Looking at the program from the point of view of feeding the children, it was feeding them something healthy. Part of our school health program was to look at the importance of fruit and vegetables and things like that. That is just one small example of how the stopping of that program has clearly affected the kids at Kurrawang. As I said, some kids do not have access to morning tea as they should. Ultimately, if kids are getting hungry then we are looking at their learning outcomes being affected. Learning outcomes are really what schools are all about. These are clear examples of how the stopping of ASSPA funding has caused an issue there. As to your question about the nutrition program, it just does not run anymore.

Mr Hill—I would like to add that sitting in this room are delegates from seven extremely remote communities, all of whom have a healthy nutrition program running in their school. That has been the case for the 20-plus years that I have been working for the remote Indigenous community schools. I guarantee they will continue to do so, by hook or by crook, but changes to funding obviously make that more difficult. As I look around this room, I can guarantee the remote schools that have always had their health and nutrition programs will continue them because they are an absolutely vital part of the school. Part of the reason that these communities have the Aboriginal independent community schools is so that they can do those sorts of things.

Ms Sutcliffe—I would be interested to know what the attendance rates are like at other Indigenous schools around Australia. I do not have much idea of what they would be. In our little community there are 120 to 130 people, with 40 to 50 children at school. I did my IESIP report last week and found that for last year we had an average attendance of 86 per cent for our primary kids. Our high school kids were actually a bit of a bad bunch last year, and I said to Mr Hill that I was surprised we had 70 per cent attendance for a very scruffy bunch of students. Part of the reason for that attendance is the breakfast and fruit programs. In the morning we go around tooting the horn and saying it is seven o'clock and time for school. If it is not a pay week and people are scrounging around for food, we say to them, 'There's breakfast at school if you haven't got any,' and people just jump in the school car and off they go to school. I think things like that make a real difference.

As people here have said, the vitamins and so on that kids get from having the fruit break really help in improving their health and you do not have as many people with colds or other things that make them sick and unable to perform at school. I would be interested to know what attendance rates are like elsewhere.

Ms Cox—I just want to say that ASSPA in Noonkanbah was running really good. We have bought things for our kids and the kids get fruit at playtime, too. And we ran our homemaker and

learn to stay at school programs. ASSPA was something that was not broken, and I was just telling our principal that I miss the way it was running before. That is all I would like to say

Mr Mack—I will begin by talking about the Scaffolding Literacy Program, because I know that it is dear to many people's hearts in this room. The eight schools have been involved, in a full-blooded way, probably since 2001, as large group, although Wongutha has been involved with Scaffolding Literacy since 1999. It has produced results that blew me away when I started working for the support unit three years ago. I refer you to the page with three graphs on it that I have circulated. It shows the trends for all of the eight schools that have been involved with Scaffolding Literacy, which, by the way, is now called the National Accelerated Literacy Program. You can see the trends in the fluency levels of the students, or the accuracy levels of the students' reading of benchmark level texts, from early 2001 through to late 2004 for junior primary, years 1 to 3; middle and upper primary, years 4 to 7; and secondary school. We found that when the kids are older—that is, when they have a better concept of what literacy is and also better cognitive capacities—the rates of improvement are quite stunning. The third graph illustrates the shift: as you can see, in early 2001 close to 45 per cent of the students who were of secondary school age were not readers at all. That trend was going in the opposite direction by late last year.

One of the issues, again, focuses on DEST's slowness in administering its programs. I refer you to a press release from the minister for education, Brendan Nelson—it should be in your papers—which came out on 10 April announcing the National Accelerated Literacy Program. This program was to be kicked off with seeding funds for the Northern Territory last year and, in a more substantive way, with existing players—that is, in the Northern Territory, us, Shelong College and so on. We are concerned about maintaining the effort in terms of consultancy support to the schools. We have a consultant located in Broome, one located in Esperance, another located in Perth and a part-time one, who operates from Canberra, serving the schools. At the moment we have managed to pay them with money borrowed from the Association of Independent Schools. My guess is that that level of goodwill from AIS is going to run out very soon. In the meantime, however—and this is something that I have spoken to DEST about recently—it is very important, if this is a truly national project, as the program's title, the National Accelerated Literacy Program, suggests, that the eight schools are involved in the negotiation of what form that should take, because that has implications for us.

We are concerned that there may be negotiations happening in the Northern Territory—clearly the largest player. We accept that. While we are probably a small player, we consider ourselves significant and we want to be involved in the negotiations of any agreements because that then impacts on what we do and what sorts of services we can provide the schools. It also impacts on the way we can contribute to the development and the roll-out of Accelerated Literacy.

CHAIR—According to this press release, \$8 million will go to the Territory and \$6 million to other parts of the country. How much of that \$6 million will be allocated perhaps through your system?

Mr Mack—We put in a submission which has been also tabled. Tim has handed it out. We asked for just over \$700,000 for one year and that would be multiplied by four years.

CHAIR—The funding is for 2005-08. Have you heard whether that submission has been successful yet?

Mr Mack—No.

Mr Hill—The blunt time line is that that press release is from April last year. We had our submission submitted as requested in November last year. We are now at the end of March and we are deeply in hock to AISWA and to paying our consultants and we still have no idea. So we are 12 months from that press release.

Mr Mack—This seems to me to be a similar situation to the one that Grant Little raised in that it is an accidental consequence of being independent. There is plenty of flexibility, probably, working with large government agencies or large systems; there is not much wiggle room for small independent players. The Association of Independent Schools is essentially in that category. We desperately need the funds. I guess a simple solution would be to have an interim agreement, if we still need more time for negotiations—and I think the AIC schools would accept that—to release funds till, say, 30 June or to the end of the third quarter to allow us to operate and give us a transitional period in order to conduct negotiations but continue to provide the services that the schools desperately need.

CHAIR—It might be like your new hostel, Dr Heslop. It looks like you are going to have the minister come out and open it before you have been given the funds to build it.

Dr Heslop—The serious side to that is that we have had to go to the bank to cover us for the funds that DEST have provided us.

CHAIR—I can see that in your submission. You had an announcement in May 2004 that you would get \$220,000.

Dr Heslop—Yes.

CHAIR—In order to go ahead and build the hostel, you have had to go cap in hand to the bank for that money. You are still waiting for that money to be given to you, and the hostel is nearly completed.

Dr Heslop—A couple of Fridays ago I did sign the contract with DEST. I have not heard back yet whether any money is being released. The hostel will be finished in about five weeks. I think we have paid all bar about \$80,000 on the hostel. I am starting to wonder what the point of the money was in a sense, because we have been able to pay for it. But we are now in debt to the bank, with all the fees and the arrangements, to increase our various lendings. It would be nice if DEST could pay the money that the minister personally promised.

CHAIR—Including the fees, charges and interest, no doubt, on the money you have had to borrow.

Dr Heslop—I would not be so ungracious.

CHAIR—No, but we can be when we ask them.

Dr Heslop—I would like to think that, if Minister Nelson were actually at CAPS to shake hands about it and knew that the money had not arrived, then he would be a little disappointed. I would like to think that he is an honourable man and he would be disappointed if the money he promised personally, on the grounds of CAPS, had never come.

CHAIR—I am sure that when they read this transcript it will alert them to the fact that they will be asked questions about it when their time comes.

Dr Heslop—I am hopeful, though, that the money will be released in some form soon.

CHAIR—Do we have any other issues that we need to raise or that you want to raise with the committee?

Mr Mack—On page 8 on the impact of delays just on the Indigenous education agreement for the mainstream support unit operations. This is what John Hill and I are involved in. That is outlined on page 8 and over to page 9. It echoes what people have said about delays, but I have not experienced delays like this ever before in terms of developing agreements and getting them signed off.

Mr Hill—Yes, I think we all agree that generally our relationship with DEST—as Mr Florisson said earlier—has gone far past adversarial and has been excellent for many years now, but it is not good at the moment. And I think the last big issue, which we bring up with every single government, person, committee and reference group, is that there has never been a continuing, designated bucket of funding for teacher housing for remote Indigenous independent schools. There are much-talked-about improving educational outcomes. We have a large body of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this room who are totally committed to it, and we still bow, beg and scrape to find places for teachers to live in.

CHAIR—Yes, the Catholic Education Office in WA raised the same issue with us earlier this afternoon.

Mr Hill—There has never been a continuing—

CHAIR—They cannot put teachers out there because they do not have the housing.

Mr Hill—In this day and age, you need to house people in a comfortable fashion to get them to live and work in remote communities. There have been a couple of one-off releases of funding, which we have been very grateful for—two, I think, over the years—but there has never been a bucket of funds to allow for teacher housing.

CHAIR—How many houses would you say are needed for at least your schools at this point in time?

Mr Hill—You could easily say—certainly for the remote schools—one at least in each remote school community, so that is 12. I can think of one school in the Pilbara which could do with half a dozen. So we need perhaps 20.

Ms Sutcliffe—Thirty.

Mr Hill—Thirty would be good, yes. We need lots.

Mr Mack—The issue of teacher housing must be understood not to be whitefellas looking for comfortable accommodation. It actually affects the retention of teachers. It then affects relationships between professional teachers and the communities. It is not: ‘Oh, another whitefella who’s only going to be here for a little while and who’ll be moving on soon.’ It also affects the issue of professional development. Coming back to the topic of scaffolding literacy and accelerated literacy, one of the things you will see if you have time to have a look at the submissions is that a big chunk of our effort is managing change, because the accelerated literacy methodology does challenge orthodox notions of teaching literacy. Once people have a handle on it and then move on, you actually get others coming in. It is a treadmill. It is something that we are working on, but it is not a silver bullet without a lot of effort.

Mr Hill—In the case of Nyikina Mangala—the newest school, which we started the discussion with—again, they were incredibly lucky that, as an independent school which the community is devoted to, they received a one-off amount of money when the school started, to get a transportable house. The community has actually given over housing which the community really requires, because the people wish to have teachers teaching their kids and improving their outcomes. That is just an example, because they are a new school, but it is the same everywhere. It is the same scenario in all the schools.

Ms Sutcliffe—I know that the Western Australian DEST have done what they can in individual instances. There have been approaches from Wulungarra and approaches from Purnululu, in desperate straits, and the state has helped out. But it is a pretty varied, stopgap sort of a method. The rest of the schools do have needs as well, but if you have not made time to get your desperate message across then you just sit around for years without adequate housing and therefore without good staff. You cannot attract and keep good staff for years and years if they are living in some lean-to without decent facilities.

CHAIR—It is not a problem that is just isolated to Western Australia. It is certainly a common problem in the Territory as well. Is there anyone else who wanted to make a comment before we finish?

Ms Pickett—I am from Wulungarra school. I want to bring up an issue—and I do not think we have time to discuss it at all—to do with the tyranny of the per capita system and how it impacts on the very small schools such as Nyikina Mangala and Wulungarra. We are even smaller than Michele’s mob. We only have 25 children at the moment, but we do cater for children from three years old up to 17 years old. We have a primary teacher and a secondary teacher. Stretching those teachers’ abilities to cover all of those areas is very difficult so I also teach one class a day. I get up a bit earlier each day to do that. That is not necessarily going to be sustainable for the school.

The other thing is that that per capita money is all very well if you are going on an excursion, but if you are bringing out a specialist then you still have to pay the same amount of money to bring a specialist out for two or three kids as you do for 10 or 20 kids. That is very difficult for us. I understand the difficulty for those programs done on a submission basis and the uncertainty of that, but we only lost \$6,000 from ASSPA because we have such a small enrolment. It is just something that we need to keep in mind. Not all schools are equal simply because we are remote

or simply because we are in a particular category. You have the same amount of expense in a school of 25 as you do in a school of 50. You do not get any more staff, for instance. That is something that needs to be noted when systems are being changed and it is a good time to look at that.

Ms Sutcliffe—That should somehow be factored into the formula—economies of scale.

Mr Little—I have concerns with the outcome of this if it becomes a DEST-bashing exercise with regard to our colleague behind us, who I think works tirelessly for us. Kevin Brahm and the new incumbent, Robin Keen, have certainly done their best, particularly given the fact that their hands are tied to a certain extent as well. So I would like to thank them and applaud them for the efforts they have made on our behalf.

CHAIR—You should be aware that, when federal parliament sat the week before last, this committee handed down an interim report following our four days of hearings in the Northern Territory. The view of the majority of the committee was that we were so concerned about the crisis that is happening in Aboriginal education in terms of implementing this funding that we wanted to alert the minister to that before our reporting date of 12 May with the hope that some changes would be made. The committee proposed that this year be used as a transitional year—that programs be funded as they were last year while the administration and implementation were significantly improved. That has not been accepted by the government, and the government members' comments on the report I think reflect that to some degree. Even though that is the government members' report, we have not seen the minister yet change course. Thank you for your comments, but this inquiry is really looking at the government's policy, the administration of that policy, and the effect it is having on schools and parents.

Mr Little—I guess I am saying that there are some tireless workers in DEST as well whose hands are tied by the various policies which they have to try and enact—and they do not have the adequacies to do that as well. I just wanted to compliment the DEST people here in WA who each school has personal contact with. They definitely wave our flag very vigorously on our behalf.

CHAIR—On behalf of the committee can I thank you very much for making your time available to us today. The evidence from the different schools that we have heard today does assist us in our report-writing. The stories we gather about the impact of these changes do assist us when we come to compile our report and put a view back to the Senate about where we believe the new arrangements are going. So thank you very much for your time. I am sorry that we have kept you so late.

Subcommittee adjourned at 6.05 p.m.