

## CONCLUSION

... as long as I have been in this business, the more I know the less I understand – so good luck.<sup>1</sup>

10.1 This inquiry has examined some of the more significant reports undertaken in Indigenous education over the past ten years. In general, it has found a mixed record on implementation of the recommendations made in these reports. In some instances, recommendations have been backed up by government programs and funding initiatives but there has been little enthusiasm with regard to some of the more problematic areas such as self determination and Indigenous control of educational institutions.

10.2 Nevertheless, the Committee found a high level of support for the goals and principles of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. The commitment of dedicated and consistent levels of supplementary funding for Indigenous education was seen as one of the most significant practical outcomes. The involvement of all Australian governments in a coordinated national approach to achieving common goals in Indigenous education was also seen as positive, although there were some concerns over the extent to which the national policy recognised or catered for diversity among Indigenous communities.

10.3 In conducting its inquiry the Committee was made aware of a number of fundamental debates in Indigenous education. These included debates over the role of culturally inclusive curricula, teacher preparation, and language and literacy issues. The Committee sees the climate of debate surrounding these issues as a healthy development and a sign of progress. The Committee has documented some of the arguments on these issues in this report. The Committee recognises that diversity of opinion in many instances may reflect the diversity of experience within Indigenous communities. The Committee observes, however, that the majority of Indigenous people share two basic expectations of education: that it will provide access to the same mainstream opportunities as those available to non-Indigenous Australians; and that it will affirm and value Indigenous culture, languages and spiritual beliefs.

10.4 That there has been significant progress over the last ten years is undeniable. Some of the changes in educational participation and achievement are documented in this report. Indigenous people still lag behind non-Indigenous people in many areas but there have been improvements. The Committee noticed many encouraging developments in its hearings and visits. Many of the areas visited for the inquiry were in the process of implementing more culturally inclusive curriculum and teaching practices. The teaching of Indigenous studies subjects and languages has also progressed significantly. Indigenous people have become involved in educational decision making through participation in ASSPA committees and through

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1 Professor Paul Hughes, *Hansard*, Canberra, 30 August 1999, p. 339

involvement in determining the content of school programs. Levels of Indigenous employment in education have also increased, even if predominantly at the lower employment levels. The Committee noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) were employed in almost all of the schools visited for the inquiry.

10.5 However, the Committee notes some continuing concerns and failures. Perhaps of most concern to the Committee were the continuing low levels of teacher preparation for teaching Indigenous students. The Committee believes more could be done to improve the preparation of teachers. Government education departments, as the main employers of teachers, need to do more to ensure that universities do a better job of preparing teachers. The Committee is also concerned at the low levels of employment of Indigenous people as teachers. The Committee acknowledges that competing areas of employment make it difficult for governments to take action but considers that more could be done to retain Indigenous people within the teaching profession. The Committee also considers that a consistent national approach to improving the working conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) is long overdue. For many Indigenous students, AIEWs provide the most consistently visible Indigenous presence in education. Their importance deserves greater recognition.

10.6 The high level of absenteeism among Indigenous school students was a significant issue raised with the Committee in many locations. Community members and educators were concerned at the impact of absenteeism on student achievement. The Committee understands that a range of factors can be involved in absenteeism, including disrupted family circumstances, high levels of transience, the nature of the school environment, and community attitudes towards education. The Committee notes advice from the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs that work is currently being undertaken in the development of a national Indigenous school attendance strategy. The Committee also notes advice from some Indigenous community members themselves that the remedy for absenteeism lies at least partly with Indigenous communities.

10.7 Adult education is another important area that generally receives little prominence in policy making. The Committee believes that it is a particularly important area for Indigenous people. The most significant increases in Indigenous educational participation in recent years have been among the mature age Indigenous population. Many of these students come from low levels of previous educational achievement. Adult education has an important role to play in community development and deserves greater prominence in Indigenous educational policy making. The Committee is encouraged by the inclusion of community development training for Indigenous adults as one of the priorities of the MCEETYA national strategy, but has some concerns over the extent to which this has been reflected in actual policies to date.

10.8 The Committee also notes the obvious fact that Indigenous students are subject to many of the same changes in curriculum and educational delivery that affect

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all students. Concerns were raised with the Committee that some of these changes could impact adversely on Indigenous education and might work against some of the broader aims of Indigenous educational policy. Specific concerns were raised with regard to vocational education and training, and teacher supply. These broader changes need to be monitored carefully to ensure that Indigenous students are not further disadvantaged.

10.9 The Committee was made acutely aware of the complex inter-relationships involved in addressing many Indigenous educational needs. Factors such as health and economic well-being have a strong impact on levels of educational participation, and are in turn influenced by the educational levels of Indigenous peoples. One of the strongest messages to come out of the Committee's hearings was the need for holistic approaches that involve action across a range of areas. Educational improvements on their own have little chance of success without improvements in health care, social and community well-being, and general living conditions. While progress in these areas depends fundamentally on the involvement of Indigenous communities, the support of government agencies working cooperatively to provide an appropriate and sensitive 'whole of government' approach is imperative.

10.10 In concluding, the Committee believes strongly that Indigenous education needs to remain in the forefront of policy debate in this country. A number of submissions to the inquiry called for regular national reviews of Indigenous education similar to the 1994 national review. The Committee notes that the NATSIEP is about to enter its fourth triennium of operation. The Committee believes that a comprehensive review of the national policy should be undertaken in 2002, at the end of the fourth triennium of operation.

