



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Education of students with disabilities

TUESDAY, 2 JULY 2002

SYDNEY

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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SENATE
EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS
AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 2 July 2002

Members: Senator George Campbell (*Chair*), Senator Tierney (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Barnett, Carr, Crossin and Stott Despoja

Substitute members: Senator Allison for Senator Stott Despoja

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Boswell, Buckland, Calvert, Chapman, Cherry, Collins, Coonan, Crane, Crowley, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Forshaw, Harradine, Harris, Hutchins, Knowles, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Payne, Sherry and Watson

Senators in attendance: Senator Carr (*Subcommittee Chair*) and Senators Allison and Tierney

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:

- a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:
 - i) the criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap,
 - ii) the accuracy with which students' disability related needs are being assessed,
 - iii) the particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas,
 - iv) the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs,
 - v) access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors,
 - vi) the nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students,
 - vii) teacher training and professional development, and;
 - viii) the legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation
- b) what the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.

WITNESSES

ARMSTRONG, Mrs Karina Frances, Disability Initiative Coordinator, Enterprise and Career Education Foundation	1
BAKER, Ms Beverly May, President, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales.....	77
BERRYMAN, Mr John William, Chief Executive, Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children	15
DAGWELL, Ms Robyn, Team Leader, School Aged Services, Royal Blind Society.....	28
DE MAR, Mrs Karen Elizabeth, Director, Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales.....	53
DUNNE, Mr Leo Matthew, President, Australian Parents Council Inc.....	69
HEALEY, Mr William John, Chief Executive Officer, Enterprise and Career Education Foundation.....	1
JOHNSTON, Mrs Sandra Gail, Parent Representative, Royal Blind Society	28
LEIGH, Associate Professor Gregory Ross, Assistant Chief Executive (Educational Services), Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children.....	15
LEMME, Ms Angela, Research Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales.....	77
LONERGAN, Mrs Josephine, Executive Director, Australian Parents Council Inc.....	69
LUELF, Mrs Barbara Jean, Councillor, Special Education Committee, Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia Inc. and President, ICPA-NSW	40
LUNN, Ms Helen Elaine, Manager, Child and Family Services, Royal Blind Society	28
MITCHELL, Ms Kerry Elizabeth, Member, Management Committee, Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales	53
WHITING, Dr Paul Raymond, Treasurer, Australian Federation of SPELD Associations; President, Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales	53

Subcommittee met at 9.02 a.m.

ARMSTRONG, Mrs Karina Frances, Disability Initiative Coordinator, Enterprise and Career Education Foundation

HEALEY, Mr William John, Chief Executive Officer, Enterprise and Career Education Foundation

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee. On 13 March 2002, the Senate asked this committee to:

... inquire into the education of students with disabilities, including learning disabilities, throughout all levels and sectors of education, with particular reference to:

(a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs ...

Before we commence taking evidence today, I wish to state for the record that all witnesses appearing before the committee are protected by parliamentary privilege with respect to their evidence. Parliamentary privilege refers to special rights and immunities attached to the parliament or its members and others necessary for the discharge of parliamentary functions without obstruction or fear of prosecution. Any act by any person which disadvantages a witness on account of evidence given before the Senate or any of its committees is a breach of privilege. I welcome all observers to the public hearing.

I welcome representatives of the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation. The committee has before it submission 173. Are there any changes or corrections you wish to make to the written submission?

Mr Healey—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of evidence to be given confidentially. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. Do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr Healey—I want to place our submission in context, in terms of both our organisation and broader reforms to the schooling system that are currently being implemented through the support of state and Commonwealth ministers. Our agency was established by the Commonwealth to support the transition of young people into adult life. We are seen as a catalytic organisation that is looking at finding innovative ways to support changes to our schooling system. You may be aware that state and federal ministers have committed now to a statement on transition for young people, particularly young people at risk. I think this inquiry needs to consider that commitment as well as the broader MCEETYA framework for vocational and educational training in schools, which also talks about more of a case management approach for all students, particularly those at risk. In many cases our experience is that a more case management approach for young people leads to better outcomes in that transition process. It is probably true that students with disabilities, because of their unique problems, have experienced a case management approach more than the mainstream student population but

there is a view across the schooling systems now that that should be translated more generally across the way we prepare young people, and there are commitments to things like pathway plans for young people in the junior years of schooling to assist in that process.

The first thing for us to say is that we think this is an important inquiry because in many cases it could add value to the thrust of a much broader agenda that ministers have committed to. The second thing is that we are here because we have had experience with a couple of programs where we think some of the benefits of case management have been endorsed. However, we also feel that those programs identify a couple of issues which need to be considered in relation to issues of joined-up services across government agencies. This is a perennial problem that we are experiencing now in this broader transition agenda. The submission is quite specific. We are really here to tell you about our experience; we are not necessarily in a position to comment on items 1 to 3 in the terms of reference about definitions of disabilities and some of the funding issues, but we do believe the experiences we have had with our three pilot projects provide us with some insights into the actual delivery of services for youth with disabilities. That concludes my opening remarks.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Mrs Armstrong, did you want to add anything?

Mrs Armstrong—I just want to put in context why ECEF embarked on this initiative 2½ years ago. The then ASTF board and then the ECEF board endorsed an initiative to look at trying to include students with disabilities in our existing vocational learning programs. The other important point to make, which has probably come out in our submission, is that we are linking very closely to the work of what was the ANTA Disability Forum and is now the Australian Disability Training and Advisory Council on the Bridging Pathways strategy. In fact, our initiative came out of initial consultations with those groups.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Mr Healey, if I understood you correctly, you said you are not able to help us much with the first three terms of reference?

Mr Healey—I do not think it is in our area of expertise to say just what defines disabled students. In terms of access to the three programs we have piloted, the participants in those programs broadly represent the cross-section of different groups of disabilities from minor intellectual impairment through to other areas of disability.

CHAIR—Your submission states on page 3 that the definitions of disability vary from one educational jurisdiction to another. Are you at least able to help us by providing advice on your experience of how these different definitions apply? What sorts of problems does it cause for you as an organisation?

Mrs Armstrong—These are problems experienced at the local level in the three projects. They are not so much problems, but because we are a national organisation we were trying to look at national definitions. The projects themselves had issues about how the students were assessed and therefore able to be supported through disability support services, for example those Family and Community Services support systems and other educational support systems across the government. For example, in some states some learning difficulties seemed to be covered and not others. There seemed to be support for students in those areas and not in other states. There seemed to be quite a bit of difference in the inclusion of different groups. We were

trying to look at the definition under the Disability Discrimination Act, which is very broad, and felt that we could not really extend it to cover all those areas. Principally, what we have tried to do is look at what the score is under Centrelink, because we try to ally our work with the Commonwealth Competitive Employment, Placement and Training agencies, who have been assisting us in these partnerships.

CHAIR—So that is the definition that you worked under?

Mrs Armstrong—That is what we have been advised to do by the ANTA Disability Forum, now ADTAC.

CHAIR—You do work under that?

Mrs Armstrong—That is what we have been doing, yes.

CHAIR—How many students with disabilities do you assist?

Mrs Armstrong—Currently, within the three pilot projects, we have indicated in the submission that we have assisted 158 students. Over the next two years, through those three pilot projects, we will be assisting around 200 students. In addition to that, through our mainstream workplace learning programs funded and supported by ECEF, there are some 2,000 students across the country who are not assisted through this pilot project but certainly participate in a reduced manner through workplace learning programs.

Mr Healey—Can I just clarify that. These three projects we are talking about today were an incubator to see what the issues were in helping specific kids with disabilities. They were targeted at these kids to find out what the impediments were and what the processes were. Basically, our role is to try and provide advice on what works. The issue that we have, as Karina mentioned, is: just what is the definition of someone with a disability, particularly in the intellectual area? In many cases, there are a lot of young people that may have a problem but it is not determined. It is very hard. One of the things that has emerged is the definitional question and the subsequent resource requirements that support people with a particular problem.

CHAIR—You can refresh my memory, but you have a budget of about \$100 million over the forward estimates period—is that right?

Mr Healey—We have a budget of \$21 million a year over four years.

CHAIR—How much money would you say you spend on students with disabilities from that budget?

Mr Healey—Half of that budget goes to support 229 local partnerships around the country that support workplace learning. As Karina said, there are about 2,000 participants. There are about 80,000 students who benefit from those placements, and 2,000 of those 80,000 students have a disability. In addition to that, our organisation has committed around—

Mrs Armstrong—The total amount over the four years with which we are funding the three projects is \$560,000. We have also committed some \$200,000 over the four-year period for project management, resource development and other advocacy work.

CHAIR—So you are saying you have spent \$700,000 specifically on disabilities—

Mrs Armstrong—It has not been spent yet, but it will be spent.

CHAIR—That is your intention?

Mrs Armstrong—Yes.

Mr Healey—At the moment, these three projects have been funded to 2003. Part of our role, ultimately, is to take that learning, try and influence mainstream policy development and provide a blueprint to lead to lasting reform. For us, it is more important to be a catalyst and to find out what the problems are and help the systems change. As you are aware, our funding is only to 2005.

CHAIR—Yes, I am aware of that. The submission also speaks on page 3 about the groups of people that support your work, and you list here parents and students. Could you indicate to us which parents and students organisation you are referring to?

Mrs Armstrong—It is not an organisation. We are referring to the parents and the students of the participating pilot projects across three states. We are not referring to actual associations.

CHAIR—You indicate that three state governments support the initiatives. Which are they, and how do you measure their support?

Mrs Armstrong—The state governments are those that are associated with the three projects—that is, where the projects are located. The education department of the New South Wales state government is aware of our project and is very supportive of what we are doing. In fact, on occasions we have had meetings together with that department and the New South Wales Department of Community Services to look at the issues and to gain their support.

CHAIR—Okay. That is one state. What are the other states?

Mrs Armstrong—In Tasmania we have the GATE project, which is discussed in the submission. By virtue of the small state, the project has very close relationships with state departments. The Tasmanian project is also connected to what we call a mainstream workplace learning program. It already has quite close contact with the department, which is very supportive of the work. In Tasmania contact has been made between, and certainly meetings have joined up the services of, the department of health, the department of family and community services and the Department of Education. The South Australian education department through the EVE strategy are very aware and very supportive of our project and have regular meetings with the proponents.

Mr Healey—That particular reference relates to these three specific projects, rather than the organisation as a whole. We have other links—

CHAIR—I appreciate that. I am concerned that your submission is extremely general. We could have had more specifics in it, given the size of the amount of money that the Commonwealth is appropriating for your organisation. I think that we could have had more detail of the work that you are doing, and that is the point of these questions at this stage.

Mr Healey—Can I just respond to that?

CHAIR—Yes, of course.

Mr Healey—Basically, the purpose of this submission was to focus on one particular area of our work in relation to the terms of reference. The previous board allocated funding for the specific needs of students with disabilities, and I think those three projects are relevant to this inquiry. We did not see that our submission needed to justify the organisation's involvement on a broad scale.

CHAIR—No. You have indicated to me that you cannot assist us with the first three terms of reference, which are really important issues, particularly for a national organisation like yours. One of the biggest problems we face in Commonwealth-state relations is what we might call the failure to develop a national vocational education system. This committee has discussed this at length. You seem to be highlighting to us, yet again, examples of how that failure is producing quite serious blockages. Obviously, I was seeking further advice from you on those matters because it would have been very helpful.

Senator ALLISON—I am interested in the way the proposals are funded. You said that 87 proposals were received. Does that mean that, as you invite submissions from other groups, your organisation does not actually deliver these services? If that is the case, who will deliver those programs?

Mr Healey—This particular process commenced under the previous organisation, which has subsequently been rolled into the Enterprise and Career Education Foundation. At that time the board, of which I was a member, indicated that this was an area of specific need and allocated some funding. At that stage we were primarily basing our operations on a project funding model. We already had a large number of local partnerships around the country, and we called for submissions. As a result of that, we had 87 submissions, and then there was an evaluation process which led to the three specific initiatives that we funded. I think the new board is of the view that that sort of approach is perhaps unfair to people out there in the field and that a more targeted approach based on a logical partner or area and a more controlled pilot project is the way that we will go in the future. We did call for submissions, and then there was an evaluation and a subsequent decision to fund three initiatives. That was based on the previous project funding model that was in place.

Senator ALLISON—But you have found that that is not targeted enough; is that what you are saying?

Mr Healey—I think part of the problem at the moment with a lot of funding in these sorts of areas is that it is still focused on project funding models, which are very closed ended. What you do find is that there is enormous frustration about the short-term nature of the funding. In many cases, much of the learning that comes from a partnership approach is lost because of the stringent accountability mechanisms that exist in project funding. So we are exploring the possibility of entering into partnerships with organisations that have the requisite skills to actually pilot initiatives over a longer period of time.

The question, of course, then is: how do you ensure access and accountability? The key for our organisation is not necessarily to deliver a mainstream outcome; it is to provide guidance and information to the general system on what can work. I take the senator's point about our lack of advice on definitional issues, for example. That may be one of the things in the future that we can explore to provide guidance to the mainstream systems. Clearly, joined-up services, including a better approach to joined-up services in particular areas, is one of the things that we wish to show can lead to more effective outcomes.

Senator ALLISON—I note you say in your submission that you are hoping to provide a blueprint to lead to lasting reform. Does this mean that out of those three proposals you will choose one model which is better than the others and present it to the minister? Is this the blueprint that you are talking about, and who is this blueprint for?

Mr Healey—I think the blueprint is across the board, not only to our minister but also to agencies and government in general. If you look at this transition agenda that I mentioned earlier and you look at the various agencies that have a responsibility to support that, it goes well beyond education. One of the concerns we raise here—for example, in relation to the CEPT support arrangements for people with disabilities—is that that is an initiative that is funded by Family and Community Services. It is very much focused on employment outcomes, yet the expertise that that group have could be very valuable in providing pre-employment support. So we see that, firstly, you have to have the information and the blueprint and that, secondly, it is a matter of distributing that to key stakeholders, which will be part of our role.

Senator ALLISON—So does your agreement with the Commonwealth for the expenditure of the \$760,000 include this amount of money to be spent on disability programs or not? Is it entirely up to you or your board to determine how much of this money will be spent in this way?

Mr Healey—We have three funding contracts. The first contract is specifically targeted at Indigenous initiatives and, taking on board your earlier point, one of the things we have in place is a cross-government steering group to talk about joined-up services. We have a second contract that looks at enterprise education, and the third contract, our core funding contract of the \$21 million that the senator mentioned, has three components. One is our base funding that includes operational expenditure and new initiatives, which have a series of areas like career ed. and pilot initiatives. Half of it relates to our local partnership coordination funding, which is about \$10 million. There is also some additional support for areas in Central and Northern Australia, which currently have gaps in coordination funding. So this particular initiative was taken out of our core funding because it was deemed by the board to be an area that we thought we could show some leadership in.

Senator ALLISON—I find it remarkable that you have that leeway in your funding.

Mr Healey—That goes to the heart of the organisation. The organisation, as you might be aware, was established in 1994 by the previous government to be an innovative, catalytic organisation. The current government has continued to support that concept. In many cases there is not the flexibility in other funding arrangements to look at innovative programs like this.

Senator ALLISON—Some of these programs at least are going into their third year. What is the time frame for them? Will any of them be completed this year? When will you start to analyse the results and develop that blueprint or report?

Mr Healey—We have committed funding for the three projects to the end of 2003. One of the challenges with all project funding is to look at the whole concept in terms of sustainability. The new model that we have put in place in terms of our funding approach is such that, before we move into an agreement to provide support to a partner, we attempt to outline the sustainability, the communication and what I call the knowledge management components of that up front. The challenge for us now with these projects is to ensure, firstly, that the learning is distributed around the system and, secondly, that we have an exit strategy that enables these projects to continue with mainstream funding. That is the purpose of the organisation. It needs to be a seed funding organisation. The last thing in the world we want, which happens with a lot of Commonwealth funded programs, is insufficient consideration of the exit strategy. That is one of the issues with mainstream project funding at the moment.

Senator ALLISON—We may not have time to do this today, but I think the committee would benefit from knowing what is innovative about these three programs. Is there a document which describes them and perhaps gives some preliminary understanding of the outcomes?

Mrs Armstrong—There are some case study reports on each project, which we are in the process of finalising. We would probably be able to provide those to the committee within the next month. Would that be acceptable?

CHAIR—Yes. Thank you.

Mrs Armstrong—The thing that really makes them very innovative is that, for the first time that we know of, local community partnerships involving schools and businesses have taken on board an additional partner, and that partner is the Commonwealth Competitive Employment, Placement and Training agency. The idea behind this came from the Bridging Pathways strategy out of ANTA and the consultations that we had with those groups to put forward the idea that a CEPT would be an ideal partner to work with the school system. Unfortunately, and as indicated in our submission, they are not actually funded to work with school students whilst they are still in school. They work with them post-school. The three projects have partnered CEPTs in their local areas—

Senator ALLISON—What does partnering mean in real terms, on the ground?

Mrs Armstrong—Joining up with, working with, supporting, funding—

Senator ALLISON—But what does that mean? Does that mean staff coming from the office and being there in the school with that person?

Mrs Armstrong—Yes, exactly—providing support and training delivery. Our project in South Australia even provided work readiness training to students before they attended their VET in schools course and went out on their work experience. They have provided support in the workplace. When they go along and do their work placement, students with a disability often need a support person with them, at least for part of the time, and this is a real issue at the moment across the country. The alliance building is one of the innovative things about this project, and it does not occur in general in the local community partnerships that are delivering career and workplace learning.

Mr Healey—I think you have to put this in context. When the ASTF was first established, the concept of local arrangements to support young people's development was new. You now have a MCEETYA commitment to the whole concept of business-community partnerships, which we are building on and trying to get a greater response to. In many cases, because of the nature of government activities in functional areas, there has not been a holistic approach to preparing kids. The innovation for us is actually getting parties that have got a common customer or a common client together and operating in a more holistic way, which is what this broader commitment on a national level to transition management is about.

Senator ALLISON—I am sure that is admirable, but I never quite understand what it means at the end of the day.

Mr Healey—There is a resourcing issue, I must admit. One of the things we have done is contribute resources to enable CEPT to actually become involved in this pre-employment arrangement, which would not normally be the case under current funding. These people are currently funded on the basis of an employment outcome, so for them to get involved, to use their expertise and not to duplicate that expertise somewhere in the schooling system but to mobilise an investment in government funding and infrastructure development we have actually provided financial support.

Senator TIERNEY—You mentioned 80,000 students are involved across the country, and I think you said 2,000 of those people had a disability. When you were talking about the Lighthouse program, you were talking about several hundred people. So what happens with the 2,000 with disabilities? How are their needs met?

Mrs Armstrong—Probably inadequately.

Senator TIERNEY—What have you identified that is inadequate and needs to be corrected?

Mrs Armstrong—Mr Healey said before that the idea of funding pilots was to show what we believe to be best practice, and what we believe to be best practice is a partnership with the Commonwealth employment agency. In these other arrangements, the 2,000 students are going through without any additional support and at great personal sacrifice to the people who are project managing those groups.

Senator TIERNEY—So currently they are treated as if perhaps they did not have a disability?

Mr Healey—It is difficult to say. At the end of the day, the responsibility for a kid going out into a workplace is with the school, and what we provide is the coordination infrastructure to assist in that process, so it would vary.

Senator TIERNEY—But it is more likely to be informal, on the ground—

Mr Healey—It would depend upon the resources that each school is applying to support that particular student. What you probably find is that, in many cases, because the interventions do not occur early enough and you get significant drop-out with these kids, they do not even actually get the chance to take advantage of it. In other cases, probably both the employer and the student are underprepared to take advantage of that experience.

Senator TIERNEY—Have you tracked the drop-out rates in the general mainstream groupings where there are people that do have disabilities—those 2,000 I am referring to?

Mr Healey—In terms of our hands-on management of those programs, we are not involved in the day-to-day management. When we survey the individual partnerships that we are supporting, we do ask them to identify particular groups such as kids with disabilities. We are aware through our support for those projects of particular problems, but I do not think that we have got an overall picture of it.

Mrs Armstrong—No, we have not. However, we will in the future because we are conducting destination surveys of students who have been through our mainstream programs across the country—and that will include students with disabilities—to determine what has happened to them. Have they taken up further study? Have they continued with tertiary education? It will look at all those kinds of issues.

Senator TIERNEY—When is that information likely to be available?

Mrs Armstrong—We are collecting that information now, and that will be analysed towards the end of the year.

Senator TIERNEY—Does that analysis dissect the group in terms of the type of disability they have in relation to the outcomes?

Mrs Armstrong—It will not in that particular survey. However, the pilot projects, the Lighthouse ones, will be conducting destination surveys and will cover those kinds of issues.

Senator TIERNEY—But surely the type of disability and the level of disability, the degree of impairment, would be factors that would affect the outcome, apart from the program, as variables—

Mrs Armstrong—Definitely.

Senator TIERNEY—But you are not looking at those?

Mrs Armstrong—We could.

Mr Healey—As I said, in terms of the local programs that we support, the results of those should come out of the mainstream destination surveys of the particular schooling systems that are putting those people through. With the ones that we have tried to target and show as a model of best practice we can provide that information. The issue that I wanted to raise is that there is no doubt that there is a demonstrable improvement in these kids' esteem and expectations. The other thing is that they do require work earlier on to ensure that the workplace, for example, has suitable access and suitable support mechanisms. So they are some of the things we are looking at.

Senator TIERNEY—Because we are lacking some information on this in terms of the Lighthouse initiative and the few hundred students that you are working with on that, could you just describe in a nutshell how that is different from the general experience of those 2,000 students who are in a mainstream environment at the moment?

Mr Healey—Currently we support 228 local arrangements which facilitate work placements for students in their senior years of schooling to undertake vocational courses. There is a coordinating management committee and, in some cases, coordinator funding going to those programs. Those initiatives currently place about 82,000 students around the country. They are part of the 30 or 40 per cent of students now in the senior years of schooling who are doing a vocational course. Of those students, we are aware through our tracking that 2,000 have a disability. We do not provide additional support to those local partnerships to assist those students; it is really up to the schools and the systems to provide the support. In order to provide guidance to the schools and the systems on best practice, we initiated three specific projects, which are the ones we have listed here, to show how you can improve the experience that those kids are having. As a result of that, we will be developing models of best practice.

Senator TIERNEY—What I am trying to find out is: within those Lighthouse initiatives and within those three projects, what are you doing that is different from what is happening elsewhere?

Mr Healey—Certainly there is more intensive case management of students, and that does involve the CEPT group providing support to the teachers and the employers. It really is the development of a case management plan and a pathways plan for these students. In relation to other vocational students in the mainstream programs, it is probably not happening anywhere near to that extent and there is probably not the specialist support. The point I raised earlier about this commitment to a transition agenda by ministers is that you will start to see far more personalised case management or pathway plans for all students. It is an issue of approach, and it is an issue of additional resources and support. The point that we have also made is that the resources are there. In many cases, however, the resources are not linked to students until a later time when in actual fact a lot of the damage has already been done. That is the other issue we have raised in our submission—the application of public resources at an appropriate time.

Senator TIERNEY—Could I drill down a little bit further. Just say I am a student who has a disability and I am in one of these Lighthouse initiatives: what is going to happen under this program that is different from what would happen if I was just in the mainstream?

Mr Healey—In relation to our support, I will let Karina answer.

Mrs Armstrong—If we could take an example, the comparison would be that one of these students would receive counselling training with the project officer who is managing this project. It would be a one on one talk over the table about their needs. They would complete some documentation which would indicate what their disability is and the information that needs to be supplied to the employer. They would discuss what might be an appropriate course for them—retail, hospitality, construction—and what they might be interested in. There would be a discussion with the school, the teachers, the classrooms and so forth. What would then happen is that the student would enrol in the appropriate course through the school system. The Lighthouse project might provide training to teachers, and I know that some of them do this in assisting students to prepare for the workplace. The student would attend a work readiness training program, which would enable them to understand social behaviours and other requirements before they go out into a workplace. They would undertake part of their course at school or through a registered training organisation depending on the training delivery. Our Lighthouse projects would pay through ECEF, in some cases, for that training delivery.

I can give you an example. I was in Adelaide a few months ago and attended a training session for a group of retail students—all with a mild intellectual disability; there were about 12 of them in the group—who had been out on a work placement for which they were prepared through our project. We went around the group, and they all talked of their experiences. It brought tears to your eyes, actually. They told of the employers' response to them. Several of them were offered traineeships, and people asked, 'Will you come back and work with me?' There were all sorts of arrangements like that. Subsequent to that training group, the students went back to school. Some of them continued with school, and the employment agency continued to provide advice and service to them. That is the difference between what would happen in this program and in a mainstream program. It would simply be a project officer ringing an employer saying, 'I've got a child with a disability. Would you take them?'

Mr Healey—It may be the case that the individual school will prepare the kids in a similar way, but that is not part of our role in relation to the funding of our mainstream programs. Through the use of these specialist initiatives, we hopefully will be able to show the schools how best to prepare young people to go out and take advantage of that learning opportunity.

Senator TIERNEY—In case managing these students, how long do you stay with them in this process? You have gone through the counselling and the possibility of training somewhere or doing something out in industry. When does your obligation end?

Mr Healey—It is not our obligation.

Senator TIERNEY—In terms of your doing a pilot.

Mr Healey—As I said, our funding for the support units will end when the students finish their vocational placement and probably leave school. One of the things we will be working

with the agencies to do is look at ongoing support through some of the agencies that are outside of school. What we are trying to show through these experiences is the fact that we have got to use the existing services in a more joined up way. It is not what our programs show; it is what we can do using our current resources in a more effective way. I would have thought that these groups could have ongoing support well past their time of leaving school.

Senator TIERNEY—But, in terms of the Lighthouse initiative, I assume you would pick some of these people up around the start of year 11 and the program would stay with them until the end of year 12—

Mrs Armstrong—That is right.

Senator TIERNEY—and give them that sort of experience.

Mr Healey—Can I also say that the CEPT's responsibility to place people post school actually leads to a link for these kids to tap into once they leave school.

Senator TIERNEY—You mentioned there was some sort of training for the people who are working with them in certain circumstances. Could you give me an example of the sort of training there would be and who would actually do that training?

Mrs Armstrong—Conduct the training or receive the training?

Senator TIERNEY—Who would conduct the training and what type of training it would be.

Mrs Armstrong—It would be on the training and supervision of students with a disability regarding occupational health and safety issues and behavioural issues and just how to manage those students when they are taking them on board in the workplace to cover particular competencies that relate to, for example, a retail, hospitality or construction course.

Senator TIERNEY—And who would do that training?

Mrs Armstrong—In the case of the Lighthouse projects, that training has been delivered by our projects in conjunction with the CEPT agency.

Senator TIERNEY—Who does the training?

Mr Healey—The actual CEPT agency.

Mrs Armstrong—The CEPT. But it does not happen par for the course. We are funding it; they would not normally do it.

Mr Healey—I think the important point—and I am conscious of the time—is that the resources and the expertise are there through CEPT. The point that we are raising is that, given current funding arrangements, the utilisation and the adaptation of that skill and knowledge are not available to kids to get a vocational experience prior to leaving school.

Senator TIERNEY—Presumably in your evaluation of this project you are making recommendations relating to that. You have said in your submission that the program has been very successful. What outcome measures are you using to make that conclusion?

Mr Healey—Firstly, in terms of placing the requisite number of young people in a work placement position. There is also a process through the evaluation of attitudinal change, and that has been very positive. It was not intended that there would be a direct employment outcome as a result of these, but there have been quite significant employment outcomes generated as well. So I think there has been summative assessment. There has been a full evaluation through the process.

Mrs Armstrong—We have received information only in the last week that some additional students to those indicated here have received offers of employment and have started in jobs.

Senator TIERNEY—Your submission makes a strong point about the unwillingness of states to provide sufficient funding for VET in schools for those with disabilities. What sort of response do you get from states when you raise this matter with them? Perhaps you might focus on the state of New South Wales at the moment.

Mr Healey—I do not want to be critical of one sector over another, but the facts are—

Senator TIERNEY—But your submission makes the point.

Mr Healey—We make the point that there is insufficient targeted resourcing for students to take advantage of vocational placement, because they do need additional funding, because there are additional costs. What most school systems are still grappling with is the whole cost structure of providing vocational learning across the board. The funding of work placements is a major issue to support the vocational reforms, but over time I think that people have to start thinking about where they apply the resources at the appropriate time.

Senator TIERNEY—Your pilot project is obviously showing a way of applying resources in VET for people with disabilities, but I take it that nothing else is happening that makes special provision for children—

Mr Healey—Hopefully the models that we are showing will provide justification for the reform process that is in place. As I said, we are seen to be a catalytic organisation. We are trying to provide evidence that policy positions have merit or do not have merit and point to a way of working with the systems to make a change. As I have said in other forums, we are a mere speck of dust. In a \$25 billion education system \$20 million might seem like a lot of money, but by proving things can work and reinforcing best practice we believe we can work with systems as partners and change things. It is not so much what our projects have done on the ground; it is what they have shown of what is possible with a case management approach which will lead to lasting reform.

Senator ALLISON—Can I just ask for one more bit of information. I have just worked out that with 200 students \$760,000 equates to about \$3,500 each. Is it possible to get a breakdown of how that money might be spent per student: how much on case management and how much on training?

Mrs Armstrong—We can provide that to you.

Mr Healey—We can provide a breakdown of each of the programs.

Senator ALLISON—Excellent. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing today.

[9.48 a.m.]

BERRYMAN, Mr John William, Chief Executive, Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

LEIGH, Associate Professor Gregory Ross, Assistant Chief Executive (Educational Services), Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

CHAIR—I welcome witnesses from the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children. The committee has before it submission No. 99. Are there any changes or corrections you wish to make to the written submission?

Prof. Leigh—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of evidence to be given confidentially. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I now invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr Berryman—I would like to speak briefly about the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, and then my colleague Professor Leigh will make an opening statement pertaining directly to the submission.

The Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children is a large charity in the Australian context. Having been founded in 1860, it was probably the first in this country to provide education to students with disabilities. We have experience and expertise in the field of education of blind children or children with partial sight, deaf children or children who are hearing impaired and children who have disabilities in addition to their sensory loss. The institute's services range from home-delivered early intervention services and preschool provision to support of kids in mainstream preschools. We conduct three special schools but, importantly, we support kids in mainstream schooling. And, in affiliation with the University of Newcastle, the institute runs a centre for professional development and research.

There are a couple of points in particular that we would like to bring to the committee's attention, and the submission goes to those. So I would now invite my colleague Professor Leigh to talk to the submission.

Prof. Leigh—As John said, the institute is a diverse service delivery organisation, and the diversity of the services that we offer reflects the heterogeneity and diverse educational needs of children with sensory disabilities. The particularly specialised nature of the services that we deliver reflects the particular special needs of children with sensory disabilities. As a population, children with those disabilities have special educational needs which are quite specific and indeed unique.

The submission speaks to a number of issues about the quality of services for children with sensory disabilities and the importance for that diversity of needs being reflected. We have

highlighted two issues in particular which we believe go directly to Commonwealth involvement in the area of education of children with disabilities. They are specifically what we have observed through our service delivery mechanisms: firstly, a disproportionately low representation of children with disabilities in general, but sensory disabilities in particular, in the non-government school sector and the significant underfunding of services to support children in that sector; and, secondly, the dramatic need to support and recognise specialist teacher education for children with sensory disabilities.

In the period from 1987 to 1997, some five university based teacher training programs closed across the country. In 1987, there were seven specialist teacher education programs relating to the education of students with sensory disabilities; in 1997, there were just three. In one of those cases, our program—in affiliation with the University of Newcastle, which is the largest and most comprehensive in the country—is almost entirely supported through the charitable sector. In the case of the other two programs, one program at the University of Melbourne is substantially supported by independent funding, and the other program is wholly included within the university's program.

The needs of children with sensory disabilities dictate highly specialised teacher education. We have observed across the country a trend towards generic training of both teachers in special education and special education teachers in, we would argue, the incorrect belief that inclusion in mainstreaming creates a need for broader based and more generic teacher education—indeed, that is not the case where children with sensory disabilities are concerned. The need for highly specialised, highly technical teacher training to support the needs of these children has never been more pre-eminent, particularly with the advances in technology in areas such as cochlear implementation and adaptive technologies for children with vision impairment. We see a dramatic need. We both recognise and support the need for specialist teacher education in this area, and we see the need for both funding and infrastructure support for that to be improved.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Your submission is a valuable one for the committee because it addresses the issue of funding, and I want to ask you some questions about that issue. You talk about the inadequacy of the Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes Program. You have indicated that you think the non-government school sector are underfunded and that this is the source of their failure to provide services to disabled students. I take it that is the thrust of your submission?

Prof. Leigh—Indeed.

CHAIR—Is the strategic assistance program the only source of funding for students with disabilities in the non-government school sector which is provided by the Commonwealth?

Prof. Leigh—In its various forms, my understanding is yes, it is.

CHAIR—What about the recurrent grants?

Prof. Leigh—In this state, at least, they are now channelled through the strategic assistance program—what used to be the category 12 funding, the additional funding per capita for children with disabilities.

CHAIR—But what about the recurrent grants? We have had an extra \$18 billion—a huge sum of money—provided to the non-government school sector as a result of the new SES formulas. That money is now directly indexed. It will not be long before the Commonwealth is spending more money on non-government schools than it is on universities. In indexation terms that is directly tied to the AGSRC index, which is predicated on Commonwealth support for government schools. There is a direct relationship between those two figures. How can you say that the Commonwealth's major source of funding is the strategic assistance program, when you have these massive increases?

Prof. Leigh—We look at the cost of providing education in independent schools in two parts: firstly, the cost generally—that is, the cost of supporting any student; and secondly, the additional cost that arises on account of the disability. We are talking specifically about the second part of the cost. Yes, we appreciate that there is government support at considerable levels generally to support kids in independent schooling. But in relation to additional funding provided on account of the special needs arising from disability, the levels of funding are very low.

CHAIR—My point is that the indexation arrangements already pick up the additional moneys being provided to the government school system for students with disabilities but the non-government sector does not seem to be able to provide the services to disabled students. Is this therefore a case not of a funding shortfall but of discrimination?

Prof. Leigh—We would both recognise and indeed wholly endorse the notion of responsibility on the part of the non-government sector under the Disability Discrimination Act to provide for students with disabilities. That goes without question. It goes to the sector's capacity to be able to do so. The very fact that some schools are able to wage a case under undue hardship would indicate that, at least in certain cases, it is indeed an undue hardship for those schools. On the issue of average government school recurrent costs, the SES system you refer to funds schools on average between 13.7 and 70 per cent. We work on the basis that for a primary school student the average government school recurrent costs are about \$5,000. However, let us look at the average recurrent cost of educating a student with disabilities in those states that keep those records: in Western Australia the figure for the average recurrent cost of educating a student with disabilities is put at \$26,000, in Queensland it is \$21,000 per annum and it is \$37,000 per annum in the ACT. The ACT quotes a figure of \$19,000 per annum to educate a student with disabilities in the mainstream. That is close to the levels of support we understand to be required for a student with a hearing impairment or a vision impairment in the mainstream. Our recurrent costs for supporting a single student are just under those levels—between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per annum.

We are saying that independent schools are funded between 13 and 70 per cent of the average cost of educating a regular student. Where they have a student with a disability, logic and fairness would dictate that they be funded somewhere near the same level—13 to 70 per cent of the average cost of educating a student with disabilities. We are not saying that they have not received an increase in funding—indeed they have. Relative to the average cost of educating a student in the non-government sector they get a certain percentage for non-disabled students, but they do not get anything like that percentage for a student with a disability.

CHAIR—King's School here in Sydney is getting several million dollars extra every year. Are you suggesting that the Commonwealth should now provide an additional \$20-odd thousand a year for King's School?

Prof. Leigh—I think that is a very fair question. In New South Wales, if you happen to have a vision impairment or a hearing impairment and you attend a government school, an itinerant teacher support service is provided by the government. If you attend a Catholic systemic school in metropolitan Sydney, an itinerant support service is provided by the Catholic education system. Prior to the institute's involvement, if you attended a non-government school there was no specialist itinerant teacher support. Under the old system independent schools included all those from category 12 to category 1 which includes those like King's School, and their capacity to support those students varied enormously according to their resources. I take your point: a school as well resourced as King's School has considerably greater capacity to support an enrolment of a student with a sensory disability than, for example, a category 12 small independent Christian school.

Unfortunately, the system of SES funding does not discriminate between the capacity of the school to provide those services. We argue very strongly that the system should accommodate that. Under the Disability Discrimination Act it should be impossible for a school to wage an undue hardship claim. A school that has the capacity should be required to do so and a school that does not have the capacity should be assisted.

CHAIR—There are schools in this country that cannot provide enough books—that is a fact. Frankly, you would seriously have to question the education equality of the services provided. You are proposing here and your submission says: 'The Commonwealth should provide 100 per cent actual cost'—

Prof. Leigh—A case could be waged here; we do not say that. We are arguing that it should only be the same level as the percentage of average government recurrent funding.

CHAIR—I think I have made my point.

Senator ALLISON—I am interested in your recommendation about the need for more highly specialised teachers in the sensory field. Would some of the students in this category have integration aides in school?

Prof. Leigh—Yes, they would have that assistance but to lesser degrees than students with significant intellectual disabilities. In New South Wales the majority of students who are assisted for integration with regard to their sensory disability have itinerant teacher support. Children at the high end of need have assistance, particularly deaf students who require in situ teacher's aide interpreter assistance.

Senator ALLISON—Integration aides would have particular skills. They would be doing translations, assisting with braille or some such thing, wouldn't they?

Prof. Leigh—Indeed.

Senator ALLISON—When we began this inquiry, I was surprised when I read in the submissions that there is no course required for integration aides. Is that your understanding too?

Prof. Leigh—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—I can understand the need for highly specialised teachers, but what about integration aides? Should they be certificated or have some sort of program that they need to go through?

Prof. Leigh—Yes, indeed. In New South Wales currently there is a teacher's aide special program available through TAFE, but I am not aware of any employing authority that requires teacher's aides functioning in that capacity to mandatorily require that level of training. Of considerable concern is the situation that arises not infrequently where a student with a significant hearing impairment and a need for accessing alternative communication, whether it be sign supported English or sign language, has a teacher's aide working with them who does not have the required skills to provide that access effectively.

A significant issue for the system, were it to go that way, is economy of scale. The number of people working in that capacity with children with sensory disabilities is very small, which raises the issue of the type of training that would be required. What we tend to do for our own employees, for example, is individual training to support particular individuals into those roles, rather than training en masse, because the numbers that would need to be engaged in such training would be very small. It would be very difficult to create a cohort at any one point in time.

Senator ALLISON—On that subject of numbers, is it true that students who are blind are more likely to be in special schools than in mainstream schools? Can you give us some proportions or percentages?

Mr Berryman—If a student is blind or severely vision impaired but not intellectually impaired, the expectation today is that they will be in a mainstream setting right from the beginning of education. The blind schools of old do not really exist any longer. Of course, a very significant number of children who have a vision impairment are also intellectually impaired—in fact, probably the majority of vision impaired students are also intellectually impaired.

Senator ALLISON—Is that right?

Mr Berryman—Yes. They tend to be in schools for children with intellectual disabilities. In the case of the Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, we conduct a school for kids who are intellectually impaired and have either a vision loss or a hearing loss and in many cases both of those sensory disabilities.

Senator ALLISON—On another subject, this committee conducted an inquiry two years or so ago into Aboriginal education and was somewhat dismayed at the level of deafness, the result of otitis media. Does your organisation get involved with any Aboriginal community edu-

cation in this state, and can you advise the committee if there has been any progress made on assisting students with this problem or preventing it in the first place?

Prof. Leigh—I have a two-part answer. Certainly the institute is involved with the problem. We operate a special priority group support program, which, through our Aboriginal community support workers, has over the last several years conducted screening programs in a number of locations in New South Wales. The incidence of hearing impairment associated with otitis media continues to be a significant one for Aboriginal populations. Is there any indication of that having changed dramatically? Certainly not from our perspective. It does seem to be a highly resistant problem.

Educationally, the quality of the response varies enormously depending on the location, and a significant issue to be aware of is that it is not a stable condition. At any one point in time, a high percentage of children in a school where a significant proportion of the children may be Aboriginal would have a hearing impairment associated with otitis media. At a subsequent point in time, the percentage may be very similar but the actual children involved may be quite different. It is a transient issue. Children fall in and out of the condition of hearing impairment.

There are a number of issues being trialled. We have a PhD student working through our Renwick College program at the moment looking at whole of class amplification systems—whereby the whole class would have amplification provided, not unlike the amplification that is provided in this room, to try and account for the fact that at varying times children will fall in and out of levels of hearing impairment—rather than trying to treat the problem on a case by case basis. Providing a level of access to the teacher's voice in classroom communication that is consistent over time gives everybody the opportunity to participate in the classroom experience. So, yes, we are actively aware of it and involved in it—

Senator ALLISON—So there are smaller amplifiers at the back of the classroom and that sort of thing? There are not individual hook-ups?

Prof. Leigh—That is right. Individual aids can be necessary for one student on one day and not on another because of the transient nature of the hearing impairment. On one estimate, at any one point in time approximately 60 per cent of the kids in that class may experience a hearing impairment, but different kids will experience it at different times. We are responding to it in creative ways like that, and it is an issue that is under investigation.

Senator ALLISON—We have one PhD student working on this concept. What else is being done? Should we be funding this area at a greater level? Who needs to be taking the initiative?

Prof. Leigh—There are two aspects to it. There is the educational response to it and the medical situation that underpins it. The Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin has been actively involved in research on otitis media in Aboriginal populations for quite some time. The other issue is the quality and availability of assessment services. I mentioned that we screen in a number of rural locations, but we are really filling a gap that is left in those locations by local area health services, who are unable to meet the demand for hearing screening and vision screening in those populations.

Senator ALLISON—Unable to meet the demand?

Prof. Leigh—Seemingly, or lacking the capacity to meet the demand in some of those situations—audiological services or hearing assessment services differ according to the local area health service, certainly in New South Wales, and our service is called upon to provide assessments where other means are not as readily available.

Senator ALLISON—So are we talking here about very remote communities? Why do you think it is that these children are not able to be assessed?

Prof. Leigh—I think that one of the benefits of the model that we have had is that we have employed an Aboriginal support worker to work with the audiologist in assessing those needs. The health department of New South Wales has an otitis media program and has endeavoured to staff that with Aboriginal case workers, otitis media specialists, in different locations and that has been very successful, but they are not available in all centres. We currently have a vacancy for an Aboriginal support worker, because finding people with the skills and the right cultural and sympathetic/empathetic background is not always easy, and that seems to be the case here.

Senator ALLISON—It is a bit chicken and egg, though, isn't it? We are not getting people through the system because they have the problem in the first place.

Prof. Leigh—Indeed.

Senator TIERNEY—You indicated earlier that there were no specialist schools for the blind. Could you provide us with a picture in terms of units for the blind in schools and how that is working out in relation to the general issue of integration of children who are deaf and blind into mainstream programs in schools.

Prof. Leigh—In New South Wales in regard to vision impairment there is still a special school called the North Rocks School for Blind Children, which is a Department of Education school.

Senator TIERNEY—How many students are in that?

Prof. Leigh—Approximately 40, but they are students with significant additional disabilities. They are not students who—

Senator TIERNEY—Multiple disabilities.

Prof. Leigh—Yes, and typically severely disabled. Other than that, in New South Wales to the best of my knowledge there are no special schools or special support units for children with vision impairment. All the children who have vision impairment and no associated other disabilities would be fully integrated into regular environments.

Senator TIERNEY—So when did those schools disappear in New South Wales?

Mr Berryman—Progressively over the last 20 years or so.

Senator TIERNEY—This is all part of the inclusive policy for children with disabilities in schools; what is your attitude to how that has worked over the last 20 years?

Prof. Leigh—One of my opening comments was about the significant heterogeneity and diversity of the population. For those children who have no additional disabilities and a vision impairment, it is not only apparently appropriate; it is appropriate. It has been shown to be an entirely appropriate form of educating those students—with the significant caveat that it is extremely resource intensive to do so. For example, coming back to the issue we were talking about before, in the case of the students that we support in the non-government sector, the recurrent cost of supporting a student at a secondary level—doing HSC, for example—who is fully dependent upon the provision of braille can come to many tens of thousands of dollars—\$60,000—per year in terms of the production in braille of all their specialised resources. Given that support—the input of a specialist teacher, learning braille and then having access to the materials in braille—the experience of integration is a wholly positive and sustainable one for those students.

Senator TIERNEY—Let us talk about the reality of what is happening in classrooms with such children. How is their level of support measuring up to that ideal that you are outlining in your typical New South Wales classrooms?

Prof. Leigh—I can speak with surety about the students that we support, and I would have to say ‘very effectively’. In terms of our experience: we work very closely with the braille production—alternative format production—section of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, and they certainly have infrastructure in place to support those students who—

Senator TIERNEY—You say ‘the students we support’. Can you clarify that in relation to the total population of students in the state who have that sort of impairment?

Prof. Leigh—Currently we are only supporting students who are not supported by other services: those kids who are not supported by the Catholic system or the government school system—kids who would otherwise fall between the cracks. That is only in regard to vision impairment. Hearing impairment is quite a different kettle of fish with quite different needs for specialist schools. In that regard we operate a number of special schools on the premise that the range of service delivery required for kids who are deaf is much greater and includes everything from dedicated special schools—we operate a school called the Thomas Pattison School for children whose first or preferred language is sign language—right through a number of school options for children who communicate orally but require intensive support en route to full integration, through to fully integrated programs.

Senator TIERNEY—I am trying to get a picture of what my options would be if I had a child who was deaf or partially deaf. I might decide to send the child to a normal comprehensive high school. Would I freely have the option of sending the child to a specialist school?

Prof. Leigh—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—And I would automatically get a place?

Prof. Leigh—I can only speak for New South Wales. In New South Wales, in terms of whether you would have the option of sending the child to a special school, you could only do that in the independent school sector at the moment. For deaf children in New South Wales there are no government operated special schools for deaf students. There are government operated support units where numbers of deaf students with special education needs are congregated in metropolitan Sydney and the Hunter, but there are no special schools per se other than those operated by the non-government sector. Specifically, in Sydney there are the three schools operated by the institute, St Gabriel's School for Hearing Impaired Children in Castle Hill and St Dominic's Centre for Hearing Impaired Children in the Hunter.

Senator TIERNEY—So, if the private system is operating such schools, obviously there is a demand or a need for them, or parents see it that way. Still on the topic of deaf children, can you comment on why you think the state governments are not providing that. Do you think the feeling is that there is adequate provision in an integrated situation in state schools? Perhaps you can give a comment on your view of the level of that adequacy in terms of providing an education for children who are deaf or partially deaf.

Prof. Leigh—For children who are deaf, it is the type and intensity of their support needs that creates the need for a special school environment. Typically, communication needs lead to the creation of a special school or a special educational unit setting, particularly the needs of children who require access to an alternative language or form of communication—specifically sign language or supported sign communication of some form. The decision then becomes one of: do we do that entirely in a special school environment and provide for that program or in a semi-integrated environment where students are congregated in a setting that allows what I call a critical communication mass—a number of students who share a communication mode to come together to be able to share that communication mode for both pedagogical purposes and social interaction purposes? For whatever reason, the government school system in New South Wales has made the determination that that can be best delivered through support units, and there are a number of large support units in Sydney where significant numbers of deaf students are congregated for specific educational purposes.

Senator TIERNEY—Attached to comprehensive schools?

Prof. Leigh—Attached to regular schools. Some years ago—10 years ago, in fact—there was a perceived demand, particularly from the deaf community and the parents of children who had special educational needs relating to their children's use of sign language, and the institute made the decision that a special school which focused on those particular needs was an appropriate response to that. Indeed that has been a highly successful and well-utilised program since.

Senator TIERNEY—But if I had a child at Broken Hill, Wagga, Cobar or Lismore, what would my options be?

Prof. Leigh—Currently, almost exclusively the options are inclusive education in regular local schools with varying degrees of support.

Senator TIERNEY—What if I turn up at a primary school in Ballina? Do you think a child who has these sorts of impairments can get an adequate education in a comprehensive

classroom? You might want to comment on the extra support or the lack of support that is provided for the general classroom teacher in that situation.

Prof. Leigh—Again, the issue of heterogeneity cuts right across this. I will answer partly by mentioning another PhD student we have who is looking at just that issue—the integration of students with severe and profound deafness in rural New South Wales. The experience varies according to the particular characteristics of the student. For students who have adequate audiological support—in other words, who are adequately aided by hearing aids and have reasonable access to spoken language—the educational prognosis tends to be fairly positive, given adequate levels of support. It depends on how much support there is; it is typically up to 10 hours per week of itinerant teacher support, specialist aid, aid time et cetera.

Senator TIERNEY—So if my child is in such a school in Ballina, could they expect to get that itinerant aid support?

Prof. Leigh—Our experience is that it is almost district by district, depending on the way those things—

Senator TIERNEY—It is sort of potluck wherever you land?

Prof. Leigh—I would not use that term, but it is certainly district by district. However, for a student who required access, for example, to sign language to sustain their education, the potential to provide that support on the ground is even more variable and much more difficult to sustain. Over the last four years we have created what we call the Host Family Program, which allows students from the country to come and live with families in Sydney and attend one of our special schools. Indeed, we have a student from that region who does that. If they need to attend a school using sign language, that is possible but it does mean moving away from the family home, and that has its own set of associated difficulties and problems.

Senator TIERNEY—Say we turn to general teachers who are trained through the normal processes of becoming primary teachers, science teachers or whatever. We have found in earlier inquiries that there is not a lot of work on special education undertaken pre service. Indeed, you indicated in your oral submission that that is possibly even getting worse. How can such a child receive an adequate education if there is so little attention given in teacher preparation to this issue? You might like to comment on why you think that has actually declined. You did not actually give the time span; I think you said there were seven specialist teacher education units. How many are they down to now?

Prof. Leigh—They are down to three nationally.

Senator TIERNEY—One is in Newcastle. Where are the other two?

Prof. Leigh—At Griffith University in Brisbane and the University of Melbourne.

Senator TIERNEY—So if you are in Western Australia, South Australia or Tasmania it is bad luck, I suppose.

Prof. Leigh—The University of Melbourne has an annexe that a single staff member operates in Perth to provide some teacher training there, but the other states have nothing.

Senator TIERNEY—So in half the states and territories there are absolutely no units at all?

Prof. Leigh—That is right.

Mr Berryman—Senator, there is none at Newcastle.

Senator TIERNEY—But there was a special education centre there?

Mr Berryman—The training in New South Wales is provided through the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children in affiliation with the University of Newcastle, but it is done at our centre at North Rocks.

Prof. Leigh—The special education centre at Newcastle is for generic special education—students with learning and intellectual disabilities. That is available in lots of institutions across the country.

Senator TIERNEY—So you are referring specifically to sensory disabilities?

Prof. Leigh—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—I want to explore briefly the link between vision impairment and intellectual disability. Is that as a direct result of the fact that the child starts life with these impairments and therefore has difficulty picking up information? Children will normally be read to and will watch television, but children in this situation are missing that. Is that the reason or is there a very definite linkage between the two types of disability in a population of students?

Mr Berryman—The major reason is that babies are increasingly surviving the experience of extreme premature birth—some of them with multiple disabilities. So the impairment is often to the brain rather than the mechanism of seeing and it affects intellectual capacity, vision and sometimes hearing. It may also cause a physical disability. They are the sorts of children who are enrolling in the institute's special school for multi-handicapped students. That is where the association comes from in most cases.

Senator TIERNEY—I will return to the point that you mentioned in relation to Aboriginal education. Senator Carr indicated that this committee looked at health related problems in education—conditions like glue ear, for example—and the need for early detection. For those sorts of hearing impairments—you might want to comment on the general population as well as the Aboriginal population—could you provide us with some picture of what is happening with regard to early detection at the preschool stage?

Prof. Leigh—I am absolutely delighted to say that the government in New South Wales has recently announced the introduction of universal screening of hearing in newborns in this state. That is something that we, at the institute, have advocated for a long time. Indeed, I have been on the working party to see that implemented in New South Wales. It has the target,

commencing in December this year, that all children who are born in New South Wales in known environments—through the hospital system or when they come into contact with the public health system—will have their hearing screened.

Senator TIERNEY—Is that test in the first week?

Prof. Leigh—Within the first three days.

Senator TIERNEY—Back to the Aboriginal situation, what about the condition of glue ear that might develop months later? The child might be fine in the first few weeks and then the condition may develop later—therefore, it has all these learning implications later. How do we pick that up?

Prof. Leigh—Research by the Menzies School for Health Research in Darwin tends to indicate that the average age of onset of the first bout of otitis media for Aboriginal kids is before the age of six weeks. It is an absolutely entrenched problem in certain Aboriginal populations. I was making the point to Senator Allison before that we almost have to operate on the assumption that part of the experience for most Aboriginal children in those communities is that they will have some interaction with hearing impairment.

Senator TIERNEY—Given that that is the case and given that the percentage of the total newborn population which is affected is low—on average it must be under two per cent, just by proportion of population—is there any specialist attempt to track that?

Prof. Leigh—To track the number of kids with otitis media?

Senator TIERNEY—Given that there is such a high risk of it in the pre school years, is there any systematic program that picks that up?

Prof. Leigh—There are Aboriginal ear health programs and educational programs for teachers working in Aboriginal populations to alert them to the likelihood of mild to moderate hearing impairment associated with otitis media. The project that we were talking about before—to try to put in place more adequate listening conditions for kids—is happening to a certain extent, and should be happening routinely, in all Aboriginal community education programs. As I said before, the efforts to monitor it and identify it on a case by case basis differ according to location.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you mean that the more remote you are, the less likely it will happen?

Prof. Leigh—Not necessarily; often the more remote you are, the more intensive the support.

Senator TIERNEY—Why is that?

Prof. Leigh—With the higher percentage of Aboriginal kids in those schools, it is more likely that there are dedicated resources attending to that. In a program sense, the problem is more likely to go not unremarked, certainly, but unaccounted for in schools where the

proportion of kids from Aboriginal backgrounds is lower and there are no highly intensive support programs for that population. For example, the incidence of otitis media in Aboriginal kids in metropolitan schools is apparently not that much lower—if lower at all—than in kids in remote rural communities. But it is much less likely that there are large numbers of kids with an Aboriginal background in those schools and therefore it is less likely that teachers are as well versed in the problems associated with that condition for that population.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. We will take a short break.

Proceedings suspended from 10.30 a.m. to 10.49 a.m.

DAGWELL, Ms Robyn, Team Leader, School Aged Services, Royal Blind Society

LUNN, Ms Helen Elaine, Manager, Child and Family Services, Royal Blind Society

JOHNSTON, Mrs Sandra Gail, Parent Representative, Royal Blind Society

CHAIR—I welcome the representatives from the Royal Blind Society. The committee has before it your submission, No. 101. Are there any changes or corrections that you wish to make to that submission?

Ms Lunn—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given confidentially. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Mrs Johnston—Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am the parent of a 17-year-old son who is legally blind. I have been asked to address the committee on behalf of the Royal Blind Society to attempt to give some insight into the difficulties faced by parents when attempting to access an appropriate educational program within state schools for a child with a vision impairment. My son has a degenerative condition of the eye called retinitis pigmentosa, which in 10 years has decreased his vision to a current status of light and some colour perception. As a result of the degenerative nature of his condition, we have had the chance to experience the whole range of adaptive technologies from large print format right through to now braille and the latest in computer technologies.

The experience has not been easy and has required constant monitoring by us to maintain some input into our son's education. The focus of our efforts has been to attempt to access an age appropriate education program which addresses our son's needs. His needs are the same as any other young adolescent, but with the added complexity of a sensory deficit which impacts on all aspects of his life. Our experiences with the education department have been fraught with difficulties over the years, but we have also been fortunate to have been allocated some exceptionally gifted professionals whose expertise and dedication have helped ease what is a very bumpy ride. However, it has been my observation that unfortunately these professionals are few and far between. The reasons for this seem to be many and varied, although an excess of workload for individual IST-Vs and a lack of funding seem to have the biggest impact on outcomes.

The current focus for my son at this time is to gain skills to make him workplace ready, and this has projected us into a whole new realm of discovery which requires a strong constitution and an exceptional sense of humour. There is apparently a yawning gap in the support base for young adults attempting to access skills to make them workplace ready. Our experiences in this area could rival the stupidity of an episode of *Monty Python*. The lack of commonsense and reluctance displayed by some professionals employed within the department to be innovative in their approach was almost beyond belief. When we made inquiries to ascertain where the

responsibility for assistance for accessing workplace training lay, we became very quickly aware that at this point in time there appears to be no protocol in place to effectively address this issue. After consultation with all the key people who we had perceived would be a part of this process, we were amazed to discover that, in fact, nobody within the department was willing to take responsibility for such issues. As a result, we were forced to look elsewhere for information and support and were fortunate to be able to access the Royal Blind Society Child and Family Services staff. The ability of this group of professionals to provide innovative solutions for the individual with a vision impairment is seen as second to none by the general population, and yet the powers that be within the department are perceived as unwilling or unable to engage the expertise of this organisation as part of a collaborative model of education.

The reasons for the unwillingness of this strategy remain a mystery to me and many other parents. Over the years I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to network with a large number of parents of children with a vision impairment, ranging in ages from primary school right through to now university. In that time it has proved to be invaluable to have the support of others in the same situation. What is of concern is the repetitious nature of the issues which we have all faced at different times throughout the years.

One of the issues which has been highlighted by most parents is the fragmented approach to the dissemination of information by educational bodies to parents of children with a visual impairment. It is seen by parents as being ad hoc at best and often nonexistent and influenced by the knowledge base and expertise of the individual teacher. The outcomes of such methods of information sharing often force parents into the unenviable situation of having to source relevant information themselves and disseminate the information back to the professionals involved in the education of their child. This type of information sharing has the potential to be emotion driven and, whilst it focuses on goals and issues which are important to the individual, there is a danger that key information related to education issues may be misinterpreted or, worse, missed altogether.

The range of issues which impact on the delivery of an age appropriate curriculum are many, but for the purposes of today's address I have chosen to identify a number that have been discussed with other parents as being not only problematic but also unfortunately recurring. There appear to be no clear guidelines in relation to achieving curriculum goals and recognised outcomes for children with a visual impairment. Because of the necessity to make use of adaptive technologies to access information required for curriculum development, it is perceived by parents that achieving skills in this area would be a priority to enable their children to function on the same level as their sighted peers. Unfortunately, adaptive technologies are often prioritised according to the skill of the individual IST-V and as such can sometimes be relegated to the too-hard basket for those teachers whose particular skill base lies with the braille code.

Accountability for funding appears to be random and governed by a formula. Our own recent experience with this issue highlighted the fact that it is necessary for parents of children with a disability to be aware of funding arrangements for their own child and to be prepared to investigate changes to arrangements already in place. However, to achieve this, there needs to be a recognised process which allows parent access to such information and clear guidelines to facilitate consultation. There appears to be no clear chain of command within the organisation which governs accountability for addressing parent concerns in relation to curriculum issues.

The perception by a large number of parents seems to be that the 'pass the buck' mentality is alive and well in the department, and often the key players are unaware of their own roles within the departmental framework. Parents are not recognised as being key stakeholders in their children's education. The ability of parents to play an active role in helping to facilitate appropriate educational outcomes is often grossly underestimated or, in the worst-case scenario, ignored by departmental staff.

There is a lack of foresight in planning for curriculum requirements in the long term. The approach to achieving curriculum goals seems to be fragmented and does not identify the need to aim for workplace readiness in the long term. There is an apparent reluctance to recognise and utilise the specialist skills of outside service providers such as the Guide Dog Association and the Royal Blind Society to enhance educational programs. Our experience has been that these service providers are actively discouraged from accessing the educational environment. As a result, the individual IST-V who has limited training in this crucial area is often charged with the responsibility of facilitating and overseeing mobility skills. This has the impact of utilising valuable classroom hours to train students in skills which would be more efficiently gained from experts in the field. In the view of the parent, this is a waste of valuable resources.

The Royal Blind Society is recognised as the main provider of services in relation to adaptive technologies, and yet there appears to be a reluctance to put in place partnerships which would help to provide a collaborative model of education which more appropriately addresses this issue. There appears to be no clear policy which relates to providing access to workplace skills for the vision impaired. Workplace experience is an essential element required for school certificate standards, and yet our own experience has been that protocols surrounding this very important matter are ad hoc and consumer driven. Responsibility is not clearly defined within the department and required, in our case, the accessing of outside service providers to help facilitate a meaningful dialogue and implement workplace strategies for my son.

Part of my role as an employee of the health department is to examine existing processes within a health department framework and assess their appropriateness for the task for which they were designed. My experience in that role thus far has highlighted that the programs which utilise a multidisciplinary skill base are perceived as being the most effective in achieving recognised outcomes. Recognition of the importance of engaging key stakeholders in positive dialogue within a collaborative framework is often seen within that environment as a key indicator of success. This model could be easily transferred to the educational environment, with partnerships between service providers and the education system seen as being not only relevant to achieving educational outcomes but also a more effective model for the delivery of specialist services.

Of particular interest to parents is the lack of availability of and accessibility to adaptive technology specialists within the educational framework. I am aware that there are IT consultants within the system, but I am unaware of an equivalent skill level of expertise with adaptive technologies. The reasons behind this could be perceived by parents as a lack of understanding of the importance of skills required by students in relation to their sighted peers.

If the education department is to be seen to be addressing the needs of students with a disability and facilitating positive outcomes in the long term, it is my opinion that this can only be achieved by an increase in funding and resources; implementing collaborative models of

education which acknowledge the skills of outside service providers; acknowledging the role of parents as key stakeholders in their children's education; the implementation of consultative processes within the department that are readily accessible by teachers, parents and students; and the establishment of liaison officer positions within the department. These professionals could be seen as resource people by both parents and teachers and could help to facilitate positive dialogue regarding requirements needed to achieve planned educational outcomes. Only when these issues are positively addressed can the department truly say that they teach the children well.

Senator TIERNEY—I will start with the case you mentioned relating to your son trying to get assistance. How old was he at that point?

Mrs Johnston—He is 17 at the moment.

Senator TIERNEY—And this was recently?

Mrs Johnston—This was within the last six months.

Senator TIERNEY—Can you describe in a little more detail exactly what happened at the point you tried to actually gain assistance? Where did you go and what were you told?

Mrs Johnston—He is sitting his school certificate this year, and it is a requirement that there is a work experience placement for at least a week to gain your school certificate. We started making inquiries at the beginning of the year as to who would be responsible for coordinating that work placement and what would be the most appropriate way of doing that. We actually had a meeting at school which involved all the key players: the careers adviser, the principal, his current IST-V and a few other people, such as a representative from TAFE and a transition officer. There was a lot of positive dialogue about how that work placement should be facilitated. When it came down to it, it was a whole new area for the careers adviser at the school: he had never been in a situation where he had to place a child who had a disability in a workplace for a short period of time.

I actually accessed a work experience placement for him within the Department of Sport and Recreation. It was then that the problems started. I tried to negotiate who would do a workplace assessment within that environment, because obviously a child with a disability needs to have the workplace assessed to make sure that it is appropriate for his needs. The response was: 'Oh well, we don't do that.' We then contacted the Royal Blind Society. The outcome was that the Royal Blind Society actually provided that service for us; they did the workplace assessment and we have been liaising with them quite often since all this started. We have now reached a point where the Royal Blind Society has had to do the workplace assessment. I have had to negotiate quite avidly with his AP for the area to achieve some sort of commitment for supervision. Obviously, work experience people with a disability need to have a level of supervision, whether it be input or contact, at least once or twice within that week period. I have now had a commitment to that, but it has taken a lot of fighting to get it. Nobody is aware of the protocol to access an appropriate workplace. There is no written protocol and nobody seems to know what their responsibilities are or they are not willing to find out what they are.

Senator TIERNEY—So nowhere in the department of education does a protocol exist?

Mrs Johnston—That is my understanding. I have had several employees at the department of education do the buck pass and basically say, ‘That is not my role.’ Whose role is it? I do not know. There has been a consistent lack of understanding of roles and whose responsibility it is.

Ms Dagwell—This would not be an isolated case; we would be aware of other cases of young people who are not being offered opportunities for work experience because no-one in the education department is taking responsibility.

Senator TIERNEY—But there is a disability section in the department of education.

Ms Dagwell—There is a disability section.

Senator TIERNEY—The department is appearing tomorrow afternoon. Did you contact people at that level in the department and ask what the protocol is?

Ms Lunn—We recently had a discussion with the Senior Education Officer, Vision, who has statewide responsibility. We asked her who is responsible for work experience, because there are various players: an itinerant teacher, a careers adviser at the school and transition support people who have recently been put in for disability issues. But it seems that not one of those three knows who is going to take responsibility and most people seem to spend their time saying it is the other person who might do it.

Senator TIERNEY—But we have had people being placed in these things for 20 or 30 years now. Surely, a lot of other people who were in this situation must have gone through.

Mrs Johnston—I think a lot of it has to do with parental input.

Ms Dagwell—And the individual teacher at the time.

Mrs Johnston—I am aware of quite a few parents who have organised work placements themselves because it just became too difficult.

Senator TIERNEY—So they did it themselves because no-one else would do it. It seems like there needs to be a protocol. What about the role of the IST-V in this? Surely, on the ground, that should have been the person.

Ms Lunn—Some of them at some point will take that responsibility, but they will say that it is the careers adviser’s or transition support teacher’s role to do that.

Senator TIERNEY—When that is put to the careers adviser, what do they say?

Ms Lunn—That they have no expertise in disability.

Mrs Johnston—That is the difficulty—there is no expertise, and usually we are the ones giving them the information about how they have to go about it.

Senator TIERNEY—But the IST-V should have some expertise.

Mrs Johnston—I emphasise the word ‘should’.

Senator TIERNEY—There is some indication in your submission of inadequacy in training. Could you elaborate on what should be happening in terms of the training of these people that is not happening?

Ms Dagwell—I think one of the problems is that the background of the itinerant vision teachers could be anything from a kindergarten trained teacher to an HSC maths teacher. There is no consistency in their training. They come into the specialist vision training from any background then they work with a child of any age. So you could have a maths trained high school teacher training and teaching a kindergarten student or vice versa: Some of them have no background in technology but are specialists in braille. Some of them have great experience in braille but no experience with low vision. It is a broad range of skills that they are required to have, but no one person can have all those skills—and certainly no one teacher ever does. The problem is that they do not tend to refer to specialists in their areas. In Sandra’s case, her teacher has experience in braille but not in technology, but is not seeking out that other experience in technology. So you have a teacher with a background in infants teaching and braille who has no idea about workplace issues, work experience, independence training for teenage vision impaired students—they do not have the background. Some do. Some do well; some do not do well.

Ms Lunn—Vision impairment is such a low incidence disability that there is probably a need for a national initiative for training these teachers, maybe with distance delivery. There are not enough teachers going through in each state for many universities to want to put up a course. We need more flexible models of preparation for these teachers, with a combination of residential and distance—

CHAIR—Can I ask a specific question: how can the Commonwealth assist in the development of a national strategy? What would you like to see the Commonwealth government do?

Ms Lunn—In the tertiary sector, I would probably like to see them identify that there would be established universities that set up courses as part of their special education offerings so that there was a designated course. Perhaps the government could establish credentialling, so that a teacher who was a teacher of the vision impaired had to have gone through that preparation.

CHAIR—And they could work anywhere in Australia? You would like to see that?

Ms Lunn—Yes; you could have national credentialling in a number of the disability areas, not just vision impairment. There are national standards being advocated by the professional association. If they were adopted as the benchmark and all itinerant teachers worked to those standards, I think that national approach would make a difference.

Senator TIERNEY—I suppose one of our problems—we have discussed this in other inquiries with other groups—is that what universities teach is difficult to direct. Within individual faculties, it is a variable feast across the nation in terms of special education: whether there is a focus on it or not, whether teachers who are not specialising in this area get any background at all in it—that is all very problematic at the moment. Mrs Johnston, I want to ask about some-

thing that is also referred to in the submission: transition phases—when your child went from preschool level into the infant school, to primary and then high school and now into tertiary. Could you briefly describe some of the difficulties you might have had when you crossed those barriers? This would not be the first time you have come across this sort of thing.

Mrs Johnston—My son was not diagnosed until he was seven, so he was within a school setting when he was diagnosed. His condition is degenerative; transferring from preschool to primary school was not an issue because we were not aware at that stage. His transition from primary school to high school was made reasonably smoothly because he had the benefit of taking his then IST-V with him into a different area to smooth that transition. We sit on the boundary of two areas, but the high school he was going to was in a different area. He was fortunate that the IST-V at the time had a broad view of his education and took into account the need for adaptive technology skills as well as a good braille focus.

We have always maintained a fairly high profile within our son's education and have made a point of being contactable, accountable and all those other things that you need to be to be part of a child's education. Liaising with the powers that be within the school environment has not been too bad. We have had all the usual issues which I think most parents come across within the school environment. There is this attitude: 'All parents are silly and they have no idea what they're doing, so we'll have it all over them.' But the transitions in those areas have been reasonably painless—for want of a better word.

Senator TIERNEY—What have you observed with other parents who may not be as articulate or as educated as you are?

Mrs Johnston—I have found—and I have networked with a lot of other parents—that it is an exhausting experience. You need to know what you are talking about, stick up for your rights and know what your son or daughter is entitled to. Therein lies a problem: not many people know what your son or daughter is entitled to and it is often a huge effort to find those things out. A parent usually finds things out by talking to another parent: 'My son got this.' 'How did they get that?' That sort of routine goes on. It is not necessarily the best way of doing things.

Some of the stories I have heard have been really awful. The other day I heard of a child who is in a Catholic school, not in an education department school, has the same condition as my son, is now legally blind and does not have the support of an IST-V. There are negotiations going on at the moment, but this child is in a mainstream school and without any support.

Ms Lunn—Some of the transitions from preschool to school—Sandra's son obviously did not need to make that transition—can be very difficult. Some parents seek a placement for their child that they cannot always get, particularly those whose children have additional disabilities; they cannot always get an inclusive education for their child at their neighbourhood school. So some of those transitions can be very difficult.

Senator TIERNEY—What area do you live in?

Mrs Johnston—We live in Helensburgh.

Senator TIERNEY—On the edge of Sydney. In talking to parents, are you picking up what is happening outside Sydney, particularly in relation to support from IST-Vs?

Mrs Johnston—As in country areas?

Senator TIERNEY—Yes.

Ms Lunn—Robyn services Dubbo.

Senator TIERNEY—Robyn, tell us what happens over in Dubbo.

Ms Dagwell—I regularly go out to Dubbo, Gilgandra and Gulargambone and I have been to Walgett recently, so I have a sense of that area out there. Within the education department the service provided is supposed to be the same as in the city. I think in the major centres—in Dubbo, for example—it is fairly good. The more remote you get the harder it is to find trained teachers. A lot of the positions are casual: teachers are not permanently replaced or a local teacher takes on the job and receives supervision from a trained teacher in a region a few hundred kilometres away.

It is very difficult for these remote children to have expert assistance and expert training because of the untrained teaching staff and the distance from services. At the same time, if you are in the right school with the right supportive staff, it can still work. If you are outside the education department you do not get specialist vision services. So the biggest issue for children in country areas is that, if you are in the Catholic system or the independent system and you want to learn braille—or you are a braille student—you cannot. There are no trained teachers and no support network for those students. Those parents only have the choice of a state system. That is the biggest issue for parents.

Senator TIERNEY—Finally, can you describe the state of early intervention in terms of detecting problems? Mrs Johnston, you might want to comment on this because you have a child who went blind through that time. Ms Lunn, you might want to comment on that as well.

Ms Lunn—Sandra's son did not experience early intervention services, because he was not picked up till six and that is the nature of his condition, whereas a lot of other children are identified at birth or over those early years. It is non-systematic. The pick-up of children is dependent on parents attending something or going to their GP, the GP in turn referring them to an ophthalmologist and that ophthalmologist having a paediatric background and having enough knowledge or respect for early intervention services to refer them on. So the parent and child are very vulnerable to the knowledge base of the particular medical community that they happen to interface with. There is no automatic screening of children. There is a little bit at the early childhood centres or baby health centres, but that is fairly low level.

Mrs Johnston—It is fairly generalised.

Senator ALLISON—Just on that point, we heard from the previous witnesses that New South Wales is doing screening for deafness as from December.

Ms Lunn—Yes, they are.

Senator ALLISON—This does not include vision impairment?

Ms Lunn—No.

Senator ALLISON—Is it more difficult to test for vision impairment in very young children?

Ms Lunn—I shouldn't think so, no.

Mrs Johnston—No.

Senator ALLISON—A number of submissions—I think yours as well—have called for a national register of children with vision impairment. Do you support that? What are the difficulties associated with maintaining such a register, and what would its main purposes be, in your mind?

Ms Lunn—I would support it, because I do not think we have enough of a research base at the moment to know what strategies are effective for students. We do not really know the current status of literacy acquisition and numeracy acquisition for students with low vision or who are blind. We have hunches and hypotheses about it, but we do not have any really strong data to compare those students to their sighted peers. I think it would allow us to start to map where the services are, which services are effective and which educational strategies are effective. It would be a much better mapping exercise. With any national register there are issues about privacy, of course, and keeping the information up to date—and it would obviously have to be voluntary—but I think that, if it were to lead to effective educational strategies, most parents would be willing for their children to be part of the database. As it is, I do not even think that within the state there would be a database where the senior education officer could actually say, 'What are the literacy standards for students with vision impairment across New South Wales?'

Senator ALLISON—It would presumably be complicated by the need to include other disabilities. We heard earlier this morning about the increasing incidence of learning disabilities—

Ms Lunn—Associated disabilities.

Senator ALLISON—Yes, sensory disabilities with brain damage rather than from other causes. Would you agree that it would be necessary to have some sort of profile of individuals?

Ms Lunn—Yes, you would need some profiling of each student. Most states are working towards some form of profiling for students in order to match resources to the child's needs. Most states have an ascertainment process or some sort of process that profiles the student, so that could be employed too.

Senator ALLISON—Are any longitudinal studies of children who have vision impairment through brain damage being done?

Ms Lunn—For educational outcomes?

Senator ALLISON—Yes.

Ms Lunn—There are certainly none going on in Australia that I know of. There have been some longitudinal studies in the States, but I do not know that we have ever tracked children from preschool through to post-school options. I think there may have been some tracking from preschool to about eight to 10 years, looking at the most vulnerable children educationally.

Senator ALLISON—You speak in your submission about the need for additional funding across the board, but I wonder if you can talk about your organisation. I gather that you rely on the charitable sector for 40 per cent of your funding.

Ms Lunn—No, 60 per cent—40 per cent comes from government funding and 60 per cent comes from the charitable sector.

Senator ALLISON—I see. Forty per cent is astounding enough. Generally speaking, how is that money raised? How appropriate do you think it is, in this day and age, for us to rely on charity for what would appear to me to be pretty basic services for a group of people?

Ms Lunn—It is raised through all those strategies like art unions, bequests, corporate liaison, donations and events—that sort of mix of strategies. They would be the major strategies of the organisation. The Royal Blind Society particularly relies on bequests. But I think it is totally inappropriate that students who need disability services are reliant on art unions or the charitable sector to support them, particularly in the case of our early intervention services, which are their only option. The government does not provide early intervention for children with vision impairment, so the charitable sector is basically supporting services for below school-age children and their families.

Senator ALLISON—Presumably you would not want your society to disappear but, in an ideal world where there was proper funding, what would you see your role as being?

Ms Lunn—The Royal Blind Society would be happy to disappear, in a sense! In a long-term sense, if we felt that all the supports for people with vision impairment were part of mainstream society, that would be a goal we would love to see achieved. But I guess it is one we would say realistically may not be achieved. If there were better mainstream services—in health, education and transport—we would mainly be involved with systemic advocacy to and consultation with major government departments. As it is, we are a direct service provider with less energy for that systemic work because we are so much at that grassroots level of providing services.

Senator ALLISON—Do students in secondary school, or even before then, ever use guide dogs?

Mrs Johnston—They can do. There is the potential from age 18 for students to access a guide dog, if necessary. I am aware of people who are at university, living on campus, using a guide dog.

Ms Dagwell—They can have them before 18, I think, if they show adequate maturity and already have some competent mobility skills. But certainly the Guide Dog Association provides mobility training—cane training—to children.

Ms Lunn—You need quite a lot of maturity. It looks like a simple solution but it actually requires quite an adult attitude.

Senator ALLISON—You need to be very firm with those dogs.

Ms Lunn—Yes, and you need to look after them and so forth. The use of a cane is the more usual thing to teach a young child.

Mrs Johnston—Again, that is outside the school environment. The schools do not seem to ‘like’—for want of a better word—guide dogs to access the school environment to give that training, so it is often outside school hours.

Senator ALLISON—On the subject of technology and braille services, for a typical primary school what funding is available to make sure that the library is stocked with appropriate books and so on? Is there a special grant program or does it have to come out of general library stocks? How does the system work?

Ms Dagwell—There is some capital grants funding for equipment for technology. For library books—

Senator ALLISON—Does that attach—

Ms Dagwell—It attaches to the student, I think.

Senator ALLISON—to the number of children of low vision?

Ms Dagwell—For a particular student you apply for capital grants funding for a piece of equipment, so it is per student.

Ms Lunn—I think the transcription services for braille and so forth are completely a state responsibility. I am not entirely sure about how the funding flows between the Commonwealth and the state.

Ms Dagwell—The Commonwealth provides for equipment.

Ms Lunn—But the alternative format production and so on is within the department and they have their own library.

Senator ALLISON—It is always mixed up. We can never quite get to the bottom of it.

Ms Lunn—You cannot track where the dollars came from, no.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing today. You have been very helpful.

Ms Lunn—Thank you for the opportunity.

[11.25 a.m.]

LUELF, Mrs Barbara Jean, Councillor, Special Education Committee, Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia Inc. and President, ICPA-NSW

CHAIR—I welcome the representative of the Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia. The committee has before it submission No. 180. Are there any changes or corrections that you wish to make?

Mrs Luelf—I have tabled another document which lists a couple of case studies that elaborate on the recommendations I am going to put forward this morning.

CHAIR—Thank you. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of evidence to be given confidentially. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Mrs Luelf—The Isolated Children's Parents Association of Australia thanks the Senate committee for the opportunity of speaking to the submission presented by our association to the inquiry into the education of students with disabilities. ICPA-Aust. is the only parent group that represents students from rural and remote areas of Australia who depend upon and use both government and non-government systems of education. All members are completely voluntary and, as a grassroots organisation, the information presented is obtained from actual situations with which families geographically isolated from services are endeavouring to cope.

The following recommendations summarise in essence the submission presented to you earlier. These recommendations are: (1) that the federal Disability Discrimination Act 1992 be upheld, enabling the enrolment and schooling of students with disabilities; (2) that the federal government should provide recurrent per capita funding to meet the full educational needs of a disabled student irrespective of the system chosen; (3) that funding should follow the child, irrespective of the system chosen, and not be affected by the current SES rating of the school; (4) that recognition should be given to the additional problems faced by families from rural and remote areas in the education of a disabled child; (5) that federal and state departments of education work with health and community services departments to ensure the transition from early intervention to school does not result in the elimination of necessary services for a disabled child; (6) that state authorities should ensure all preservice teacher education training includes modules that assist teachers in providing an appropriate education for a student with a disability who is integrated into mainstream schooling; and (7) that teachers, aides and parents working with an integrated student with a disability receive continuous training updates and assistance as to ways of assisting that student so as to provide the best educational opportunities. The rest of that tabled document involves two case studies which highlight those recommendations and also the submission previously entered.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Can you enlarge upon the submission that you have made to us as to the problems associated with diagnosis of disabilities and early intervention for children and their families in remote areas?

Mrs Luelf—Families from remote areas are at a disadvantage because they depend on the paediatrician or the level of the health service available locally. The previous speaker highlighted that issue also. Some GPs are not aware of some of the problems. Families are long distances from specialists. Of the case studies that I have identified, one was identified reasonably early because of the parents picking up the problem. It was not picked up when the child was born. Neither problem was, actually. It has been up to the parents to follow things up, because there are no services in many rural and remote areas.

CHAIR—You refer to Charles Sturt University and their early intervention strategies. Could you indicate to us what particular measures were undertaken through Charles Sturt?

Mrs Luelf—This is a new thing between the Isolated Children's Parents Association in New South Wales and Contact Inc., which is a service that deals with children's early learning in remote areas. We were very concerned that there are no therapists in many areas. We wanted to attract therapists to our rural areas, so we met with Charles Sturt University representatives to see if we could get students in their final year to come out and visit different community health places, like mobile early childhood services which go around in a van to outlying areas, and just see the problems that families are facing. Maybe they could start a home program or help the mothers to do something with their children and be attracted to come to rural and remote areas on graduation. I know from experience that home programs can work if you get back to the city to have things assessed and checked over and then go back home and keep the program going. Once a month or once every three months is not good enough. This program has started. Just in the last couple of months, three students went out from Charles Sturt University to the central west New South Wales, and the students held workshops for parents as well as meeting them and seeing the need. They all felt it was very good.

CHAIR—This is a relatively new program.

Mrs Luelf—Very new, yes. It is the first time it has happened. It is something that we would like to see progress and be extended to other universities, because it is the only way we are going to get people back into rural areas. They may not necessarily stay there, but if the therapists come in on a regular basis we have information technology such that programs can be beamed into certain areas and videos can be done and sent back for specialists/therapists to check that parents are doing the right thing. But families need help; they need to know where to start. Some cannot travel to the metropolitan areas.

CHAIR—Have you been able to attract any Commonwealth funding for this particular initiative?

Mrs Luelf—Not as yet. We are going to meet again with the representatives of Charles Sturt University. This was a one-off thing that we were trying. We are now doing a survey to see where the need is. A few of us got together and we thought, 'Let's try this.' If it works, we would like to see it attract Commonwealth funding, definitely.

CHAIR—On page 7 of your submission, you advocate a voucher model for disability education funding. What assessment have you made with regard to the efficiency of vouchers as a form of funding distribution or an allocation for disabled children?

Mrs Luelf—We have not done any research into it; we just know that students in rural and remote areas have no choice in some cases. Of the two case studies I have outlined, one student is deaf. She is in a government school. She is six years old. Her parents are just normal working people. They could not afford to send her to the Catholic school, which is a smaller school, because she would lose her itinerant support. She has eight hours of itinerant support a week. Surely that child is entitled to the same level of support regardless of where she goes to school. Under the human rights inquiry and the Disability Discrimination Act, there should be choice for parents, and that choice does not exist.

CHAIR—There are two issues there: there is the argument about choice and there is the question of efficiency. Do you see that there is any trade-off between those two principles?

Mrs Luelf—I think that the schools should be accountable, definitely. But there is a great discrepancy in funding between the government and non-government systems. In the first case study that I have quoted, that little boy is to start school next year. His parents have chosen the Catholic system. It is a smaller school, and his siblings go there. There are a number of reasons why that school was chosen, but because it has been chosen his funding is much less than it would be if he went to the state school. The state school has far bigger classes. As the people who were speaking before me said too, the teachers are not necessarily trained. These are things that need addressing.

CHAIR—Yes. Can I just come back to this point, though: you are arguing that there should be a voucher model, but then you say that the state should provide support for the training of teachers and classroom aides. Aren't those two principles incompatible? I am making a point about efficiency versus choice. If you are saying that the individual should look after themselves, how can you then also say that the state should look after everybody?

Mrs Luelf—I am sorry—

CHAIR—On the one hand, you are saying that the state—that is, the public sector, the government or however you describe it—is responsible for providing equality of opportunity.

Mrs Luelf—That is right.

CHAIR—You argue that case.

Mrs Luelf—That comes from the Commonwealth, though, not the state system.

CHAIR—Yes, that might be the case, but when I say 'the state' I am talking about government.

Mrs Luelf—Yes, fine.

CHAIR—There is a responsibility for it to provide equality of opportunity in what we describe as a social democratic country.

Mrs Luelf—Yes.

CHAIR—On the other hand, you are saying that individuals should get the money from the government—

Mrs Luelf—No—

CHAIR—That is what it says, isn't it?

Mrs Luelf—I think that the funding should follow the child.

CHAIR—Yes, but there is no voucher system.

Mrs Luelf—No. We have per capita funding for students in schools across Australia. The Commonwealth provides that funding. The majority of funding from the Commonwealth goes to non-government schools, and the state provides the backup. But, when it comes to a student with a disability, it is a different situation. Those children have far more needs. If it is a child who has a physical disability, who pays for that? The special schools that used to exist are all being closed down, or for our students who live in rural and remote areas they do not exist. Those students have no choice of school unless their parents and their school community can afford to pay for it. It is the responsibility of all of us to educate all children. It comes back to a taxpayer responsibility.

CHAIR—Yes, and that is usually measured through governments in determining priorities. It is argued that, when you take into account all the expenditure presented to, for instance, the Catholic system in terms of the indexation arrangements and the like, Catholic schools are in fact able to attract money in excess of government moneys given to government schools; that they are funded at 100 per cent plus on the indexation arrangements. Are you aware of that argument?

Mrs Luelf—Yes, I am.

CHAIR—If that is the case, what possible argument is there for the non-government school sector to receive additional moneys when it appears at the moment to, in some cases, receive in excess of the money provided to the government school system and it is not fulfilling its responsibilities to disabled children?

Mrs Luelf—But they also depend on funding from their parent body. When you look at the funding that goes into a Catholic system or into a non-government school, you are not taking into account the funding that is provided by that parent body or by that non-government sector.

CHAIR—What I am suggesting to you is that the Commonwealth is currently spending in excess of \$24 billion a year for the schools program. The overwhelming bulk of that, well over two-thirds of that money, goes to the non-government school sector. When we look at the full total—and this excludes, as you have indicated, moneys provided by private sources—we know on the statistics that the non-government sector is not carrying its share of the load with regard to disabled children. Why is that?

Mrs Luelf—I am afraid I cannot answer that because, in my experience with the small country schools, they are endeavouring to do all they can if they have an integrated student. People

really want a secure environment for their child if they have a disability. They want their child to be able to learn. The two cases I have outlined do not involve structural changes to a school, but if a child did have a disability that involved structural changes—capital works programs—that would be very expensive. Those are provided within our state system, regardless. The structural changes needed for disabled students who come from rural and remote areas and who have to board away from home if they are going on to secondary schooling are enormous, because they have to be able to access all levels. Usually dormitories are above ground.

CHAIR—I accept the point that you make and there are some schools that are very poor. We know that. There are within the disabilities act provisions for exemptions, on discrimination grounds, for what they call ‘unjustifiable hardships’. There may well be a legitimate argument for the school to say, ‘We can’t afford to put in all the equipment that’s needed for one child.’ However, that is the case for very poor schools. There are extremely wealthy schools in this country that are receiving extraordinary sums of money from the Commonwealth. There are very wealthy schools which have fees of up to \$20,000 a year for students to attend them. Why shouldn’t they provide the full range of services? Why should they be in any way exempt?

Mrs Luelf—For any school that provides these services, this is over and above the cost of education of students without a disability. The cost of educating a student with a disability is much higher than educating—I hesitate to use the words ‘a normal student’—a mainstream student, because there are special needs involved. When it involves an aide, when they need a one-on-one person, that costs money. It is not going to affect the other students, other than it could mean that the teacher is involved with that student far more than they are with the rest of class. We have to look at the teacher and the other students as well as the disabled student, and that is why we feel that those students need funding above the average government cost of educating the child in the state system.

CHAIR—That is my point. The average cost of educating a child in the government system is one measure. There are schools in this country that, in addition to that, when all the various payments are made, get assistance from the strategic assistance program, which provides assistance to schools. Compare the recurrent grants to schools plus the strategic assistance program for schools. My point is: why aren’t non-government schools doing more to fulfil their social obligations to meet the needs of all children?

Mrs Luelf—Are they receiving funding that enables them to provide the aides? Where we come from as a parent body is that we have the families who have these children who cannot get a full-time aide. The little boy in the first example that I have quoted to you is going to lose time that is provided to him with his early intervention program. He is going to lose services because he is going to a non-government school. He is going to lose services in the transition from early intervention to primary. He has an aide for half a day, and one of the things that was said to him was, ‘During the other half of the day we can’t provide an aide.’ What happens to that child? He is of compulsory school age. Does he go home? Does he do nothing for the other half of the day? Does the school have to carry a responsibility for a child who is very easily distracted, may run away and may disrupt the rest of the students in the class? These are the situations that are faced. People do not have access to anything else in rural areas.

Senator ALLISON—I want to ask you about the case study of Emma—case study 2 in your tabled document. You say:

When she first started at school in Kindergarten she was given 10 hours itinerant support a week but this has been reduced to 8 now and further reductions will be sought as she gets older.

Why is it that the itinerant support declines in terms of hours? Is it just the particular condition of this child or is that what happens to all children who get that support?

Mrs Luelf—The situation seems to be that, once a student is integrated, they consider that their needs are decreasing as they go along.

Senator ALLISON—That may or may not be the case; is that what you are saying?

Mrs Luelf—It may or may not be the case. I know this particular family were very concerned that Emma's hours were going to be cut further, because she needs this. Yes, she has had the cochlear implant, which was at great expense to her family in terms of time. We were able to get IPTAAS assistance through for her. The level of IPTAAS that is available for those families is another issue.

Senator ALLISON—Would you mind just saying what IPTAAS is?

Mrs Luelf—IPTAAS is the Isolated Patients Travel and Accommodation Assistance Scheme. If you are more than 200 kilometres from a specialist you can receive some travel and accommodation assistance for the child to visit a specialist. As I stated there, she was two kilometres off that distance initially so no funding was received until she had the cochlear implant, which involved the trip to Sydney. But it is a concern when they do lose hours because as they go up through the school system their needs change and quite often they need every bit of that assistance just as much. Even though they are getting used to the system they have additional needs coming on, particularly in the transition to primary school and then on to high school.

Senator ALLISON—So they are continually re-evaluated?

Mrs Luelf—They are assessed every year.

Senator ALLISON—Can you explain the circumstances of parents who, because of their remoteness, home-school their primary school age children in circumstances where they have a disability?

Mrs Luelf—For students who are on distance education—I cannot speak for families who are just choosing to home-school, only those who have no choice—

Senator ALLISON—No, I meant those who have no choice but to teach their own children.

Mrs Luelf—It is a very difficult situation because it does depend on them being able to have that child identified and then to receive the services. You cannot have a teacher's aide allocated to help you. If you have two or three children on distance education at different levels as well as a disabled student it can be extremely difficult.

Senator ALLISON—Under the system that the state government administers, you may be entitled to a teacher's aide should that child be in a classroom situation.

Mrs Luelf—If the child is in a face-to-face situation: that is right.

Senator ALLISON—What efforts does the state make to provide a teacher's aide in a remote location, or do they not make any efforts at all?

Mrs Luelf—That depends on the state. I know that in Western Australia they have a system set up with their schools of distance education where they have a panel of people assisting students with disabilities and difficulties. The students are assessed and then the panel puts in place the required people to help them, whether they are therapists or other specialists, and they come into the distance education centre—it may be hundreds of kilometres away. They have an individual program put out for that child. The level of support really does depend on the particular state or territory.

Senator ALLISON—But it is still not face-to-face support; they just assist with the material which is sent out to that student?

Mrs Luelf—They may come on a visit to the child. It might be once a term or something like that or the child may come in for an assessment once a term.

Senator ALLISON—I think I understand. I must say, I have always been astounded that so many parents are able to provide education for their children in a home situation with no payment and no recognition that this is what they do. It must be so much worse for them if they have a child with a disability.

Mrs Luelf—It is very difficult. We actually have a family which has just taken on two foster children, and both children are extremely disabled as far as their intellectual ability is concerned. They are really struggling at the moment. They have 80 miles to travel to see a speech therapist and an occupational therapist, because both boys require gross motor training. The program that has been set up for them, because they are now enrolled in the School of the Air, is very difficult for the foster mother to cope with. She is having extreme difficulties, and she is a trained nurse.

Senator ALLISON—What about children with learning disabilities who are in isolated areas? These children fall through the gap in many schools because they are not identified and they do not fit into any category which provides extra funding. What is your experience of the discovery of those learning disabilities in children in isolated areas?

Mrs Luelf—Usually it is the mother or a close family member who identifies the need, and then it is up to that person, particularly the distance education parents, to convince the school or their teacher that there is something wrong with the child. That is hard to do at times. In a small rural school situation, it is also very difficult. In many cases, unless the parents can afford to take the child off for an assessment, it can be a number of years before they are properly assessed. It depends on how educated the teachers are in picking up difficulties as well. That is something that we are advocating in our recommendations—that all preservice training of teachers should involve a special education component. When they are in the school, they really

need to know how to work with the integrated child. The parents need to be involved. Any aides need to be involved. That is the only way that you can have a successful program for that integrated child.

Senator ALLISON—You said earlier that with one of the case study children the parents chose a Catholic school despite the lack of support. I gather that one of the reasons was smaller class sizes. Would you like to suggest to the committee the size of class which would be optimum for integrating children with disabilities? I know that is a difficult question, but clearly you advocated smaller rather than larger class size.

Mrs Luelf—Also in that case study, which I know you have not had time to read, there was a special education unit within the state school in that particular town. That was closed due to falling numbers. The boy in question, who is to start school next year, would have started in the state system in that special education unit if it had still been operating. It was set up as a separate unit within the state school, and there was a very small class ratio of one to three or one to four. I could not give a number, because it depends on the disability. But it is a known fact that, if you had a child with a disability in a class of 30, the child would definitely be lost within that classroom situation. Starting school, going from a full aide to a partial aide within the school setting and just making that transition, is difficult in itself for a normal child without a disability.

Senator ALLISON—I believe your association represents Indigenous communities and, to some extent, parents in those remote areas. Would you like to suggest what the special problems are in those communities, bearing in mind the fact that this committee did an inquiry two years ago into Indigenous education, with particular regard to disabilities?

Mrs Luelf—I am sorry, that is something I cannot really speak about. Even though Indigenous families are welcome to be members of our association, we cannot speak for them unless they come with their particular problems. We are a grassroots organisation and we speak on behalf of our members on situations that are presented to us.

Senator ALLISON—You do not have a membership of Indigenous parents?

Mrs Luelf—We do have some Indigenous parents who are members, yes, but in this situation we have not had people bring case studies to us.

Senator ALLISON—I understand you have come quite some distance today to be here. Do you want to tell us what distance the place that you live is from Sydney?

Mrs Luelf—I am about seven hours from Sydney, between West Wyalong and Hay in south-west New South Wales. The mother whose son is mentioned in case study 1 would have liked to have accompanied me to this hearing, but unfortunately was unable to because her husband is away at the moment and they had nowhere to leave her autistic son. She did consider bringing him but we felt that it would be just too much for the committee. But she is willing to speak to the committee at a later date, if you would like to contact her. I can give details as to how she can be contacted.

Senator ALLISON—Okay. Broadly speaking, in your part of New South Wales—which sounds like it must be one of the more remote areas of New South Wales—

Mrs Luelf—No, there are far more remote areas.

Senator ALLISON—In a general sense, is the situation getting better or worse for the education of children with disabilities?

Mrs Luelf—It varies. Health services are declining, as I am sure you are all aware. There are services that are being withdrawn. When my children were born we had local paediatricians, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists. As I have quoted in case 1, that rural town could lose the speech pathology service, that comes once a week, with the removal of one child. Families would then have to travel 100 kilometres on alternate weeks to receive that service.

We have some improvements within the state system through funding, but then it is also harder to have your child assessed. In New South Wales we have a wonderful organisation called Dalwood, where children come down to Sydney and are assessed. But that is a long way away and the waiting list is very long. We as an organisation are looking at ways of thinking laterally: bringing services out on an occasional basis; starting home programs; using information technology, where it is available, to upskill people; and facilitating liaison between parents and carers in rural communities and specialists back in regional and metropolitan areas.

We really have to look at the problem because these children cannot be allowed to slip through the system. There used to be special schools available where everything was there for the student. We do not have that situation as much now, with students integrated into mainstream schooling. It depends on the level of the teacher's expertise and training and also on how much the parents can find out. A lot depends on the parents identifying the problem at the beginning and being able to follow it through. It should not be left totally to them, because people fall through the net. I was interested in hearing the comments from the lady who travels out to Dubbo about the situation the further west you go. It is okay in regional areas where there are hospitals and doctors, but in the smaller country towns these people sometimes are not identified earlier enough, and early intervention is the key.

Senator TIERNEY—I will begin by raising the point in your submission about the criticism of the disjointed approach to the education of students with disabilities in New South Wales. Could you elaborate on the way in which you feel the New South Wales government's approach is disjointed?

Mrs Luelf—I am not just referring to New South Wales. This happens across different states and territories. At the Human Rights Inquiry into Education in Rural and Remote Areas, Lady Pearl Logan made a comment where she recommended the departments of health and community services and education should all work together to deliver these services. It is something that really needs federal and state to work together, but it also needs to be a working together of those different departments as well. As quoted in the case of Oliver, when he goes on to primary school he will lose his speech and occupational therapy, and this is at a crucial stage of his learning process. He is making a big transition from early intervention with full-time aid to a school situation. There needs to be an overlap.

In rural areas we tend to work together to use the resources we have. There are some wonderful programs where this is happening and in New South Wales there are some great examples. There is Connect 5, which is happening in the central west area, where they are connecting local government services. But Health and the department of community services are also working together to address the needs of our children. It is a whole of government approach that is needed because funds can be wasted, can't they?

Senator TIERNEY—Is that example you gave happening in north-west New South Wales?

Mrs Luelf—Yes, around the Coonamble area.

Senator TIERNEY—But is that just because that is a local initiative or is it happening elsewhere?

Mrs Luelf—It is a local government initiative, working with the families—

Senator TIERNEY—The association of shires have put that together?

Mrs Luelf—Yes, things like that. That is just a recommendation that we would like to see across the board because if we waste services people fall through the net, and there are only limited funds we realise. As an association we really try to use the dollars the best way they can be used.

Senator TIERNEY—So in that example you quoted before of a child leaving a preschool environment, having had that support, and then getting into the normal school system, what happened in terms of support in that case?

Mrs Luelf—It then comes under the department of education particularly if they are a deaf or a blind student. Case 2 that I mentioned, Emma, would lose her itinerant support service if she went into the Catholic or the non-government sector. While she is in the state system she has itinerant support now of eight hours a week.

Senator TIERNEY—Where is she located—what school?

Mrs Luelf—She is located in Griffith but if she went to the Catholic school she would not have that itinerant support. You would find that would apply across New South Wales.

Senator TIERNEY—What if she went to a state school in a smaller centre than Griffith?

Mrs Luelf—She would still be entitled to itinerant support.

Senator TIERNEY—But would she get it in the more remote areas of the state?

Mrs Luelf—It would depend on how the child is assessed. Every year an assessment has to be put in by the school and it is done in conjunction with the special education person from the district office. I do not know how that situation works in other states; I just know the situation in New South Wales.

Senator TIERNEY—If they were in places like Warren or Ivanhoe or White Cliffs?

Mrs Luelf—It depends on the teacher and the school counsellor. It is a meeting between the parents, the school counsellor and the head of the school. It depends on how up to date they are with the issues and the needs of those children.

Senator TIERNEY—What we are trying to get is some sense of how systematically and regularly this sort of thing happens. We are getting a general impression from other witnesses that a lot of what happens out in rural and regional Australia is pretty hit and miss in this area; that it depends on the situation, like the example you gave in north-western New South Wales, or on who the principal is. I am trying to get from you some sense of how pervasive it is—or is it just isolated—that it is dependent on the local circumstances whether a child in a remote area with a disability actually gets some assistance.

Mrs Luelf—The system has changed. With more students being integrated into mainstream schooling, the responsibility is falling on the mainstream schools, whether they be in the government or the non-government sector. Previously, there were more special schools but those schools are closing down for a variety of reasons. Teachers in mainstream schools—and I am a teacher—

Senator TIERNEY—Are you currently a teacher?

Mrs Luelf—No, I am not at the moment. While I was teaching, we did not have special education training for students with disabilities.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you sure it happens now?

Mrs Luelf—There is a very small component in their course in New South Wales.

Senator TIERNEY—It varies.

Mrs Luelf—It varies across states and territories.

Senator TIERNEY—It actually varies from university to university. Some do it, some do not.

Mrs Luelf—If they are training to be a teacher, they are supposed to do a small component of special education.

Senator TIERNEY—Where is that mandated?

Mrs Luelf—It is something that our association has lobbied for and we have been told it exists, but we have our doubts. But then it is a general thing. As I quoted in our submission, if they are doing something about autism they might have one lecture in a four-year program so that does not enable them to work with children with autism.

Senator TIERNEY—Does your association have a view on the trend to integration in terms of its adequacy in providing an education for children with disabilities, particularly in rural and regional areas?

Mrs Luelf—By that question do you mean are we for or against integration?

Senator TIERNEY—For the last 20 years governments have been moving towards integration and I just wondered whether your association has a view on that. Do you have concerns about it in terms of the adequacy of the education of children with disabilities?

Mrs Luelf—We agree with the students being integrated. They can bring a benefit to the school and they can benefit by it, but adequate funding of those students to be integrated is essential. In New South Wales we have what are called PP6 schools, one-teacher schools—in other states I am not sure what the terminology is. If the teacher is the only person there and they have an integrated child without a full-time aide, where does the level of responsibility lie when it comes to the Child Safety Act? That is a problem.

Senator TIERNEY—That is a very important question. I go back to my original question: does your association have a view? You are saying that, yes, they should be supported properly, and we all agree with that, but the question is: are they? Do you have a view on that?

Mrs Luelf—We do not think they are adequately supported at the moment.

Senator TIERNEY—I will just move on to the area of assessment as it relates to isolated children. Often a lot of these conditions, even in urban areas, are not picked up at an early stage. Do you have any comments relating to assessment of children that have disabilities, and parents getting assistance for that assessment, in rural and remote areas?

Mrs Luelf—As stated in our submission, cost—financial cost and time cost—is a huge thing when it comes to assessment. Yes, I agree there are students who are not picked up in urban and metropolitan areas, but the likelihood is less, particularly if they are in a face-to-face school. I agree with early screening; that is something our association believes in strongly—and I notice the people from the Royal Blind Society were saying that early screening is not conducted there. Parents identify problems or they have a feeling that something is wrong but then it is getting someone else to acknowledge that. You do not always have that person within a couple of hundred kilometres.

It is much harder for a family that is educating its child by distance education because it does not have access to services on a regular basis, be it medical or education on a face-to-face basis. The mobile resource vans that go around with early childhood services are wonderful for families in isolated areas. That is one vehicle by which we feel that early assessments may be able to be done, using things that are out there to identify problems as early as possible. The earlier the problem is identified, the sooner you can start some sort of treatment. But again, if the treatment is only in the metropolitan area, it is very difficult. It is costly in time but it is also financially difficult, and some families just cannot afford that. Their child will not be put onto a program until they can get into a government school where maybe they will be on a waiting list for one, two years—it just depends when there is a therapist or someone else who can come out and diagnose the problem.

Senator TIERNEY—So if someone is in, say, White Cliffs or Warren and the teacher thinks there is a particular problem, are there any medical services moving around the schools still, even in a general sense, to at least get the next level of assessment?

Mrs Luelf—That depends on the situation and where they are and what their health services are like. It varies.

Senator TIERNEY—But there should be a system state by state at least. In New South Wales in the areas we are talking about—

Mrs Luelf—The Royal Flying Doctor Service have established a base in Dubbo in the last few years and one of the purposes behind that has been to enable teams of specialists and therapists to fly out to certain areas on a regular basis—and a regular basis might be two or three times a year. So they might fly out to places such as Brewarrina or Bourke and bring in the services. These services, even in Griffith, which is a large regional centre, do not exist. Families have to travel to a place like Wagga or Dubbo.

Senator TIERNEY—Or Griffith, yes. They have to go to a base hospital or something like that.

Mrs Luelf—Yes. Specialists fly in to places such as Griffith. When it comes to therapists, it depends whether there is a local one in the area, someone who has married and moved there. There is just such a chronic shortage.

Senator TIERNEY—It is all a bit hit and miss, isn't it, depending on where you live?

Mrs Luelf—Definitely.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming today.

Proceedings suspended from 12.13 p.m. to 1.57 p.m.

DE MAR, Mrs Karen Elizabeth, Director, Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales

MITCHELL, Ms Kerry Elizabeth, Member, Management Committee, Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales

WHITING, Dr Paul Raymond, Treasurer, Australian Federation of SPELD Associations; President, Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Specific Learning Difficulties Association of New South Wales. The committee has before it submission No. 200. Are there any changes you wish to make to it?

Dr Whiting—No, I just apologise to the committee for one or two small typographical errors. We can actually spell the word ‘access’. We do so correctly in one or two places but not in the first.

CHAIR—That is the least of our worries, I would have thought. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of the evidence to be given in camera. I would point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I now invite you to make an opening statement.

Dr Whiting—In our opening statement, we would like first of all to express our appreciation to the Senate for their interest in this issue, which we of course regard as very important. It is the central issue that AUSPELD is concerned with. AUSPELD is a federation of SPELD organisations around Australia, of which there is one in every state. AUSPELD represents the national interest in specific learning disabilities. The paper that we have sent to the committee raises a number of issues—probably too many for me to refer to in this opening statement, which I understand you would like to be brief. However, let me just refer to a few.

The first is the definition of ‘specific learning difficulty’ as an intrinsic disability. The point that we want to make is that, in the education of these students around Australia, there is a lot of confusion or perhaps deliberate clouding of that issue of definition. We actually think that it is deliberate clouding of the issue, because we have argued this issue extensively, particularly in New South Wales with the 1994 primary schools syllabus in English, where we wanted the term ‘specific learning difficulty’ included to identify children who have a difficulty learning in one or two specific areas only and not a global difficulty in learning. However, that was strongly resisted by the representatives of the New South Wales department of education, and we were not able to win that argument.

The education departments try to simply list people as having a learning difficulty. They justify that—reasonably, from one point of view—by saying that their responsibility is to treat learning difficulties and it does not matter what the cause is or what the implications are; they will deal with the learning problem. The difficulty with that of course is that it conflates difficulties in learning that are produced by extrinsic factors—that is, things like poor schooling,

absence from school, emotional problems and sensory problems—with intrinsic factors such as dyslexia when we know there are biochemical and physiological differences between people who are dyslexic and people who have no reading problems. So the issue of definition is important from our point of view because the treatment implications will be different depending on how you define the problem.

The second point is that we want to be clear that this should be an educational issue and not a medical issue. In our submission we have referred to some comments from the Department of Education and Training which suggest that it will need medical diagnoses and references. In our view that is entirely inappropriate: doctors are not trained to identify or recognise a specific learning difficulty—or a specific learning disability, depending on the term you want to use—and it will only hold up the issue. Most of the treatments that are appropriate for this condition in the present state of knowledge are not medical. The only medical treatments that are of any help to people with a learning difficulty are those for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and even then drug therapy is not appropriate for everybody who is identified as having that disorder. So this suggestion that we need health department involvement and medical diagnosis is, in our view, quite incorrect and unhelpful. If we were looking at the involvement of speech pathologists and occupational therapists, perhaps health department involvement would be important in the treatment of specific learning difficulties or disabilities.

The third point that we would like to underscore is the funding dilemma: who is responsible for funding these students and their education? The difficulty here, we believe, relates to the definition. We think the reason the definition has been obscured is that once it is defined it becomes somebody's responsibility to fund it. If it is true, as we believe, that seven per cent of the population are in fact dyslexic to some significant degree, then we are looking at quite a lot of children who will potentially need some funding in the form of support teaching, and there is no way that with current provisions the departments of education could supply that support. In fact, even with the current level of demand, that support is not supplied. It is relatively easy to be assessed as eligible for support but often very difficult to actually get that support.

So if you are in a small two-teacher school—I am speaking now of a particular example that comes to mind—with a difficulty that requires support teacher intervention, it is very unlikely that you will be able to get any support at all. The school numbers and your level of need within the school will be such that, if you are lucky, you may be eligible for 0.1 of a support teacher or perhaps even less, in which case you will get virtually no support at all. It is not an easy problem to solve; I do not minimise the difficulties. The travel times involved in getting a support teacher to these places for one or two children is very difficult to accommodate within a reasonable system. The level of support available is just insufficient for the need, and you can see that reflected in the fact that, every time there is something on television about dyslexics, there is a rush of demand from people who have not been able to access the help that their child needs through the system and who think, 'Maybe this will help my child'.

The fourth point I would like to make is the emphasis on teacher training and career path development. I understand that that is not directly a federal government responsibility. However, the federal government, for good or ill, has taken on university funding, and the universities took on the colleges of advanced education which were training teachers. We do not believe that there was an understanding of what that would involve when it was done. From a political point of view, I do not think that the people concerned understood what teacher

education involved or what the costs involved. Teacher education has been slimmed down, shall we say, to a more lean and so-called efficient model. For example, now with four-year training for teachers there is no way that we can run the courses that we used to run when we had three-year training for teachers. We have had to cut courses, in which I have been personally involved. In dealing with children with specific needs, we have had to cut courses in half in terms of the hours that we allow for them, because we have gone to four-year university training, instead of three-year college training. That is very largely a matter of funding: universities cannot pay the staff to do it.

Teacher education will be important. Most state governments have mandated a course in special education for all trainee teachers. In fact, the New South Wales government said to the University of Sydney and to all of its universities, 'If you do not have an appropriate course, we will not employ your graduates,' which is a pretty strong incentive for a university to comply. But in the last 10 years nobody has looked at the content of those courses; nobody knows what is in them. The first director of special education who was involved in implementing that mandate actually went to and inspected every university to see what was involved in these courses, but it has not been done for 10 years. There is no question that teachers are still not being trained to recognise these learning disabilities. That is all that we ask of teachers: that they are able to recognise a learning disability when they see it and not to confuse it with mental retardation, intellectual disability or misbehaviour.

There are lots of other points that we could make, but let me make just one more. A current political response, at least in New South Wales, to some of the difficulties in our schools is to provide additional funding for behavioural problems. In our view, that is misguided. It is very understandable but it is misguided. It fails to look at the causes of the behavioural problems.

I will cite just one case as an illustration of that. I have recently been looking at a young chap who is 14 years of age. He has a reading level of grade 2 and a spelling level of grade 1. He has been assessed as dyslexic by a private psychologist. He has had three years of remedial teaching at that psychologist's clinic. He has had a support teacher for learning difficulties in school, and he has attended an intensive reading class in school. He has had every provision that the government system can provide. At 14 he is in a school for behaviour disordered children and has been told that, at the end of this year, he can leave because there is nothing more the system can do for him. His parents will tell you that he is not behaviour disordered at all; he is a delightful child. I certainly did not find him at all difficult to deal with. He is behaviour disordered because he has finally refused to do things that nobody has enabled him to do—namely, to read, write and spell. When they ask him to do it, he just says no. So he is oppositional defiant and in a school for behaviour disordered kids. And where is he going? What is his chance in life in the future?

That is what really is of concern to AUSPELD. He has had everything the system can give him, and it is not enough. He has never been properly diagnosed, because the system does not recognise dyslexia and it does not know how to diagnose dyslexia. I know what is wrong with him. It took me five minutes to discover what was wrong with him. I am going to stop now because, as you see, I get very angry when I start talking about a 14-year-old who is intrinsically a nice boy with a supportive family, but who is going nowhere and who, in my view, is in danger of self harm because of where he now sits in the system that this world offers him. So we are very concerned about these children and about their educational opportunities. I

would be very happy to answer any questions that you have regarding our submission. I thank you for taking the trouble to read all these submissions.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. It is a very good submission. I must say I cannot say the same about all the submissions I have had the opportunity to read. It seems to me that you have a great deal to offer the committee, so I might try to explore some issues with you and I am sure the other senators will as well. I will go to the issue of the various divisions of powers—‘responsibilities’ is probably a better word, given the nature of our federation. It seems that no-one really has any power to do anything if you believe most education authorities. Putting aside the question of the adequacy of funding—you put an argument that it is not enough, and I accept that point of view—the question arises: which is the level of transparency in the way in which existing funds are actually spent? You seem to be suggesting that there is a problem first in terms of definition and that this serves the purpose of disguising the failure to have an accountable, transparent system for the expenditure of public funds. Is that what you are saying to the committee? Is it the case, in your judgment, that we cannot really identify where the dollars go, whether they are Commonwealth or state dollars?

Dr Whiting—I think we can often identify where they go, but we think they go in the wrong direction, very often. The whole question of the eligibility to have a disability is an example of that. The federal Disability Discrimination Act, for example, would clearly put a learning disability into that area. However, in the application of that act, people who have a learning disability are specifically excluded, and yet the act itself says it covers people who learn differently. There is a problem in that there is a conflict between what the state is prepared to do with the funds that are supplied by the federal government and what the Disability Discrimination Act would suggest should be done. It is about the business that I referred to of funding behaviour problems but not looking behind the behaviour problems to see whether we could stop them earlier on in the system by applying this funding further back.

CHAIR—Let us take something specific. You have the Commonwealth literacy and numeracy programs, and you also have the Teachers for the 21st Century program. How would you like to see those programs improved so that targeted funds actually go towards meeting educational needs for students with learning disabilities?

Dr Whiting—We think that probably the Commonwealth literacy and numeracy programs are the place where funding for something like dyslexia could be accessed, because it is a literacy and numeracy difficulty, and it avoids the whole argument about disability. We do not really want to get into that argument, but sometimes you have to in order to access the funding. If we did not have to get into that argument, if the disability were defined as a learning disability in literacy and numeracy, then it could be funded under a program like that.

CHAIR—You have raised some questions about the government sector and government schools and their lack of transparency. What do you say to the proposition that the non-government sector is not very transparent in the way in which it spends Commonwealth moneys?

Dr Whiting—Absolutely. Very often the non-government sector has much less to offer than the government sector, but of course as in the government sector it depends on the school that you are talking about. Some schools will offer support. I recall that at our last conference we

had the principal of a private girls school speak, and her opening remark was, 'There's no way we could provide the kinds of systemic support that the state provides in its schools.' However, she went on to describe what happened in her school, and that was obviously a much more supportive program because of the way they organised the school than is available in many state schools, which cannot actually get the support that is theoretically available because there is not enough of it. Having said that, there are some state schools which work very well in this regard, but it is not the majority. But I agree with you that the private schools are not at all transparent in how they use Commonwealth funding, and we think that Commonwealth funding is too freely given without sufficient controls in that area.

CHAIR—I turn to the university sector. You mentioned teacher education and the fact that the move to universities charging full fees for postgraduate courses has reduced participation in courses related to specific learning difficulties. Do you have any evidence for that? If so, what is the nature of the evidence?

Dr Whiting—The evidence is in enrolment of students in postgraduate coursework degrees. In the education faculties of some universities, the introduction of full fees for those courses has virtually wiped out their postgraduate courses. That is not true at a university like Sydney, but then Sydney is very different from the others, and when this happens people tend to look around and think, 'Where will I spend my money if I have to spend it.' But when you couple that with the fact that the Department of Education in New South Wales, for example, no longer supports teachers when they enrol in postgraduate coursework degrees, as they used to, you can see that there is a considerable disincentive for teachers to enrol in such degrees.

CHAIR—Could you give us a breakdown of any further information you have to sustain that point. I am particularly interested in following that up with a report. The question also arises about the impact on research funding as a result of the squeeze that is now taking place within the universities. Are you aware that about 80 per cent of the research funding comes from recurrent grants at the moment? Have you seen much evidence of that flowing through to the university faculties that teach education?

Dr Whiting—I will just comment on teacher education research. There are a couple of factors here. One is the difficulty of getting grants, which is very true; it is very difficult. As you know, the success rate for ARC grants is about 20 per cent. People go to enormous trouble—they spend weeks and months—in preparing their submissions. That is a lot of money to put into preparing submissions for research grants with a one in five chance of being supported, so there is an increasing reluctance to do that. The success rate in linkage grants is higher. It is about 54 per cent at the moment, but that requires you to have an industry partner, such as the Department of Education or one of the private school sectors—something like that—and they have to put in matching funds and so on. So there is a higher success rate there and people are looking at those sorts of partnerships. On the other side, you have the difficulty of accessing subjects for this kind of research. It is very difficult to get into government schools now to do research. The ethnical restrictions placed on researchers and the difficulty of maintaining access in an overburdened school system where teachers do not have sufficient access to their classes and they already have too many administrative jobs to perform—

CHAIR—Are you finding that the state governments are making up the gap that is now emerging in this area of research?

Dr Whiting—No, I am finding that the research emphasis is changing, and people are now reluctant to even propose research projects that go into the schools and look at children's learning and what is effective in improving that learning. It is just too hard. If we were in America, it would not be a problem; it is much easier in America.

CHAIR—In the United Kingdom there is a code of practice for special education needs. Do you think we should have one here?

Dr Whiting—Yes, absolutely. I know the United Kingdom system. I was there three years ago and looked at what they do there. As you probably know, there are a small number of government schools and a number of private schools specifically for dyslexic students, and there is a whole system for students with special education needs and it is legislated for.

CHAIR—You describe a system in the United Kingdom. How would it help us to establish a code?

Dr Whiting—It would help us because these students would have to be identified. In the United Kingdom it is legislated for and the term 'specific learning difficulty/dyslexia' is in the title of the legislation.

CHAIR—Are you saying that that should be linked to funding?

Dr Whiting—Yes, as in America, where students have to have an appropriate education plan devised for their educational needs. We need that here. We have resisted legislation in this area because we just do not want to go the legislative way. Wherever you go through legislation you get litigation, and we do not think that helps anybody except the lawyers. But we have not been successful since the 1974 House of Representatives Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties in getting these young people identified and accessing support for them. Legislation may be the only way to go.

Senator TIERNEY—I want to initially make some comments on teacher education in this area. You did say that this has all been slimmed down and training has gone from three to four years—somewhat ironically, the amount of time has gone up but the courses have been slimmed down. You did mention that one of the reasons for that is the inability to pay staff. I am just curious as to why that is a problem. If the students are there in a four-year course and are being taught something, why does the content make that much difference in terms of cost? Why couldn't they have more instruction on the teaching of people with disabilities?

Dr Whiting—I suppose it is because they are now required to do so much more in areas of generalist study and in areas of specific emphasis, but it is also because the amount of money that the federal government supplies to tertiary institutions for teacher education or anything else as compared to the amount of money that was supplied to the former teachers colleges is relatively small. The economics department at the University of Sydney looked at the actual cost of educating a student 12 months ago and found that the Commonwealth government funds about 90 per cent of the cost of putting a student through the degree.

Senator TIERNEY—But why does that affect what is taught in content? You have to have someone in front of the students for four years anyway. Why does funding affect the content?

Dr Whiting—I do not think I said it affects the content; I think I said it has reduced the amount of time that we can spend on the content.

Senator TIERNEY—We have gone from two-year training to three-year training to four-year training—in some places, there is five-year training if students do a double degree. I am still curious as to why, in all that time, we cannot fit into the curriculum somewhere something related to learning disabilities. It does not seem to have anything to do with funding; it seems to be the preference for what they are taught.

Dr Whiting—That is true, of course, and you do have a majority of children who do not have learning disabilities, so you have to provide the normal curriculum. The normal curriculum is much more closely specified now than it used to be. We have outcomes based teaching, which we did not have years ago. In a generalist sense, I think we train teachers a lot better than we used to many years ago. I am not simply looking back to the good old days—

Senator TIERNEY—Shouldn't some of that outcomes base be related to children with difficulties? We have had an inquiry into gifted children as well, and both ends of the spectrum seem to be missing out on special preparation for their needs as teachers.

Dr Whiting—I think that is right. I made the point to you that the argument we had with the department over the 1994 syllabus has just run on to the 1998 syllabus in New South Wales, where there is virtually no mention of these children and their needs.

Senator TIERNEY—You are at the University of Sydney. What sort of preparation are students who are preparing to be teachers in the system who might have children with a learning disability given in terms of identifying these children?

Dr Whiting—All students have the mandatory course in special education, but that is one semester of about two hours a week with a certain number of hours of fieldwork built into it.

Senator TIERNEY—A semester nowadays being—

Dr Whiting—You can call it about 26 hours, the whole of that, of face-to-face lectures plus some assigned work plus some fieldwork. In addition to that, at Sydney in the fourth year all the primary education students have to do four hours a week for one semester in our children's centre, where they work with a child who is identified by the school as not succeeding as they should be. They have to learn to do appropriate assessments and to program for that child and to teach that child and to report on the progress of that child. That is a one-semester program and they are able to do that only in numeracy or literacy, they cannot do it in both. However, as far as I am aware, Sydney is the only university that does that in Australia, and that is under threat because of funding difficulties too; it has always been under threat for that reason.

Senator TIERNEY—That brings me back to the point of why the content of the curriculum is under threat.

Dr Whiting—It is simply the staff time available.

Senator TIERNEY—The staff have to be available to teach something, presumably, in a four-year course.

Dr Whiting—That is true, but remember you have moved teacher education out of colleges where the sole responsibility of the staff was to teach into universities where they will only get promotion through research, not through teaching. I am not saying that the teaching is bad or is underestimated but you are not going to get promotion through teaching—

Senator TIERNEY—But if you compare university staff loads now with CAE loads 20 years ago, the teaching loads are higher. So if you say they do research it is not because they are spending less time teaching; they are actually spending more time teaching. I cannot really accept that argument.

Dr Whiting—I do not know where the teaching loads are higher, but the old teachers colleges, when somebody foolishly asked the question what was an appropriate teaching load, the answer that came from our political masters was 14 plus or minus two hours per week face to face. There are not too many places that I am aware of where serious academics are teaching 14 plus or minus two anymore.

Senator TIERNEY—In those hours that you have mentioned at Sydney University, how many of those hours would be related to training teachers in diagnostic techniques for identifying children with learning disabilities?

Dr Whiting—The only place where that is done would be in the children's centre course in the fourth year for that one semester.

Senator TIERNEY—And how much of that one semester would they spend on it?

Dr Whiting—On diagnostic techniques, they would have probably, in terms of practical work plus instruction, 10 hours or 12 hours.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you aware of any other universities in New South Wales that do this?

Dr Whiting—No.

Senator TIERNEY—You are the only one?

Dr Whiting—I think so.

Senator TIERNEY—So it is a bit hit and miss for the kids out there. They had better hope they get someone from Sydney University.

Dr Whiting—Absolutely. We do think that we train a different kind of teacher because of that, but if it goes we do not even have that to offer.

Senator TIERNEY—If students graduate from all these other universities with absolutely no inservice training in this area, what can they look forward to in terms of inservice training?

Dr Whiting—We do not think there is enough inservice training available in that, although the New South Wales department is putting a lot of money into employing staff in the field to oversee that and to conduct inservice training. But a lot of that has to be done in teachers' own time now, whereas it was not previously.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you aware of how the funding levels on that have shifted in terms of inservice training money being available in New South Wales over the last few years?

Dr Whiting—No, I do not have figures on the change in that. The fact that the department no longer funds postgraduate coursework is one indication of a reduction in inservice provision, because that was an important provision.

Senator TIERNEY—I will come back to that one in a minute. I will stick with the normal several-day inservice matter. Over a 10-year period, how much time could your normal classroom teacher expect to receive on inservice training in special education?

Dr Whiting—I do not think I could answer that. There must be many teachers in the system who have not had any inservice training worth mentioning for 20 years.

Senator TIERNEY—That would line up with what we have found with gifted children as well. I assume it is the same with the children with disabilities.

Dr Whiting—Kerry might like to comment on that.

Ms Mitchell—SPELD runs its own teacher training courses in this area and we find with a lot of people who come to those courses that that is the only place they can get specific training in this area.

Senator TIERNEY—How many people would do that a year?

Ms Mitchell—It depends on how often we run the courses.

Senator TIERNEY—On average, roughly.

Ms Mitchell—I ran a course last year for teachers of adults with specific learning disabilities and there were 15 people there from all over the state, and that was a very quickly organised course. I have had people inquiring constantly since then about when the next course is coming up.

Senator TIERNEY—Because there is nothing else available.

Ms Mitchell—There is nothing else available basically. They are doing it on their own time and they are often paying their own fees. Very rarely does the school pay the fees for them.

Dr Whiting—A group in the Shoalhaven have just conducted a learning disabilities expo at which I spoke. It was a one-day thing and it had teachers there. I met a woman as I was walking back to the car, wandering down the track, and she said to me, ‘This has been the most amazing day.’ I asked why. She said, ‘I have been a teacher for 27 years and I have never heard of this sort of thing.’

Ms Mitchell—We get people coming to our conferences regularly who have had no other contact with learning disabilities. So there are still a lot of people out there who do not know that they exist, and they are teaching our kids.

Mrs de Mar—Approximately one child in every class of 30 would have a specific learning disability, if not up to three, on average. So it is a huge percentage of the children in the schools.

Senator TIERNEY—And these teachers have all missed it because they have had no preservice training and no inservice training to identify such things. I will just return to a comment you made, Dr Whiting, about the postgraduate courses. You said the state government used to support teachers doing those. How long ago did they disappear and what was involved?

Dr Whiting—I am not exactly up on the year that they disappeared but it was about the same time as coursework fees were introduced by the universities, so probably five years ago. I would have to check that exact time for you.

Senator TIERNEY—You also said that teachers are increasingly reluctant to do these courses. Have you noticed any change since the introduction of PELS, the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme? Across Australia the number of postgrads has gone up 17 per cent and I am assuming there is something similar happening in teacher education that has happened everywhere else.

Dr Whiting—This is in the last 12 months, isn’t it really?

Senator TIERNEY—It has come in in the last 12 months.

Dr Whiting—I would have to check those figures for you. I do not know the answer to that.

Senator TIERNEY—They have the support in terms of paying it back through the tax system—like HECS. It works in a similar way.

Dr Whiting—Yes, that is right.

Senator TIERNEY—Also, another point you made on research was that you said people trying to get ARC grants had a 20 per cent success rate and you said they were increasingly reluctant to undertake that sort of research. Have you noticed any difference since the money available has doubled for ARC grants? It is being phased in, but is that changing people’s motivation, the fact that it will be easier to get ARC grants over the next four years as the money in the system doubles for those grants?

Dr Whiting—I certainly have not heard any change in people's views. They are still simply quoting the 20 per cent versus the 54 per cent for linkage grants. It is not just in education but in all disciplines that they are saying it is just not worth putting the effort into applying. It is a hugely cumbersome system, the ARC system, and an enormously costly system to administer. If we could use the money for research that goes into administering the system, it would be fantastic. The amount of time and the actual costs involved are huge.

Senator TIERNEY—When we had an inquiry into this about six years ago they were claiming there was not enough money to administer the system at that time.

Dr Whiting—That is because it is so cumbersome. It is such a giant system to administer.

Senator TIERNEY—I think at one point everyone had to send their submissions through quickly to a certain point at a certain fax number which then got totally jammed up with these things.

Dr Whiting—That is right.

Senator TIERNEY—Finally, in terms of states in Australia—because different states take different approaches to the teaching of children with disabilities—does any state or territory stand out as a shining beacon in this area that we can say is a good model for other states to follow? Is anyone doing this well?

Ms Mitchell—Not that I know of.

Dr Whiting—I would have to say that TAFE—and Kerry can talk about this because she is responsible for learning disabilities in a TAFE college—appears to be potentially able to do a better job than anybody else because they do define specific learning disability in their manuals and they do have instructions for teachers as to what action to take with a student who has a specific learning disability and what kinds of difficulties they might have. Maybe you would like Kerry to just comment on that because that is a better example.

Ms Mitchell—All TAFE institutes—and an institute is a combination of numerous campuses—have disability consultants. They have consultants for all disabilities—for example, for the hearing impaired and visually impaired. They also have a consultant for neurological disorders, which include learning disabilities. But whereas in every institute you will find a consultant for physical disability, the visually impaired, the auditorily impaired or whatever, there are only two neurological disorder consultants within New South Wales. I do not know about other states.

Senator TIERNEY—Yet the TAFE institutes can do this—but the whole system cannot do it.

Ms Mitchell—It is there but it is still not everywhere. The Sydney Institute is one of the main areas looking at learning disabilities. They look after people who are doing vocational courses and who have a prior and recognised assessed learning disability. There is a major gap though in the area of people who are coming into adult basic education units with major literacy needs. They do not have the literacy levels to get into vocational courses. They are the ones missing

out, and there is a huge gap in there. There is no regular funding provided for those people who want to build up their skills to get into vocational courses or who want to build up their skills to get into a vocation for a start or who are already in a job and need assistance in getting over problems that are occurring in their job because of their literacy levels.

We use ANTA funding, which is a Commonwealth funding source, to help those people out. But it is irregular, you are never sure you are going to get it for the next submission and you spend a lot of time putting in your submissions. People with learning disabilities need a continuous, ongoing support service, not something that you think might come in next time you submit your application for more funding.

Senator ALLISON—I wonder how realistic it is to train teachers during undergraduate studies to identify learning disability given that the experience of most parents with such a child is that they need to take them off to an educational psychologist and go through a series of tests. Are we talking about a preliminary identification followed up by a more complete arrangement? Is two days in one semester enough for teachers to be able to find those students?

Dr Whiting—Karen is a psychologist and I think she would like to comment on that.

Mrs de Mar—I think there is definitely evidence to prove that screening will really detect a lot of issues with younger children, especially in the early intervention phase. Maybe on entry to kindergarten there are a lot of factors available—multimodal factors such as sensory issues, gross and fine motor skills and language problems—that are indicators that there could be a specific learning difficulty. Teachers can definitely screen for those. I think that the trouble at the moment is that school counsellors often are not trained enough in specific learning difficulties themselves to do the assessments and parents have no choice but to go to private educational psychologists. So the onus and the financial burden rest with the parents in that situation. I think that teachers definitely could be trained to do screening.

Senator ALLISON—So what could they not be trained to do in an undergraduate course?

Dr Whiting—We take the view that there are certain things that all teachers ought to be able to do, and they are not the things that psychologists do. There are classroom identification strategies that every primary school teacher ought to know and particularly every kindergarten teacher ought to know. They are quite simple things, not hard to do. They just need commonsense and a good educational mind. As a result of those you can make a pretty good guess that it is worth this child having further assessment at this point. That is what we want.

It is a bit like the GP model, if you want a medical model. You go to the GP and he says, 'I think there's a problem here. I'm going to refer you to this specialist.' He has got enough knowledge to know it is probably that but he sends you off to someone who will say it is definitely that. That is the model that is there in our schools. We have got school counsellors who should be able to say, 'It's definitely that.' But as a school counsellor friend of mine said—and she finished training only about four or five years ago—'I don't know anything about learning disabilities at all, so what am I supposed to do?' She can do intelligence testing just fine; she has a licence to do that. You do not need a licence to do testing for learning disabilities; you just have to know how to do it. I think that is the issue.

Senator ALLISON—Moving to the next stage, what kinds of skills does a teacher need in order to deal with that learning difficulty or disability? Can this be done only by postgraduates in special education or, again, is it simple? We have heard in the past that students with learning disabilities can never function adequately like others in a classroom situation and that they need ongoing one to one support. Can you expand a bit on that?

Ms Mitchell—What teachers need is just very good practice. They need multimodal teaching. Quite often teachers get caught up in being so busy with doing everything else that they do not put a lot of thought into their teaching style. They need to ask themselves: how do I present this so that it is going to accommodate all the different learning styles in this classroom? We really need to press that with these generalist teachers. As well as that, we need to be supplying really good backup support, because they cannot do everything when they have 30 kids in their classes. They can keep those kids happy in that room and they can teach them certain things, but those children with learning difficulties are going to need the ongoing support of a specialist teacher as well. You can train generalist teachers to do a lot that will make those kids lives a lot easier, but they still need that specialist support, as well, to build up other skills that the regular teacher is not able to do.

Senator ALLISON—Going back to your point about teachers needing to take the ‘multimodal approach’—I think they were the words you used—is it fair to say that very few teachers, schools and systems require teachers in an ongoing way to examine their pedagogy for its effectiveness in terms of whether or not the kids in the class learn? I do not mean testing kids; I mean examining themselves for their own teaching techniques.

Ms Mitchell—I am not sure how much of that is going on out there. I have been involved in this area for so long that that is just part of my thinking. I look at how people learn and at different learning styles. The teachers that I work with at TAFE are certainly lacking the ability to look at different people and to understand that people learn differently. I assume that that kind of thinking would be the same as in schools. It is something that you just forget. Teachers need that constant reminder of somebody coming in and saying, ‘Hey, this kid needs a lot of visual stuff to be learning properly,’ or ‘This kid needs a lot of hands-on stuff to be learning properly.’ A constant reminder is needed that in that room there are kids who are different and who are learning differently. Maybe a lot more teacher inservice training is needed just to get keep up those skills. That is one of the things that SPELD provides, but we are in only one area and we cannot do it all the time.

Senator ALLISON—Some of the courses you offer are two-, three- and four-day courses. You provide an introduction to dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties; computer software and support for students—in and out of classrooms; phonological awareness; phonics; reading and spelling. They seem to me to be very complex areas and I am surprised that they can be dealt with in a four-day or a two-day period.

Dr Whiting—I do not think that they are very complex at all. But, of course, the longer one is in this business, the more one knows and the more it seems obvious, and it may not be nearly as obvious to those who are just starting out on the track. They are certainly neglected areas. The whole business of technology and the technological support that one can offer to a person with dyslexia is almost entirely neglected. We have, for example, a very good document on teaching spelling put out by the New South Wales department of education. It is a very good

document. It never mentions using a spellchecker or a hand-held spellchecker, like a Franklin speller, which is a great aid to a dyslexic person for whom spelling will always be the biggest problem. We pay lip-service to technology. We have a lot of computers in schools and a lot of kids use them for playing games, filling in time and doing a little bit of word processing, but the other technologies we are not taking seriously, especially in these areas. They could be a great help to these kids.

Senator ALLISON—And is it the case that many students with learning disabilities find keyboards a little easier to manage than handwriting?

Dr Whiting—Not all, but dysgraphia, or very poor handwriting, is involved for a significant proportion of dyslexic people.

Senator ALLISON—I am sure we could talk all afternoon, but could you just describe what a parent goes through with a learning disabled child in terms of their discovery of the situation, the sorts of hoops they go through? What is it like?

Ms Mitchell—Both of my children have dyslexia and I have been through this. I have learnt with them about dyslexia. I was in special education in primary schools before I discovered that they had dyslexia but I did not know anything about it, so I have been learning with them. It is a difficult process. I was told my son, who has very bad coordination problems and now uses a laptop in high school, had a maturity problem. He did not start to read until about third grade. I was told, 'He'll grow out of it, he'll grow up.' His social skills were not wonderful, so there were a whole pile of issues there. I would now think, 'Stop, there are problems here,' but at that stage I did not know. Finally I went to the school counsellor. The teacher was telling me, 'It's maturity, he'll grow out of it.' The school counsellor tested him, gave him the WISC test and gave me the total scores. When I look back at those scores now, there are these blazing indications that there is dyslexia there, that there were these major problems, and she could not read the scores properly.

I then went to a friend of mine who taught in this field and whom I had spoken to and she said, 'Bring him to me and I'll work with him.' She taught him to read in a couple of months. She had the specialist training to know what to do. By this stage he was running away from school. He could not cope because his teacher was saying, 'Write neatly. Stay in at lunchtime and write out your spelling list a hundred times because you can't do it properly. You can't copy off the board correctly.' There are all of these other issues that are going on at the same time. You spend your time keeping the kid's head above water so that they can survive in the school. But once you find some specialist support, once you find somebody who understands, it makes it much easier. His life changed when we found this other woman to help him. She supported him. She told him he was bright. In the end his IQ test is up in the gifted and talented range but he was just not showing that at school. My daughter is very similar. She is in the gifted and talented range but her school work does not indicate that.

Senator ALLISON—Was she identified in school as being gifted?

Ms Mitchell—No. It very rarely happens. Their oral work is way up there but their written work is down there, and teachers tend to look at the written work. They will say, 'They sound

really bright but their reading and writing or spelling or colouring is atrocious.’ That is what quite often counts.

Senator ALLISON—We often hear about prison populations being full of people with learning disability. Is that borne out by adult education courses that are available in prisons, and can you tell us anything about that?

Ms Mitchell—We have a marked increase. The nature of the students we have come into adult basic education and TAFE has changed over the last couple of years. We are getting an awful lot of young people now who left school and have already been through the juvenile justice systems. The number is just growing incredibly. We are getting kids coming in with drug and alcohol problems. When I was working in TAFE 10 years ago, you would never see a young person in there. The numbers are just increasing incredibly.

Dr Whiting—I have a comment on that from the British experience too. A colleague of mine over there has developed a computer based teaching program which SPELD has actually been able to offer to some people in Australia. He has deployed that in a number of prisons in Britain and was recently given an award by the British Dyslexia Association for the success of that program in teaching prisoners to read and spell and, more importantly, to feel that they could cope once they left prison. I do not think I am telling you anything if I say that that is one of the biggest problems; that prisoners feel they will not cope once they leave prison if they have these illiteracies, which they know about but it is very hard to admit to and seek help for. It is a social issue which is of great concern to us. It does imply that the children with specific learning disabilities are at risk. It is not a prediction where they will end up but it implies that they are at risk of ending up on the wrong side of the tracks. That is a great concern to us.

Mrs de Mar—In Kerry’s case, her children were lucky that she had the personal and financial resources to get help for her children. The teachers may have picked it up if they knew how to screen at a younger age but there are a lot of people in these other areas whose parents do not have the resources. Those children are definitely at increased risk in those situations, as well. The education system is letting them down.

Senator ALLISON—What does it cost for an assessment?

Mrs de Mar—A cheap assessment is \$350 and it goes up to \$600.

Senator ALLISON—And there are no funds available to subsidise that?

Mrs de Mar—There is a private health fund rebate but that is minimal. Again, the assessments by psychologists who have experience in that area are very variable. Some psychologists may do just what the school counsellors do and some may do far more thorough specific assessments. The cost of private tuition can range anywhere from \$40 to \$80 a week and it can be ongoing for years. That is a big outlay.

Ms Mitchell—Then you might need a speech therapist or an occupational therapist, as well.

Senator ALLISON—I think this has been very useful. I agree that your submission has been terrific but your discussion about definitions—external and internal circumstances—has been particularly helpful for us in dealing with that question.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming along today.

[2.52 p.m.]

DUNNE, Mr Leo Matthew, President, Australian Parents Council Inc.

LONERGAN, Mrs Josephine, Executive Director, Australian Parents Council Inc.

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Australian Parents Council. The committee has before it submission No. 14. Are there any changes you would like to make?

Mr Dunne—I would like to read a statement, a summary, into the record.

CHAIR—We will give you an opportunity to make an opening statement. Are you happy for the submission to stand as it is?

Mr Dunne—Sure.

CHAIR—I invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Mr Dunne—Thank you for the opportunity to bring our submission to the committee. This is somewhat of a summary. The Australian Parents Council would like to highlight the following additional points. Parents of non-government schoolchildren have welcomed this inquiry and hope that it will provide, inter alia: (1) sufficient reliable information which would lead to a national approach to the definitions of disability; (2) recommendations for improved access to, and availability of, accurate and timely assessment of disability; (3) funding information that would lead to the establishment of an average recurrent cost of educating a child with disabilities in a government school; and (4) recommendations for immediate increased public funding support for children with disabilities attending non-government schools.

For the past 10 years, with politicians of all political persuasions, education ministers and the department, the Australian Parents Council have been highlighting at every opportunity the inadequacy of funding for special education. We have been disappointed that the findings of recent inquiries into special education provision at the national level have not been released. While we do not see increased public funding as the only solution to improved educational outcomes, there is certainly a huge gap between levels of public funding available for non-government school students with disabilities and those available for government school students with disabilities. When this funding differential is considered in the light of statements in the Convention on the Rights of the Child relating to the special needs of the disabled child, public funding allocation is highly discriminatory and in breach of the convention. We hope that the inquiry will give special attention to a consideration of the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act, which places responsibility on non-government schools and school communities in relation to the enrolment and education of a disabled child without offering the public support provided in the government school sector.

The greatly increased numbers of students with disabilities attending non-government schools testify to the willingness of non-government school communities to integrate and educate children with disabilities in the settings of their choice. The financial load is often burdensome

for the school, for the child that attends, for the child's parents and for other parents who are part of the school community. We are firmly of the view that a collaborative approach between states, territories and the Commonwealth is needed to arrive at a nationally agreed definition of disability and that a funding framework is long overdue. We are not aware of any improvement in the situation, even though there appears to be a MCEETYA task force dealing with this area.

We are pleased to see that the inquiry is looking at the issue of children with learning difficulties. This group is extremely diverse and may represent up to 20 per cent of a school population. Meeting their educational needs is a complex problem as their difficulties can stem from a range of causes, often social, emotional or other disadvantage. Children with identified disabilities attending non-government schools account for about two per cent of the school population and can be assisted immediately with improved public provision. We recommend that priority in education spending be given to those with identified disabilities in the first instance and that the magnitude of the problem, when trying to take account of the learning difficulty, not militate against addressing their educational needs forthwith. A submission has been presented to the Senate committee by APC and highlights a range of issues. Much of our submission is focused on the principles that we have espoused and deals with equity and resources. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that, Mr Dunne. It was a comprehensive statement of your views. I turn to the submission itself, which you have lodged with us. On page 3 you say:

It notes the large increase in enrolment of children with disabilities in regular non-government schools over the past ten years and the increase in levels of impairment of those children whose parents choose non-government special schools for their children.

What is the evidence you would call upon to support that statement?

Mr Dunne—The only evidence I would use as an example of that is the numbers attending in the Catholic school sector in the Brisbane Archdiocese, which is a fairly major area of the Catholic sector in Queensland. Their numbers have increased significantly in the last seven or eight years. Probably since the anti-discrimination act became enforced there have been more parents seeking that choice as well.

CHAIR—Mr Dunne, it has been put to us in numerous submissions that the level of involvement in the non-government sector with education of children with disabilities is in fact quite small. How do you respond to that?

Mr Dunne—I do not have figures with me, but a test run was made after we were involved with government, Catholic and other non-government schools in Queensland. On a pro rata basis, the students with disabilities and learning difficulties in the Catholic sector were on a par with those attending state schools.

CHAIR—How does that apply to the other non-government schools? We appreciate that Catholic education provides a great number of the non-government schools in Australia, but what about the rest of the sector?

Mrs Lonergan—At the bottom of page 6 of the submission, the figures given by the National Council of Independent Schools Association estimate that, in the year 2000, 5,659 children with disabilities—1.5 per cent of enrolments—were being educated in the independent

school sector, and about 1,214 of these children attended independent special schools. The Catholic sector figures were about 0.2 per cent of the enrolments, with 645 children attending special schools. In the government sector, 89,807 children—some 3.9 per cent—were full-time students.

CHAIR—Do you know what the basis is of those estimates?

Mrs Lonergan—Those estimates are based on figures being extracted progressively by the National Council of Independent Schools Association from the person researching it at their office.

CHAIR—Since we cannot get agreement on the definitions, how do we know—

Mrs Lonergan—The children defined as children with disabilities are only those funded and eligible for Commonwealth funding as children with disabilities.

CHAIR—This is on the Commonwealth criteria for funding?

Mrs Lonergan—Yes, it is on the Commonwealth criteria. It does not include children who may not have been identified or who have applied for Commonwealth funding for disabilities.

CHAIR—Even on those figures, there is a disproportionate number, in percentage terms, in the different sectors. Do you believe that the non-government school sector discriminates against children with disabilities?

Mrs Lonergan—I think the increase in numbers is evidence that the non-government sector is very willing to educate children with disabilities. One of the great difficulties for the non-government sector lies in the way the Disability Discrimination Act is framed and what the consequences are for not being able to supply what is necessary for these children as their education progresses. We have said in our submission that we are concerned about the basis for the Disability Discrimination Act. I heard AUSPELD talking about the situation in the United Kingdom, but I think the one in America has the sort of positive attitude to the education of people with disabilities that we would like to see adopted here.

CHAIR—If, for instance, the figure for the independent schools sector—which is 1.5 per cent of enrolments—were to match that of the government sector, that would be an additional 6,500 students or thereabouts. How do you think the system would cope with that?

Mrs Lonergan—I am not sure that it would. The figures we saw earlier this year, which were given by a school in Victoria that has about 24 children with disabilities, indicated that there is an additional cost of about \$500,000 to educate those students in the school. That cost was borne by the school community and other parents in the school.

CHAIR—If the Catholic system were to meet the government sector in terms of percentages, they would have another 14,000 students or thereabouts. How do you think they would cope with that?

Mr Dunne—They really would not. They have two problems. One might be resources, in a general sense, to meet the needs of these children, but they also certainly have difficulty in getting teachers who are qualified in that field. I have a daughter who works in that field, and she clearly says that teachers in the school generally have not been given the training necessary to assess students.

CHAIR—Fair enough, Mr Dunne, but if we were to accept the thrust of what you are saying and, in the perfect world, additional moneys were to come your way for the funding of disabilities education, where would the staff come from to utilise those additional funds?

Mr Dunne—I think you would need inservice courses initially, and hopefully they would introduce into the preservice courses a little more on these special needs children. I think that is beginning to happen, and younger teachers coming through are better equipped to identify and assess students than teachers who have been in the practice for some years.

Mrs Lonergan—I think the children with special disabilities require highly qualified teachers. Leo has a daughter who is a special education teacher and so have I, and she teaches in New South Wales schools. They have both undergone four-year training additional to their generalist teaching to be qualified.

CHAIR—I think one of the problems is that they do not get paid very much, having actually undertaken four more years of training for a special education degree, for instance. There is very little incentive or reward for additional qualifications in that regard. You say here on page 8 that you are not in a position to provide data on the availability of specialist and other support services for diagnostic and other support for children with disabilities. If that is the case, what are you relying on to support your contentions?

Mrs Lonergan—We cannot supply the evidence. What we hear is anecdotal only. It is about the difficulties of people accessing diagnosis and also about parents who really have some difficulty deciding where they ought to go and what they ought to do in the first place.

CHAIR—It might be entirely appropriate in education from time to time to actually have an understanding of things without necessarily having the hard data to back it up. I appreciate that point, but it does perhaps also indicate a failure in our statistical collections if we do not know what the need is. Would you agree?

Mr Dunne—I would agree, and I would be able to quote you a hundred Kerry Mitchells. When we ask this question, we are inundated by parents who have been struggling to get some attention given to students, and the previous submission was an example of that need.

Mrs Lonergan—I think it will become obvious that there is very little structured information around about the education of children with disabilities, at least on a national collection basis. It is very difficult.

CHAIR—One of the obvious things that has come out of today's hearings is this broad consensus about the failure to provide adequate information on definitions, the level of support and the actual way in which that money is spent.

Mr Dunne—You do not know whether the information coming from each state is similar.

CHAIR—That is right: there is no national consistency in these areas.

Mrs Lonergan—Although there has been great effort; it has been on the agenda for years as far as we know, but there has been no movement at all.

CHAIR—Do you think as a national organisation you feel this more acutely than state based organisations would?

Mrs Lonergan—No, I do not think so.

CHAIR—This would be common currency amongst your various groups?

Mrs Lonergan—Yes, this is common. The people in the states do not know what the state situation is; it is really hard to get that information. Sitting on some committees that distribute equity money from the Commonwealth, I find that we have this great list of children with enormous special needs and a very small amount of money that sometimes works out to be \$40 for quite severe disabilities, so it is almost crying material to have a look at some of these kids and their needs and what they are getting.

CHAIR—Indeed it is.

Senator ALLISON—Coming back to the percentages of students with disabilities in various systems, your figures show a very big difference between independent schools and the Catholic sector, for instance, with a 50 per cent increase on independent schools in the Catholic sector. How do you explain that?

Mrs Lonergan—Is it such a big difference? The figures are 1.9 per cent in the independent sector and 2.2 in the Catholic sector.

Senator ALLISON—No, the figures are 1.5 in the independent sector and 2.2 in the Catholic sector.

CHAIR—But there are also very large differences in the base.

Mrs Lonergan—There are also big differences in the population, and the independent sector has the majority of children in special schools—

Senator ALLISON—Those independent special schools would tend to be started as charities, would they not? They are not private or independent schools in the real sense of the word. Would they not have previously been spastic society schools or the like?

Mrs Lonergan—I think a lot of them might have been. Some of them would have been started as schools for children with particular disabilities, especially the schools that deal with behavioural problems. Yes, you are right: the deaf and blind society in New South Wales would have generally been—

Mr Dunne—And are mostly based in New South Wales and Victoria.

Mrs Lonergan—New South Wales has got some 50 independent structure ones.

Mr Dunne—Interestingly, in Queensland, which I know better, there has been an endeavour over a number of years now, five or six years in particular, where the independent schools, the Catholic sector and the state, because we have six bands, have been trying to get as much consistency as possible across those bands and then get assessments done that locate children in those particular bands. That is a real struggle, and if we had consistency across the nation attempting that that would make a big difference. In addition, though, I would say that the non-government sector other than Catholic have in recent times been adding more children with disabilities than they had in their previous history.

Mrs Lonergan—Western Australia have recently started two centres for Catholic children with disabilities, which they are funding fully at about \$20,000 a student, I think, north and south of Perth.

Senator ALLISON—The sector is asking the committee in all of its submissions in various forms for funding for disabilities which is attached to the student without concern about whether it is government or non-government, but I guess the arguments that flow in opposition point to what appears to be an unwillingness by some sectors within the independent sector to actually take these students. The Catholic sector seems to be doing better on the whole than the independent sector, and within the independent sector probably the Christian schools are doing better in the main. Can you comment about whether we are likely to see King's College, Scotch or those schools taking their fair share, if you like.

Mrs Lonergan—I suppose it depends how frightened you are of litigation, to a great extent. One of the things that ought to be looked at, we feel, in the Disability Discrimination Act is the tendency for litigation to be taken in relation to attendance at schools of choice.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you know many cases where that has happened?

Mrs Lonergan—Yes. There is a 'harsh and unconscionable' clause in the Disability Discrimination Act and there is a heap of single decisions on that. There is also the suggestion now that there should be some disability discrimination standards put in place. I think disability discrimination standards would make things worse, not better, because they really promote a completely positive discrimination in favour of disability; in other words, they make the obligations much greater than they would be in other circumstances. What is more, they turn them into law rather than having them as guidelines. So as an encouragement to litigation I think they may be very good.

Senator ALLISON—Representing parents, what sort of position are you going to take on these standards?

Mrs Lonergan—We have already taken a position that we feel that the discrimination disability standards would be fine as guides but should not be converted into law, which they would be if they become legislation by regulation.

Senator ALLISON—The disability transport standards have just been agreed. In fact, we dealt with the legislation a week ago. Presumably the disability standards for education will follow suit.

Mrs Lonergan—They may well do, yes.

Senator ALLISON—Have you seen those standards and responded to them in terms of their content, or is that not your role?

Mrs Lonergan—We responded to the disability discrimination standards, not to the transport standards, which were more generally applicable, not only to education.

Senator ALLISON—I just mention those by way of suggesting that they became law as my expectation is that these will be.

Mr Dunne—I think there is a bit of history in those numbers as well. Just using one state, I know that historically Catholic education have been involved with special needs kids and students with disabilities longer than the AIS in the state have been but AIS have been very active in the last seven or eight years. I think you might find that applicable across the nation.

Mrs Lonergan—There is also the other aspect of the history of the phasing out of special schools in the non-government sector in other states, where the government sector took over the education of children with disabilities. So there is that section of the history of the whole thing to get over as well.

Mr Dunne—There would be a significant body of opinion in the non-government sector that, with adequate resources, they have an obligation to educate these children, and I would agree with that.

Senator ALLISON—You were here for the previous witnesses and the discussion about teachers, learning disability and qualifications generally for teaching children with disabilities. Has this come up as an issue with your parents? If so, what is your view about the need to improve teaching qualifications or specialisation?

Mrs Lonergan—I was really interested in what she had to say about teachers' practice and how their professional development is conducted. I think she is right that many things can be improved by raising the levels of teaching practice and allowing teachers the professional development of learning with their peers in a particular school. We would see that teaching qualifications and teaching practice are absolutely essential to address learning disabilities from whatever cause. Certainly teachers need to be able to at least diagnose that someone needs additional help, and a lot of them cannot do that at this stage.

Mr Dunne—That is a failing for many classroom teachers who do not have any background training in special education. I do not think it is as easy as our predecessors would suggest it is to assess students. In some cases it can be reasonably easy. In some cases it is very complex. It is okay if they follow the track of saying, 'We think there's a problem here,' and send them off to a specialist. If you have a specialist that is fine. But if you do not have a specialist and the responsibility is yours it is a bit more difficult.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming today.

Mr Dunne—Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 3.17 p.m. to 3.32 p.m.

BAKER, Ms Beverly May, President, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales

LEMME, Ms Angela, Research Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales. The committee has before it submission No. 181. Are there any changes or corrections that you wish to make to the written submission?

Ms Baker—No, there are no changes or corrections that we wish to make to the written submission unless you have found a spelling error we have missed.

CHAIR—We do not pay a lot of attention to that on this committee.

Ms Baker—You are in good company: Shakespeare said a man that can spell a word but one way is a crashing bore, and I am with him.

CHAIR—That is very good to hear. The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be given in camera. I point out that such evidence may subsequently be made public by order of the Senate. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Ms Baker—Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you. The education of students with disabilities has been of enormous interest to our federation for a number of years. Next year our federation will be 90 years old, so it has lived through the move from a time when children with disabilities were hidden away and parents were left with the sole cost of educating them and with a fair degree of shame for having children with disabilities. We have been part and parcel of the move in New South Wales towards the integration of students with disabilities; firstly, into the public education system as they moved from private institutions into public schools, and then as the children moved from isolated units into mainstream classes. Our organisation's policy was quite clear that children should be educated together and it should be for the parents to choose the educational setting for their child that would best suit their child's need. As an organisation we have been supportive of parents on that very rocky road.

As time has progressed and we have understood more about how children learn, the capacities of people and the vast array of differences, it has become more and more apparent that we must offer quality of life to all our citizens, irrespective of their disabilities or anything that might get in their way. Their right to quality of life is vested in them. As a result, we have seen a massive growth in the understanding of children with disabilities, of their learning needs and of the vast variety of disabilities. As we have moved towards more focused educational outcomes, which are looking not just at where kids rank with one another but actually at what they can do, we are also focusing much more closely on what is going wrong for kids.

In New South Wales, we have seen a massive increase in demand for teachers for students with learning difficulties and a moving away from targeted disability to different learning styles

and different learning needs, irrespective of what package they come in. This is an extremely labour-intensive area and an extremely resource-intensive area. But if, as a civilised community, we believe in the value of every human being then it is an expense that we must meet. In New South Wales, our state schools take well over 90 per cent of all students with learning disabilities and learning difficulties, because other systems tend not to keep them. They tend to reject them. The cost at a state level has been quite enormous. The New South Wales government spends an enormous amount of money—though we argue it is not spending enough—on trying to target the different learning needs and the different disabilities that students have so that parents feel that their children are not being discriminated against. On top of that, we have antidiscrimination legislation which means that it is against the law to deny access to education.

As a result, we looked to the federal government to inject some resources into this area. The federal government has maintained just recently that it has a responsibility for educating kids in private schools. We believe that the resource allocation for educating students with learning disabilities and difficulties is so great that it really does need to be targeted at a federal level. This is not about race, colour, creed or class; this is about human rights across all sections of our society. Individual systems and individual parents should not be left with the punitive measure of having to fund the cost of educating children who are born with different sets of needs.

Our submission is very much about what the federal government needs to do. At the election we were fairly disappointed to see this particular federal government walk away from a commitment to disabilities and the funding of them as discrete programs. We are absolutely horrified to see the continual attack on public education, which is the education system that takes most of the students with disabilities and learning difficulties. I am putting them together, because just because you have a disability does not necessarily mean you have a learning difficulty. They attract different resource needs. If we put them together, there are mixes, matches and continuums along the line.

There are things that we believe are federal government responsibilities. We believe the training of teachers via funding at universities must be dealt with. If we are serious about continuing with the integration of students with vast arrays of learning needs then teachers must have the skills to be able to deal with this. They must have a resource where they can deal with a range of difficulties. We do not believe that teachers need to have the skills of occupational therapists, physiotherapists and the sorts of things that some of our students need, but we do believe there should be resources so that they can use those. We do not believe that a student's atrophying muscles ought to be in the way of what their brain is capable of absorbing, understanding and communicating. But with the funding the way that it is sometimes that occurs. The students cannot get the manipulation that they need and therefore they become cramped, which interferes with their ability to concentrate. We really do need some serious resources put in so that the whole student can be looked at and all the needs of the student can be addressed.

Teachers are primarily teachers. They need, as I said, a store of skills to deal with this, but they do not need the professional skills that are required by medical practitioners in some instances. We believe that those medical practitioners should be associated with the schools where the students are. It ought not to be on an appeals basis. There ought not to be people going cap in hand begging for the resources that they need for their child to have a quality life.

We believe that, as a civilised society, we should provide those things. We believe there should be an enormous investigation of the training level and the qualifications of people working with students with disabilities and students who learn differently so that, again, parents are not left on the back foot, cap in hand, begging for the resources that their child needs so that they can feel that their child is having the best quality of life.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Ms Baker, a number of the submissions that we have received from the usual non-government sector are suggesting that the Commonwealth discriminates against the non-government sector by not providing sufficient moneys to support children with disabilities. How do you respond to that suggestion?

Ms Baker—I respond in the same way that I respond to the non-government sector. The non-government sector is running a private business. They choose who they will have. They take them on their own, and they charge fees for doing that. To say that the federal government, or any government, discriminates against them means that they are making choices not to take those students. The public education system is open to everybody, irrespective of their background. The public education system meets all antidiscrimination legislation and all human rights legislation. The non-government sector can absent itself from those on all sorts of grounds. Funding needs to be seriously looked at: I am not saying that it should not be. But I do not believe that the non-government sector is discriminated against any more than the government sector is in terms of funding for students with disabilities. Money is very scarce and extremely difficult to get, and it is a resource-intensive area. You know my federation's stand on the funding of non-government schools, and certainly history shows us that the non-government sector is not above what we would call 'farming disability', which means that you take the students with disabilities who are not an enormous cost but you get a huge benefit for those students, and you shed the ones that are an enormous cost, but you still reap the benefits of the students you have. Those sorts of things need careful evaluation because a student with a disability is a student with a disability and, whatever their needs, their needs need to be met. We know that if you put resources more broadly and bring things together you get a cost-effective benefit. I think those things really do need to be looked at. I think that the non-government sector is being a little bit unreasonable in saying that they are being discriminated against, given the number of legal actions against them which show that they are in fact the ones doing the discriminating.

CHAIR—You raise the question of discrimination. What sorts of legal actions are you aware of or do you think the committee should be aware of?

Ms Baker—In New South Wales a child with spina bifida was denied access to an exclusive school in the Baulkham Hills area because they said it would have been an undue hardship for them to take the student in. They said that they did not have to meet antidiscrimination law because they were a private institution. That was taken to court and the school lost; they were told they did have to take the student. She was not a learning difficulty child. She had a physical disability; she needed wheelchair access. Wheelchair access is guaranteed under discrimination legislation, which means you have got to create that space. These places are businesses and they have to create that space if they are going to operate as businesses. The school did not want to do that and fought fiercely against it. There have been a number of cases. That one was a high profile case.

CHAIR—If you are able to provide us with a list, it would be a benefit.

Ms Baker—Yes.

CHAIR—What was that case?

Ms Baker—It was Hills Grammar, and Charlotte was the little girl's name.

CHAIR—If you could provide some advice on that we would appreciate it. You say that in New South Wales 90 per cent of students with disabilities attend public schools. The Australian Parents Council, which represents parents in non-government schools, are saying that the figure is only 3.9 per cent, presumably Australia-wide. There is some disparity there.

Ms Baker—I am sorry; I used 90 per cent as a ballpark figure, meaning the bulk of the students are in our system.

CHAIR—You do not have any specific data on that?

Ms Baker—No. The department of education would be able to supply you with what figures they have.

CHAIR—We would like to get more precise data on these questions. It would appear that there is some ambiguity about those figures.

Ms Baker—The difficulty is that if students are not enrolled in the public system you do not know what you do not know.

CHAIR—That is true, but we would be interested to know what precisely the public system caters for in this state and within the country. You also indicated that you are concerned about students in rural and remote areas. We have had representations today from the parents of isolated students who suggest that this is a need often best served by the private sector. Is that your experience?

Ms Baker—Absolutely not. It is one of the areas of disagreement we have with the ICPA. We believe that rural communities are better served when the services are taken to the rural communities and you do not remove the children from them. The ICPA has a long history of arguing for funding to send their children to private schools. They have a long history of ignoring public boarding provision in preference for private provision. Private schools do not offer places, especially boarding places, to students with disabilities.

CHAIR—How many boarding colleges are there?

Ms Baker—In the government sector in New South Wales, I think there are three boarding facilities. That is not a lot and I am ashamed. I am not ashamed of the three schools that are there; they are fantastic schools.

CHAIR—Do you believe that there should be more public schools? Actually, I am Victorian and we use the term ‘public school’ slightly differently from you. Let me rephrase that: are you saying that there should be more government provided boarding schools?

Ms Baker—The government provided boarding schools are apparently adequate to cover the needs and they offer places to students with disabilities because they are government schools and they must. The parents who choose other systems argue that those schools are not good enough for them but we do not know what grounds they base that on. We believe that the students would be better served remaining within their communities and having the services taken to their communities so that their communities are not denuded by students moving somewhere else.

The old adage of ‘something wicked this way comes’ can relate to the story of removing children from a town and then the town dying. We see that as being the history of rural Australia: children are moved out of the town, the quality of the education system is diminished because of the lack of numbers, the lack of curriculum options and the lack of teacher qualifications—lack, lack, lack—and the next minute you find that nobody is coming back into the town and the town eventually dies. It is not healthy for our rural environments. Our rural communities need that infrastructure and support there and they need the access to the services that their students require.

CHAIR—You argued that there should be a national disability strategy, by which I presume you meant that the Commonwealth government should be providing a national strategy, not that the states should all agree on a strategy. Is that the inference that I should take from that?

Ms Baker—It is. We believe that the education of students with disabilities is extremely resource intensive. In New South Wales the bulk of that resource is handled by the public education system. We believe that it is a national issue. It is an issue of human rights and international conventions that we have signed.

CHAIR—What would change? If there were a national strategy, what elements would you like to see in such a strategy and how would that be different from the current practice?

Ms Baker—The first element we would like to see is the full mapping of the range and variety, without any preconceived ideas. At the moment there are things that fit into disability and things that do not. You will hear from other organisations how narrow the definitions are and how that impacts negatively on a number of students. Scotopic sensitivity, for example, is recognised in some instances and in other instances it is not. But if your child happens to have it and nobody recognises it, then your child suffers.

CHAIR—So you want common definitions, for a start?

Ms Baker—Common definitions and a wide evaluation of those definitions. As we learn, we learn more about things that are getting in the way of kids’ learning. Once we can do that, we can get a national picture of the range of differences and not have it limited. Then we can have a look at what we might need to address those difficulties. We can look at obvious things, such as students with palsy who need manipulation. Those sorts of needs are fairly obvious, but there is a whole raft of other things that are hidden, even down to ADHD. We have some states that

recognise it, some states that do not, some states that tolerate the use of Ritalin, some states that do not. If you are a parent and you are moving around, you do not know what you are going to face wherever you go. With students in this situation, you need to have some kind of guarantee. You are under enough pressure as it is. You need some kind of release valve to take the pressure off and to know that, no matter where you live, your child's disability is going to be recognised and you are going to be able to get some support so that they can engage in the learning process. We cannot do that in the tribalised state system that we have. We need to say: this is an issue of national importance. Issues of national importance ought to be dealt with at the federal level. So you do the mapping exercise and then you ask what we need as a resource structure to meet these needs. If that is held in a central pool then when students move around or something happens and there is a huge increase the states will have access to that money to support their populations.

CHAIR—Would a national code of practice fit into that—

Ms Baker—I think that would fit into that completely.

CHAIR—which would protect and give some rights to parents—is that the sort of thing you are looking at?

Ms Baker—It is certainly the sort of thing that we are looking at—rights for the parents and rights for the students.

CHAIR—What about teacher education? Do you think the Commonwealth has a role there?

Ms Baker—I think the Commonwealth has always had a role, until recently. I believe in tertiary education. I think that tertiary education is where this must be. Teachers do need a raft of skills to deal with the vast array of differences that they face in their classrooms.

CHAIR—Sometimes we get the feeling that advocates for public education—and I am one of them—might ask for too much from governments. Is it possible that there could be contained programs or a staged development of this ideal that you are looking for?

Ms Baker—Certainly a staged development. I am not one of the advocates who believe that in public education we ask for too much, because I am one of the advocates who say, 'If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.' That is what we really face unless we are prepared to invest in the education of our entire population. In a world we know a lot of but in a future we know nothing of, we have no idea what we are going to need. If we do not foster and build it now, by the time we need it it may not be there and it will be too late.

CHAIR—Do you think we could improve the accountability arrangements for the moneys that are currently appropriated, putting aside the question of adequacy? Do you think we could get a better understanding of how the money that is there now is spent?

Ms Baker—Until you get an understanding of the breadth and the scope of the issues, you cannot get an accountability mechanism in. We seem to have accountability mechanisms put in and then people try to meet the accountability mechanisms rather than say, 'Let's map the problem and then see how we can do the accountability.' Accountability is something that we

must have when we are spending public money, but first we need to map what the territory is, then we need to map what we need to spend on it and then we have to have a look at the accountability. If we are not spending the money and we are trying to manufacture accountability to make it look like we are doing something, we could in fact be wasting our efforts.

Senator ALLISON—I wonder if I can go to page 11 of your submission, the part which talks about teacher aides, and perhaps explore the situation in New South Wales with regard to qualifications, the arrangements for employment of teacher aides and what kinds of people are employed as teacher aides. How does it work in this state?

Ms Baker—Teacher aides are ancillary staff in this state. They are specialist appointments and they do have some training, but it is not tertiary qualification training; it is training to tell them, ‘This is what you are dealing with.’ I am sure there are some men, but the aides tend to be women who go into this because the hours of schooling suit their child rearing. They tend to go to work during school hours. As a society, our educational qualifications are higher than they have been in the past, so one would assume that the educational qualifications of the people doing teacher aide specials are higher than they would have been in the past.

We really do need to look at the range of skills and the type and the personality—the psychology—of people going in as aides. The nature of the ‘helping hand slaps again’ is something that we have to make sure we walk away from. Teacher’s aides need to understand the nature of their work, have the skills and the support to carry it out and know where they need to go to get help so that they are truly a part of the partnership, not the add-on, moppper-upper kind of person.

Senator ALLISON—You may not know the answer to the question, but the education qualifications you said are likely to be higher: are they completion of secondary school? Must you have year 12 in order to be a teacher aide.

Ms Baker—I can only reduce it to a personal level. When I went to work in a school as a clerical aide I was offered the position as a clerical aide, and I am a year 10 drop-out—I did not drop out of year 10, I actually finished year 10. I have no tertiary qualifications. I have no TAFE qualifications. I could have taken on the job as teacher’s aide special and I would have had four to six weeks training. Angela might know—

Ms Lemme—From speaking to stakeholders in our organisation, it appears that there actually was a TAFE qualification that was being brought through at one stage. I am not sure what the current status of that is. Another issue that has been brought up by certain members of the organisation is that in fact a number of the people who take on these positions are part-time. They may be part-time history teachers and in that capacity within the school itself, so they are not able to devote themselves completely to the job at hand. That presents an issue in terms of the qualifications of teachers and in terms of the time that they are able to commit and give to this kind of a role.

Senator ALLISON—Sorry, I think we might be at cross-purposes here—I was talking about teacher aides. So a history teacher becomes a teacher aide?

Ms Lemme—You can do both—that is right. Sometimes it can be a part-time position. That is an issue in regard to it being a quality role which is taken seriously.

Ms Baker—So you have a teacher who is a history teacher for three days a week and a teacher's aide special for two days a week—separate pay, separate pay scales.

Senator ALLISON—Very much lower pay scales as well, I would suggest.

Ms Baker—Much lower pay scales.

Senator ALLISON—The four to six weeks training—is that full-time? Is that done at a university or a TAFE college?

Ms Baker—It is done within the Department of Education and Training. This is what it is, this is what you need to do, this is what you need to know, these are the conditions you work under—those sorts of training things. It really does depend upon the aide themselves and who they are working with. Some aides, especially around autism, will go to the Autism Association to understand the nature of the condition so that they can better help the students.

Senator ALLISON—So your complaint is the inconsistent calibre of the teacher aides in schools. How do we make it consistently good? What needs to be done to improve the calibre of teacher aides?

Ms Baker—I think that what needs to be done is the same as what needs to be done in any move when you are moving from a non profession to almost a profession dealing with students with a vast array of differences. It really does require a professional approach. So you would need to have something where you, as a teacher's aide special, are engaged and have pride in what you are doing. You understand that it is not just an add-on job; it is something that is essential to the provision and that you are then engaged in that as part of your profession, not as something where you just get over a hump or get through something or because there is nothing else around. There needs to be a change in status for that group of people so that they actually see themselves as part of a learning team, part of a school team, and they get the support that they need.

Unfortunately, in New South Wales, our budget for the professional development of anybody is about \$29.50 a year, which is an insult. If you happen to be at the low end of the pecking order, which you are if you are ancillary staff in a school, then you do not even get a look at the \$29.50. Teacher's aide specials are the ones that are usually day to day, hands-on with the student. They are there as a support for that student. Under integration they are funded to be there for that student. If they do not have access to the training that they need to understand the nature of the disability or learning difficulty they are working with, then they are really behind the eight ball. Sometimes they become quite frustrated and misunderstand the nature of the complaint. If they are working with a student with ADHD and they do not understand the nature of the illness, then sometimes they can make a decision that says the child is just naughty and what they need is stronger discipline or something else rather than having a genuine understanding of what the condition is and what they might do to support rather than exacerbate the problem.

Senator ALLISON—Just on the subject of ADHD, the Parliamentary Library did a study of the incidence of medication being provided to children state by state—in fact electorate by electorate—and found enormous inconsistencies, which backs up what you were mentioning before. What is the level of anxiety amongst those parents you represent about decisions regarding medication? Do you think there is sufficient information available to them? Do you think that there are enough other supports for children who might be on medication, bearing in mind the fact that most educational psychologists would suggest that medication is only one small part of the program that such children should be exposed to. Can you comment on that?

Ms Baker—As an association we have been becoming more alarmed at the incidence of the use of the drugs to control what, on the surface, appears simply to be childhood exuberance. We understand that if a child does have ADHD and is given one of the drugs, it is instantaneous. It fixes the problem immediately. There is no six-month wait to see if it is going to work. It interferes chemically straightaway with the thing that is miswired and it fixes it. But we are seeing more students who are just loud or just noisy or just being kids, basically, and it is being suggested that they really do need some medication.

The whole idea that children should be seen and not heard seems to reside in suburbs and, depending on where those suburbs are, so does the level of medication that is applied. I guess, as a parent organisation, we are extremely concerned that children are not tolerated in our society as they once were. People expected kids to behave like kids and be allowed to kick footballs, run, jump, drive their cars to their seats and change gears as they sat down. We are not expecting that of children. We expect them to behave like well-ordered, well-behaved little adults and, if they do not, we look for the chemicals to try to do it.

Parents are very much at the mercy of medical practitioners and we are concerned at what we read and what we hear about practitioners taking kickbacks for prescribing medication when that medication is given to our children and interferes with their brain development; their ability to grow up and age and learn to control themselves. We are extremely concerned about it. We do believe that there should be a complete investigation of this as a syndrome, looking at the level of medication that is applied. If some of the figures that I have read are true, which say that in excess of 28 per cent of children are diagnosed with ADHD, then we have an epidemic. We have something that we have to know something about. That is a huge percentage of the population being diagnosed with something that we really know very little about. We know very little about the effects of the chemicals that we are using—whether they are permanent or whether they have long-term side effects we know nothing about.

This is the next generation. We ought to be a bit more careful with them. There is a fair bit of research around ADHD and a fair bit of research shows that the drugs, if the student genuinely has ADHD, will work immediately. But we see enormous prescription levels of these drugs, especially in schools where somebody says, ‘Your child is just really naughty. They will not sit still. They cannot concentrate. We think you should go and have them tested for this.’ The parents take them off to the doctor. They are frightened as parents. They do not want the child rejected and so they are looking for a reason for their child’s behaviour rather than just saying, ‘A kid’s a kid.’

Senator ALLISON—Have you heard of instances where principals in schools or directors in kindergartens have refused to accept children if they are not medicated?

Ms Baker—No, we have not heard that they have refused to accept them but we have certainly heard rumours and statements about them being threatened with that. As part of the role that our organisation fulfils we offer support for parents whose students have run foul of school rule and school law. Part of our role is to go with parents as they try to negotiate their child back in after a suspension. In some of those situations it is quite obvious that there is a discussion going on between the school and the parents as to the level of medication the student is on. The school applies a fair bit of pressure if the parent does not want to increase the medication of the student; if they think that the medication is at the medical level prescribed and they think that other systems or other things are in place.

The parents I have personally dealt with are concerned that, because their child has been diagnosed as with ADHD, everything is blamed on ADHD rather than on things that are genuinely going wrong for the child. Had they not had ADHD these things would have still caused a blow-up—like kids being picked on or bullied in the playground or not being treated fairly in the classroom. If a kid with ADHD blows up when that happens, as normal kids would blow up when that happens, it is then viewed as saying, ‘Their medication is not strong enough, and unless you increase the medication then we will be forced to do X, Y and Z.’ This puts parents under enormous pressure.

Senator ALLISON—The Disability Discrimination Act standards for education—has your association had an opportunity to look at the draft? Would you support the transfer into law of those standards?

Ms Baker—Most assuredly. It is quite obvious to us that the market policy that says, ‘Push it as far as you can and when we think it is going to break, we will fix it,’ is not working for parents. They should not be put under that pressure. They should know what they have by law, and anyone supplying should know that they cannot breach that. This whole brinkmanship that says, ‘We will say no until such time as you have demonstrated that you are serious and then we will say yes because we do not want to take it any further,’ has simply got to stop.

These parents are under enough pressure. Any parent is under pressure. All parents—good, bad or indifferent—are under pressure, more so today than ever before as everything we do as parents is under public scrutiny. As parents with children and as teachers in classrooms we are now a minority. This is the first time for a number of generations that those with children have been in a minority. But they are in a minority, and they are subjected to the whim, fancy and bigotry of people who do not have children, who have forgotten what it was like to have children or who are still children themselves. Parents today are under incredible pressure, far more than they have ever been before. There is no tolerance for children. If you happen to be a parent of a child, then that means there is no tolerance for you. Everything that you do as a parent is under scrutiny. It does not matter what it is or how hard you try, someone is going to tell you you have done it wrong and bring out a raft of people to show you how bad you are. We are doing a serious disservice to parents and we really have got to give them some protection. They are after all the only people that are guaranteeing that we are going to have another generation.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing today. If there is any additional information that you want to provide us with, please do not hesitate.

Ms Baker—It is contained in the submission. It is just on the need for those early intervention programs, because sometimes, by the time people realise there is a problem, it is harder to undo it.

CHAIR—Thank you. We look forward to receiving any other matters that you want to raise with us.

Subcommittee adjourned at 4.08 p.m.